



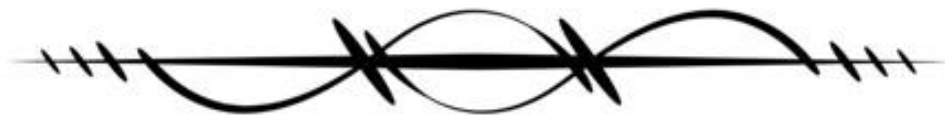
# WUKURI

BLADES OF ARRIS

# STARLA NIGHT



**BLADES OF ARRIS**  
**UKURI**



*USA TODAY* BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**STARLA NIGHT**

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## About the Author

# BLURB

I'm in love with a villain.

Ice-cold smile, shiny collection of scalpels, and he's eager to use them on me.

Joke's on you, mad scientist.

I've been trying to cut this sickness out of me since forever. Not all scars are in a place that you can see.

In your frigid alien embrace, I've found myself.

So why the hesitation in those pretty silver eyes?

You're the big bad conqueror. I'm just an ordinary human.

Right?

Put me in your maze.

Let the experiment begin.

Contains unique alien shifters, fierce passion, and fated mates who defy everything to be together! Although it continues plot lines from the previous novels, this complete, self-contained, epic happily-ever-after can be read as a stand-alone.

TRIGGER WARNING: self-harm, suicide



# PROLOGUE



---

*Present day*

---

**W**e come together in the clinical light of the science office, hot and sweet, and always in the same position.

It's the one I used to trap him that first time, when I promised with large eyes that sex meant nothing. We're both scientific instruments, logical and emotionless, right? Entwining our bodies would never cause that to change...

He thrusts, regular as a metronome, and my back arches higher with each pulsing crescendo. I am an orchestra of cymbals crashing with wet, twisting needs. Without expression, my conductor watches me writhe and thrash beneath his thick drumbeat. That's how I know he's concentrating, counting his thrusts, controlling variables. An unusual bead of sweat slides across his gray forehead and disappears beneath small, opaque glasses. They hide his silver eyes. Even when I claw at him, even when I sink my teeth into his alien skin that seems so human, he doesn't flinch, doesn't lose count, doesn't change his speed. My mind fractures like a mirror, and he only watches me break, until he too silently releases.

Orgasmic relief bubbles into my muscles and bones. Satisfaction makes my skin glow, my eyes close, and a sleepy wholeness seeps all the way into my hair follicles and fingernails. I am flooded, I am jelly. I sigh deeply and collapse in a shaking heap, my organs returning to their proper places

after contracting in ecstasy so many, many times. He could tell me how many. I lose count.

Every thrust, with him, is a perfect O.

He leans across my trembling chest and scribbles observations on his data tablet. My part in this experiment is over. His is just beginning.

One day, I'll be free. I'll escape the sickness driving me, against my will, to embrace strangers. I'll no longer need his fluids tunneling through my veins, neutralizing the urges that cage and torment my captive brain. I'll never again experience the spine-cracking orgasmic release that only he can give me.

I almost think I'll miss the last part.

Almost.

His handwriting is steady, notations smooth. Musings, facts, measurements. The only sound is the slight squeak of alien plastics above my tortured breathing. His voice is dark, rich, and utterly unaffected. "Any changes this time?"

I swallow. "Why would there be any changes?"

He looks down at me. Skeptical? Questioning? His opaque black surgical lenses reflect my sweaty face, nothing of what's inside him.

Because there is nothing inside him. He's still a scientific instrument.

And me?

Well...

He decouples us and stands, swabs our liquids, feeds the samples into his alien science machines. The silhouette of his taut body, nude before the wall screens, is a perfect specimen of gray muscle and sinew, hard and male.

Columns of numbers flash by. His steady body temperature, my erratic heartbeat.

All the numbers for him are the same. His heart is a metronome.

But mine is an aching, bleeding, organic creature, and right now, it's simmering in an unfamiliar cauldron of secret wishes and forbidden aches.

I don't know what to make of these new, uncomfortable feelings. He studies the graphs of my body without comment. Maybe secret wishes don't show up on his alien sensors. Maybe the forbidden aches are all in my imagination. Maybe they're not even mine, and this is another mutation of the foreign creature that stole my body for its pleasure. Maybe this is the last stage, where, after all these years of fighting, the creature finally steals my wish to be free.

No.

He's going to solve the riddle in my blood. I've crossed an unspeakably violent universe for a cure, and I'll get it, one way or another. He laughed when I ordered him to kill me, in his dry, amused way. I, a lesser, dared to make demands on him? But he gave me his promise so easily. And now I wait to see which future is my own. The one where I walk away, cured, or the one where I don't. Because if he can't cure me, he's promised to fulfill my last wish and take my life.

These feelings don't change anything for us.

One way or another, I will be free.

ONE



# NOEMI

---

*Two years earlier...*

---

I'm sitting in the back seat dabbing blood off the bodice of my wedding dress while my *tia* lectures me about stabbing family members, again, but I'm not really listening to her. I'm thinking about ants.

In the northwestern jungles, an ant can be gathering food, just minding its own business, while tiny fungal spores rain down on it from above. If a spore penetrates the exoskeleton, it will grow unnoticed in the ant's body until one day, the spore takes control. It "drives" the ant up a leaf stalk to the ideal height for sunlight and humidity, and it forces the ant to death-bite onto the underside of the leaf. Then, after the host ant dies, the fungus sprouts. It always exits from the same place on the back of the ant's head and releases spores onto the ant trails below.

On a human, the place the fungus exits would be at the base of the skull. Essentially, the brain stem.

Does the infected ant know when the fungus takes control? Or does it have a mysterious, unstoppable drive to run away and bite leaves? Does it watch in horror as its own legs climb, against its will, up into the canopy? Or, when the fungus clamps down on the brain stem, does it black out entirely?

"...and your uncle wasn't even asking for money this time," my elderly aunt continues, switching from Arrisan Standard to the local Portuguese to berate me. "He wouldn't

bring it up. He promised me. Why did you stab him in the shoulder? You almost ruined the whole reception.”

“I’m sorry, *tia*,” I murmur again, while scrubbing the tiny white beads. “I didn’t mean to.”

“Why are you so angry at him? Your uncle was excited to see you. You’ve been avoiding him, and all your male cousins, for years.”

“Something came over me.”

“Do you understand you could go to jail?” She sighs and rubs her eyes. “It’s good your new husband is so quick. And so understanding.”

Oh, no. She said the word. *Husband*. Dread seeps into my belly.

At the same moment, the small *thing* coiling around my brain stem perks up. Its foreign thoughts seep into mine. *A man is near?* Against my will, my spine straightens and my senses sharpen.

Outside, hover cars whoosh past, floating about a foot above the old brick street of São Paulo. Samba music shakes the pre-Contact colonial church to my right. Guests twerk and bob, wearing flashy short dresses and stylish suits, and spill from the ornate doorway. Candles flicker in ancient sconces next to floating screens showing me and Felipe smiling in welcome.

São Paulo is one of the few cities in the world where a visitor can see this mix of old human architecture and alien hover technology. Our planet, now known as Humana, was forcibly added to the Arrisans’ intergalactic empire a few generations ago, but our pre-Contact traditions percolate merrily under the noses of our absent alien overlords. Weddings, like most social institutions in Brazil, are largely the same as they were in my great-grandmother’s time.

But I’m not so sure about anything else.

I give up on the blood-stained satin. “I should go home.”

“You can’t leave early on your wedding night.”

“*Tia*, there’s something wrong with me.”

“No.” Her voice rises. “You’ll return to the reception, you’ll dance and smile and *not stab anyone* all night, and when the government office opens in the morning, you’ll register your marriage. And I’ll stop worrying about you.”

“But—”

“Don’t play!” She turns around and glares. “You have too many men in your bed to be this ‘asexual’ thing—”

“That’s the problem.”

“—and Felipe has promised to take you as his wife anyway. He’s giving up everything for you. Honor, freedom, reputation. Everything.” She faces forward and curls her hands around the old-fashioned steering wheel. “Show some appreciation.”

I feel helpless and sick. The *thing* moves in my brain, excited by the mentions of Felipe, and at any second, it’s going to yank my lights out and take over. Panic hijacks my heart. It’s like the urge to vomit. I’m salivating, and I know it’s coming. I just don’t know exactly when.

“The Vanadisans think I’m sick,” I mutter.

“Oh? Some alien doctors who don’t know anything about humans think so?” She clears her throat. “Women marry men and produce children. Refusing is against nature.”

Her doubts burn like acid.

A team of Humana neurologists can’t find anything wrong with me, but I strong-armed them into submitting my case to alien doctors and got selected for a study.

It was one of the happiest moments of my life.

The only problem is the study is being conducted on the aliens’ home planet, Vanadis, which is halfway across the universe. No one who’s left Humana has ever returned, not even the dead. We are the lowest of the lowly conquered planets, and we voyage into the unfriendly stars like hopeless refugees on tattered crafts. The Arrisans don’t bother to patrol this section of space. We’re so far from the center of their

empire that our little ships are all swallowed up by monsters on the maps of the uncharted.

So, that's a pretty big problem, and my head neurologist apologized for getting my hopes up over nothing. But the invitation remains open. A new cobbled-together ship is striking out for planet Vanadis right now. I think about leaving on it all the time.

"If you want to commit suicide," my aunt mutters, clearly thinking about the same thing, "do something useful for humanity first. Your great-grandmother would be ashamed that she survived for her line to end with a selfish, ungrateful descendant like you."

Ugh. There are many ways I wish I could have made my great-grandmother proud, but reproducing is one that I least...

A shadow falls across my window, and my brain worm recognizes it before I do. It slithers down my nerves and curls my fingers.

*Does the ant watch its limbs move in horror?*

The dread in my belly intensifies as I slide across the seat, my lips aching from yet another not-up-to-me smile, and I exit the vintage rental car.

The music changes to a popular thump-thump-thump from a new song. "*She's a bad, bad woman...*" The air smells like a penetrating earthiness and bright lime.

Felipe stands outside my door, gulping breaths and fanning his pretty, damp eyes. He's still crying.

The worm makes me pat his shaking shoulder and give a worried coo. "I'm sorry, Felipe. I didn't mean to. I'll make it right." My voice is deeper, huskier, and it sounds weird to me, like I'm hearing it through a recording rather than through my inner ear.

"How could you do this to us, Noemi?" A skin-colored bronze bandage wraps around Felipe's palm. His engagement ring, so recently moved to the left as part of our wedding ceremony, is now back on the right hand. "How could you



break our reception and hurt our families on what's supposed to be the happiest day of our lives?"

My aunt exits the bridal car and ushers curious outside guests into the church, leaving us in privacy. The music wails. "...*she's late for love and early for scheming...*"

I do not feel any sexual desire right now. Nothing. Nada. Zero.

My brain worm rests one soft palm on his bandage. My other hand cups the front of his trousers. "I want to be alone with you."

"Can't we celebrate our wedding?" His chin wrinkles. "I love you so much, and you treat me like a sex object. Do you even love me?"

If acid could melt me from this earth, I wish it would do so right now.

"Of course I do," my mouth says, even as my traitorous senses identify a hundred other men who could sate my worm, including his family in the church and strangers passing behind us on the street. "Felipe, please—"

"Felipe?" His broad father stands in the doorway, and my body turns to pose attractively for both men. "You're wanted for the...eh, what's this?"

"Nothing, *Pai*." He scrubs his cheeks with his good hand, steps back from me. Without meeting my eye, he turns away. "We're coming. Everything's fine."

Everything's not fine. Our marriage is not going to end well, and I never should have ended up here. I want to scream. But not a whisper of sound exits from my pouting lips.

His dad doesn't look at me. He's a good father, and his attention is on his son. Felipe and his father disappear inside the venue.

I hurry a few steps behind them.

One of my male cousins laughs. His shrill vibration spikes above the music and sets my teeth on edge.

My feet advance into a future with more blackouts, more inexplicable stabbings, more blood and tears and pained relatives asking me *why?* I know why, but nobody believes me. The brain worm pulls my strings, my muscles contract, and I stride into this hopeless future like an obedient little automaton.

A guest—one of Felipe’s cousins? I don’t know his name—stumbles out the doorway and crosses my path.

My body stops.

“...*she’s a villain...*” the singer croons from the DJ speakers inside.

The sloppy cousin looks me up and down, snickers. “Ah, Felipe’s nymph. Cuckolded your man already?”

Gross.

“Not yet.” The brain worm cocks my hips and looks up at him seductively. “Want to help?”

His jaw drops.

My body sashays to the bridal car, and I look over my shoulder.

He tries to set his drink on the wall sconce and misses. The glass drops to the carved stone and shatters. He ignores it and stumbles after me.

The back seat of a white 1951 Rolls-Royce Silver Wraith isn’t comfortable for what we have to do, but my brain worm has never cared about comfort. It takes longer than usual because this man, who reeks of our open bar, has trouble staying hard, but thankfully, eventually, he collapses atop me and heaves a wet sigh. The worm releases its stranglehold on my brain, a temporary reprieve, and I can see clearly through my own eyes.

This is the hour when disgust rises. This is the hour when I have total control over my own actions. This is the hour when, once, in a fit of hopeless desperation, I grabbed a butcher knife from the kitchen and carved long scars up the centers of my

forearms. Scars that are covered now in damp, stained dress sleeves and other people's sweat.

"I knew you would notice me." The stranger chuckles to himself as he plays with the plain white hem of my dress. No names of single friends are stitched there. I didn't want to curse them. "I understand you better than Felipe does. You're wild, and voracious, and you need a real man to take control."

Ooze trickles down my thigh.

I shift out from beneath him, pulling on the fabric. "I have to go."

"I'll take control now." He eases onto his heels, letting me jerk the crumpled dress free, and coughs. "Where are we going?"

"Out."

He opens the rear passenger door and backs away, and I follow him onto the stone, shutting the door behind me. Music thumps. People chatter in the venue doorway, but no one glances at us.

"The government office opens soon." He follows me around the back of the rental car, fastening his pants. "We'll tear up Felipe's marriage application and submit ours instead."

I get in the driver's side, lock all doors, and start the engine. A fan hums, but otherwise, the retrofitted Rolls-Royce is silent. On the viewscreen the mechanics inserted into the classic car's dash, its four white-rim rubber tires rotate sideways so the car hovers off the ground. A proximity alarm warns me that someone's standing too close to the driver's side, but the rest of my path is clear. I peel out.

"Noemi? Call me!" He runs after my hover, waving. "This was the best night of my life!"

He had trouble staying hard and it was the best night of his life? I do not understand allosexuals.

The hover car glides to my luxurious private apartment complex. It's quiet in this neighborhood at three o'clock in the morning, and open windows let in the warm Atlantic breezes.

My airy studio is cloaked in soothing grays, pastels, and silks. On one wall, a hand-painted mural of my great-grandmother watches me tear off my wedding dress and scan my body with a dented Arrisan medical kit that cost more than this entire building. She lifts her hands toward white letters that spell an old place name from the before times: Hollywood.

*Beep.*

The medical kit spits out my results. Traces of two sexually transmitted diseases in my body? Already? The kit squirts yellow gel into a slender syringe, and I inject it into my biceps with a quick sting. Then I climb into a searing shower and scrub with every one of my cleansing gels.

Not all of my great-grandmother's old movies have been subtitled into Arrisan Standard. Most of them haven't been found. She was in São Paulo filming when the Arrisans arrived and the pre-Contact world ended, but powerful friends protected her and my baby grandmother from the resulting chaos.

I stop the shower, dry off, and start a bath. My hands shake. When did I last eat? I grab a long slice of pineapple from my refrigerator. The viewscreen embedded in the wall above my sink shows my appointments and new messages. Many, many new messages, as usual. I click to listen as I cross the floor nude.

Voice message one, unsaved contact. "Hey, baby, I can't stop thinking about you. I decided not to make up with my girlfriend. I can't get our incredible night out of our head. Call me..."

Voice message two, different unsaved contact. "Did I hear you're getting married? Married? But what about us? I turned down that promotion so I could stay here for you. Argh, call me."

Voice message three, yet another unsaved contact. "... Noemi...*incoherent sobbing*... Why? Why not me? After everything I've done for you..."

This is the soundtrack of my life right now. I'm just functional enough to be a hazard, and I leave the burning wreckage of others' lives in my wake.

*Felipe gave up everything for you.*

*Do you even love me?*

Outside, faint bars of that popular song echo up from the street. "...she's a villain..."

I carry more pineapple slices back to the tub. The bathwater rushes into the old marble with comforting familiarity. Sweet juice drips down my inner arm, bumping over the twisted grooves of my long scars. I rinse my forearms and shut off the bath. Steam rises from the glimmering fresh water, an inviting pool. I'm tired, exhausted from fighting off the worm, and even on my wedding day, it wins. It always wins.

I want to get shipwrecked on a deserted island.

My psychiatrist's voice comes over the speaker. "Noemi, your family contacted me. I'm very sorry to hear about the reception stabbing. It sounds like you were unable to use the self-control strategies we practiced. Call me to make an emergency appointment."

I rub the base of my skull.

*Just control yourself, Noemi. Take a deep breath, don't act like that, resist the urge.*

*But I don't feel an urge. I don't feel anything.*

*Just resist.*

Two years ago, I begged my medical team to go in and cut the sickness out of me. "There's no medical basis for your symptoms," my neurologist insisted that day in her office. Her fingers were soft and cool, like the roots of a particularly insistent plant trying to force its way into virgin soil by breaking straight through my skin. "If we don't know what we're removing, blind surgery is no better than medically assisted suicide."

In ants, the fungus has to act normal until the final moment or else the colony will realize and drag its diseased body far, far away. But nothing I do alerts anyone. And someday, I'm not going to attack a middle-aged man who's used to dodging creditors and goons, I'm going to attack an elder or a child.

My aunt worries about my scars. It's obviously a problem to take a short bath with a long knife. But am I so unreasonable? In my situation, really?

*If you want to commit suicide, do something useful for humanity first.*

I tap the viewscreen embedded in the bathroom wall. Despite the moisture, water doesn't condense on the alien material. The glassy substance shows the ship's captain, a tall Nigerian with short, kinky black hair. She blinks at my nudity, but speaks in the accentless Arrisan Standard that is the universal language on our planet. "Ms. Silva?"

"I'm on my way."

"What—now? But the deadline was... Unfortunately, we've already been cleared for liftoff."

"I'm bringing an Arrisan medical kit." I hold the kit in front of my chest.

The captain's eyes narrow. "It's working?"

"And stocked."

She takes a deep, slow breath and then scowls. "You better be in a local hotel, because I'm not waiting more than twenty minutes. That's final."

It takes longer than twenty minutes to drive from my apartment to the São Paulo shuttle port. Darkness still blankets the streets as I speed, and my heart pounds. Not because I'm worried she'll leave. Nobody's leaving behind a real Arrisan medical kit.

And not because I'm worried about getting stopped by my family. The wedding reception is scheduled to last several more hours. Our caterer has probably just served our late-night

snack of savory mini hamburgers and sweet avocado milkshakes.

It's also not Felipe I'm trying to outrun.

The shuttle port perches on the hill north of the city, and the low groaning calls of howler monkeys resonate in the trees like primordial chants. A valet takes my rental, and porters bus my honeymoon trousseau through customs and onto the shuttle. I spread across an empty booth seat and use the trip to set my hair and makeup.

Wall and floor viewscreens simulate windows. Dawn brightens the sky as we lift off. São Paulo descends to a pin size and keeps dwindling. The shape of our continent hasn't changed in thousands of years, but the coastlines are jagged, clawed by the aftermath of the Arrisans' attack. On the west, massive craters mark where our volcanoes turned themselves inside out. The once-thriving city of Rio is little more than a swampy estuary. Its old white statue was knocked over so it faces down and embraces nothing but sea.

On our north shore, a wide swath of maroon marks the nutrient cube farms, the reason for Brazil's economic fortune. We're the biggest supplier outside central Africa.

The intergalactic shuttle port in devastated North America is two hours behind São Paulo, but it's a different world. We descend over broken, abandoned cities surrounded by irradiated wasteland. A black glass mountain rises from shattered, barren earth. This is the mark of the Arrisans' orbit-changing laser. *After* we surrendered, they opened fire, and our planet rippled as if it received a slow-motion punch to the face.

Two Nigerian men escort me across the gritty black glass, seemingly immune to my awakening brain worm's simpering and fawning, while local porters push my hover-assisted trousseau. The air here smells like static electricity, acrid and burning. They deposit me inside the quiet hallway of the interstellar ship and swiftly exit.

The captain forms a blockade inside with my luggage, drops my precious Arrisan medical kit on top, and descends

the gangplank to the middle. She exchanges a few phrases with the men. It's probably English, the most common human language of diverse Nigeria, but it could be one of their shared tribal languages. Nigeria is a land of a hundred kings, and almost everyone is a descendant of pre-Contact royalty. The captain turns around and stops abruptly. I'm right at her back, obviously trying to get past her to seduce the men.

She takes another deep breath and lets it out through gritted teeth, then summons false cheer. "You'll want to get settled in your room for liftoff, Ms. Silva."

"Yes, in a moment—"

"Right now." She bodychecks me up the gangplank and into the ship like an experienced rugby player. The door partially closes, cutting off my view.

My brain worm flexes uncomfortably, but I regain majority control of my mouth. "What were those men saying to you?"

"They wished us well on our voyage, of course." The door stops an inch from closing, and the motor makes a funny grinding noise. Captain Zeerah's jaw flexes, and she pries off the panel with an electric screwdriver. "They wouldn't dare say anything else."

An urge to, I don't know, test her bubbles up. It's going to be a long voyage and I want to know who I'm dealing with. "I stabbed someone today."

"Oh? Mm." She tightens a bolt, and the door seals with a hiss of finality. "Why are you telling me?"

"Because the other people in my life think there's nothing wrong with me. They say I'm not sick."

"Oh, you're sick." She chuckles as she replaces the cover. "If you're on this ship, you are *sick* sick."

A strange feeling ripples through me, like I want to laugh and cry at the same time. "Really?"

"Oh, yeah. In the last few hours, I've never seen so many seriously messed up—"



“Hi!” A freckled woman with long, silky black hair covered by a bicycle helmet reaches out her hand. “I’m Esme. From Australia.”

Australia was swept clean by tsunamis that stretched over a mile high. I truly don’t know how anyone survived. But Esme’s ancestors clearly did, so I shake her hand. “A pleasure.”

“Mine too! I guess we all have a super-obscure illness, and it affects us each a little differently. Isn’t that funny? I’ll get an emotion, like, I’m so happy to meet people who finally understand me, and out of nowhere...”

Her words trail off and her eyes roll back into her head. She drops. Her helmet makes a heavy thunk on the carpet.

The captain looks down on Esme splayed out on the ground, then pats my shoulder. “You’re all very, very sick. But that’s okay. We’re going to get you help.”

And then she checks her watch and continues on her way, completely oblivious to the tears springing into my eyes, threatening my mascara.

TWO



## NOEMI

**W**e are all *sick* sick, as the captain says, and relief mixes with fascination at our similarities and differences.

I'm not the first to stab a male relative. In fact, I'm a rarity because I can be in the same room with mine as long as they keep their distance. Others get blackout violent when they see mere recordings or photographs. Our Dutch-Malay scholar, Catarine, once cracked a viewscreen showing her long-dead male ancestors.

"Attacking blood relatives is weird, but I guess it's better than the alternative." Esme, gives a little shudder and then laughs. "I'm estranged, so I never knew. Huh. I thought nothing about this crazy illness would make me feel gratitude, but here we are."

"Same," I say, and the other women nod in agreement.

"Oh, I'm so happy to have met you all." Esme gets teary. "I've been alone for so long. I feel..."

Her eyes roll back in her head, and down she goes.

Lia, our mother figure, moves her onto her side and expertly fixes her nail polish so it's smooth when she wakes up. Lia's a pale and refined European, wife of a politician, and even she couldn't escape this messy illness.

We often take over the bridge like this, overriding the captain's protests, and spread blankets to watch movies on the massive curved screens. We give each other facials, do aerobics and mindfulness meditations, and paint our nails. And

we constantly chat about what brought us on this desperate voyage.

Everyone hates craving sex all the time. And having it isn't worth the effort since there's no satisfaction at the end.

"It's like picking at a scab," a pale, Icelandic blonde named Inga says. Tears well in her blue eyes, a perpetual waterfall of near sobbing that's the unique form of her curse. She's one of the older members of our group, past menopause, with short spiky hair, numerous silver piercings and small butterfly tattoos, and her solid body is equal parts soft as the delicate pastries she used to bake and firm from endurance sports like sailing and mountain climbing. "An obsessive urge, and it's not better afterward, only more painful."

But when I share my ant-fungus theory, like something takes over my limbs and carries me for a ride, the bridge is filled with horrified silence.

I look up from oiling my cuticles. "Um...you know what I mean?"

"No." Allie, a forceful Black American woman with long dreads, answers me firmly. "I always choose which man I take to bed. The longer it's been, the more I'm white-knuckling the wheel, but I'm still driving it, if you know what I mean."

The others nod in agreement.

"Finding male companionship three times a day can be a challenge," Lia says gently. "But only to the schedule. I must be efficient."

"Yeah, I hate this." Esme taps her helmet, just having woken up in time to hear my theory. "But hooking up is like, any port in a storm, right? If he's gross, I still take a shower, get a med scan, and move on with my day."

"It's...just..." Catarine scrunches her dark brows together. She was once learned and articulate, but the sickness has stolen her mind. "Just...um..."

"It's just sex," Esme supplies, and Catarine nods. "Even if you can't orgasm, how bad is that, really?"

Everyone else agrees.

But the captain looks up from her navigation viewscreen and barks a laugh. “You ladies are something else. If anything—a sickness, or a demon-ghost, or whatever—took over my body and used it? I don’t care whether they’re making me cook or pray or do handstands at midnight, I’d just go on down to the riverside and kill mys...”

She trails off, her laugh fading to an uncomfortable silence. Her gaze rests on my forearms.

My sleeves have bunched at my elbows, exposing the long red scars.

I set down my white polish and carefully pull the cuffs to my wrists, hiding the scars away again.

Captain Zeerah’s gaze flicks to my face, and a new expression crosses it. Recognition.

But the others default to pity.

“We’re going to get you cured,” Allie promises me fiercely, as if sheer force of will can alter my fate. “I couldn’t care less about me. I like sex. Anger’s my problem, and I’ve got family I want to see. But you? If they don’t fix you first, I’ll punch the Vanadisans right in their feathery butts. When I’m empress of the universe, you’ll never have to have sex again.”

I feel prickly and awkward to be singled out like this, but I know her heart is in the right place. “Thank you.”

“I just need to drop you off on Vanadis, hijack a ship to Arris Central, and kick that stupid emperor right in his hairless, asexual balls for what he did to Humana.” She lowers her fist. “No offense.”

I shake my head.

“Is the emperor really asexual?” Esme asks.

“He’s an Arrisan, so he had his lust organs removed and ground into powder. Sounds pretty asexual to me.”

“Right, but don’t they later use the powder to have big orgies? I think it’s called ‘lusteal.’ They take it and— Oh.” Esme bites her lip. “Does hearing about sex upset you, Noemi? We can stop.”

“No, I don’t care about talking.”

“Well, it upsets me. The only thing worse than an Arrisan is an Arrisan on lusteal. Probably.” Zeerah hugs her elbows and shudders. “Let’s stop talking before we somehow summon them. I’m normal, and you all do way too much sex talk for me.”

After that, I spend a lot of time with Captain Zeerah.

I curl up in the single captain’s chair. Lia padded and upholstered it with excess dress material packed in my honeymoon trousseau. She’s so crafty. “I’m thinking about donating my body to science. My living body, I mean.”

“Isn’t that what you’re doing here?” Zeerah taps a darkened screen on the main console. “You don’t have to keep me company. You’re missing dinner, you know.”

“I know.”

The truth is, I don’t like reprocessor food. Vegetables are limp, fruit is mush, noodles are doughy, rice is mostly gum. And there’s an iodine aftertaste, like all the containers were left open for several weeks and took on each other’s flavors in the same fridge.

But I wouldn’t dare say that aloud.

When Zeerah showed us around the ship, there were tears—outright sobbing—when she said we could eat as much as we want without any worry about rationing. Women gave thanks to God, tried to kiss Zeerah on the cheeks.

My ungrateful, ultraprivileged self will wait until the cafeteria clears so that I can be alone with my misery.

As with so much else.

“What happens if they do cure you, though?” Zeerah reboots the console. “You going back to Humana? You’d be a celebrity.”

“I was already a celebrity in São Paulo.”

“I’m going back. First human to leave and return.” Zeerah unscrews the control panel beneath the console. “I’m going to get a parade.”

My dry elbow catches on the fabric. I sit up, uncap my oil, and rub it on my flaky skin. “Did you ever see any aliens? At the space ports by your house?”

“Some. From a distance. You find out real fast which ones you shouldn’t look at too close. They’re not above using us for target practice.”

“Arrisans?”

“No, but only because we’re not worth their time. You know?” She fiddles with a connection under the main console. The dead screen flickers. “No wasted movement. No wasted attention. It’s like that song. Maybe you’ve heard it? ‘No time for kissing because they’re too busy killing.’”

I haven’t heard the song. “Maybe I should have gotten my lust organs removed.”

“I’ve heard it doesn’t help.”

The console screen goes dark again.

Zeerah swears and wriggles deeper inside the mechanics. “Anyway, your parents didn’t harass you to ‘carry on the family line’ or ‘respect your great-grandmother’ or any of that?”

“My aunts did a little.” I rub my oily, lime-scented fingers together. The bottle’s getting low, which isn’t great, because we’re only about halfway to Vanadis. “My parents were murdered before the brain worm took control.”

There’s a thump sound inside the console. “H, Noemi, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” H is the worst swearword any of us know. It stands for the most awful aliens in the universe, ones that are even worse than the Arrisans. They’re so bad, we can’t say their whole name aloud. Hence, H. “I miss them, but we

weren't super close. I'm not super close to anyone. I guess there's always been something a little bit wrong with me."

"Not...wrong..." Her tools clunk. The screen flickers on with a buzz. "Want to..." *clunk* "...tell me what happened? Or not..." *bang*... "It's fine..."

"My father's mistress drove off him a cliff and they both died instantly."

"Oh, man. You'd think all cars would have safety features to prevent crashes."

"The mistress disabled them. They'd been fighting at a party. My mother went a little crazy and joined a religious cult. Then the unstable leader found out she'd already settled her money irrevocably on me."

"Both parents. Wow."

"They died within a year of each other." I wipe my hands on a cleaning cloth. "It was a rough year."

"I guess. Man. I don't know what to say."

"I know." I examine my well-moisturized fingers. They look so nice, but also detached from me. I only have control of them as long as my brain worm doesn't. No matter how nice my body looks or feels or smells, it's not mine. "Dying so young, they kind of wasted my great-grandmother's legacy, and if the brain worm keeps control over my body, I'll have done the same. I don't want to die in a stupid, petty way, but if my death helps the world, then I'll be happy."

"That's dark, but I understand."

The console stops buzzing, and Captain Zeerah wiggles out backward. Diagnostics in Arrisan Standard scroll by as the screen reboots itself. She closes the panel and stretches.

The screen flashes red.

"It's broken again," I tell her.

She glances down, jumps, and dances back behind my chair like the console is a live snake, then edges back. Her



breath comes quickly. She pokes the console. “It’s not broken. Someone’s on an intersect path with us.”

The brain worm slithers around my spine and pulls me upright in the seat. I don’t even have time to gasp. After all these months of jumping at shadows, I’m taken completely by surprise when my voice lowers seductively and my stupid chest thrusts out. “A man?”

“Of course not. We’re the only ship that’s left Humana in kortans.”

“They could have caught up.”

“I wish.” She taps through the alien ship identification until she finds a match. *Eruvisan bullet ship*. An Eruvisan is a humanoid race with leathery green skin and reptilian features. “These aliens only leave their planet for piracy.”

The brain worm purrs. “So they’re lonely.”

“Stop it.” She smacks my shoulder. “They eat brain worms, and if they’re this deep in unpatrolled space, they’re hungry.”

The worm actually recedes. “Can we fight them off?”

“What do I look like, an Arrisan?” She dances on her feet like a fighter, but her arms cross over her chest, hugging in her internal organs. “My only hope was to pass under an alien’s radar. We’re small enough. Slow too. So if they saw us and decided we were a worthwhile target... Yeah, the only ones coming for us are more desperate than we are. And that’s not good. That’s very not good.”

The external camera shows them changing the angle of attack. Something long and sharp extends from their ship like a wasp’s stinger.

My stomach drops to my feet. “What’s that?”

She shakes her head and unplugs her grimy, well-repaired portable data tablet, hugging it to her chest. “We’re not sticking around to find out.”

Red lights flash with a hazard warning, a proximity alert. The lizard aliens are going to crash into us. The women in the

cafeteria panic. Zeerah orders them into the escape pods.

I toss my Arrisan medical kit into the captain's pod. She needs it more than I do. Everyone else takes off. It's just her and me left on the ship.

Zeerah screams into the window of a closed pod, "Catarine, I can't detach you from inside! Yours is the only pod that... Push the red button to detach. The red button!"

There's a horrible clunk and then a sucking sensation that makes my ears pop. Zeerah flinches, notices me, and runs over. "Get in your pod, Noemi!"

"I'll find out what they want. If it's safe, I'll reel you—"

"They're not bloody scientists!" She shoves me into my pod.

"So what?" I grip the sides, barely hanging in the pod doorway. "If there's a chance we can negotiate—"

"They're going to kill you and eat you."

"I know! Okay? Let me do one thing that matters. Please."

She searches my face for a long moment, then rests her palm over my heart. "You already did."

"Zeerah—"

"I wanted to be the first human who went into space and came back, and our odds were so bad, I thought the rest of you crazy sickos didn't matter. Yes, I thought that. But then I saw your arms." She jerks her chin at my scars. "You and I are the same."

Oh no.

"You all might be crazy, but you're *my* crazies. You're going to live and be cured. All of you. So just deal with it."

"But—"

"Live, Noemi." She shoves me backward into the pod.

My fingers slip off the frame, and I crash into the seat. The door between us slams shut, and her face in the window flashes with fear as the ship abruptly rotates out of my sight.

“Zeerah!”

Agony claws through my insides. I pound on the door, on the walls. Once again, someone who barely knows me is sacrificing herself, sacrificing for me, and it’s worse because our friendship had nothing to do with the worm this time.

People have to stop hurting themselves for me. I don’t want their sacrifice. It’s such a waste. I’m furious with Zeerah. My teeth clench so hard, they squeak. I thought I was safe from emotional damage on this voyage, but I’ll never be safe. So long as I’m alive, I’m a danger.

Gravity is lighter inside the escape pod.

Even though the odds of me surviving are low, I can’t let Zeerah’s sacrifice be in vain. I pull myself into the seat and fasten the harness. A meter shows my atmosphere level. As the minutes—or, as they’re called in Arrisan Standard time, clicks—go by, the meter counts down.

I guess coming into space with any hope was stupid. If lizard aliens hadn’t torn our ship apart, another race would have, or a part would have disintegrated beyond Zeerah’s skill to repair.

I rub the back of my hand. Soft, supple, and still infused with vanilla and lime. I took such good care of myself so that I would be a top test subject. I prepared for great martyrdom, not for asphyxiating in a pod. Maybe someone will stumble upon my mummified body a thousand years from now, and I’ll make a unique museum piece.

*Clunk.*

Something attaches to the outside of my pod.

*Clink.*

Gravity shifts. I’m being picked up, moved, by someone.

Pirates?

Cannibals?

Pirate cannibals?

We're too far from Vanadis to be rescued. We can barely pilot shuttles within our own solar system, much less in the vastness of space.

Maybe it's Captain Zeerah. She fought off the Eruvisans and repaired our ship. She's reeling us in to continue the voyage.

Because that's the only chance I have to deliver my body to an alien scientist.

I don't want to waste my fate by dying in a stupid way.

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Ukuri

“Science Officer Ukuri.”

I look up from the primitive medical records I’ve pried from the derelict Humana cruiser. Irritation prickles my gray skin and there’s a disgusting sense of movement at my forearms. I truly am unsettled right now. I take a deep breath and let it out with a barely audible hiss. “Yes?”

“We, uh, ‘procured’ another escape pod.” The senior engineer, Olasi, glances around the common room, hooks her thumb in her yellow coveralls, and lowers her voice. “The boss is being funny about it. Does the lesser we procured smell spicy too?”

I stand slowly, tuck the data tablet under my arm, and pretend that I am not on edge. “Most likely.”

“You can seal him in liquid metal. Clear that stink right up. Until he starts decomposing, I guess.”

“She.” I ignore the others who are listening in and follow Olasi from the common room. “The lesser is female.”

“How can you tell?”

“The lessers on this particular ship all happen to be female.”

“Huh. Weird.”

The main hall transecting the lower quadrant is always busy, but there’s a noticeable lack of engineers right now. Atana’s had them checking the new systems regularly since we left Arris Central, including early on in this unscheduled stop for some now very dead Eruvisan pirates, but apparently, there was “an incident” in the main bay, and he’s busy cleaning up the fatalities.

Such incidents happen with engineers. It’s dangerous when they get bored.

Atana has given me the use of some of his employees so I don't ask too many questions. And, I suppose, he owes me.

"Which specimen did you procure this time?" I ask. "Are you sure she's on my list?"

"I don't know. Was the one we brought you earlier useless?"

"The lesser you brought me previously was not infected." Of course I can use her, a lesser known as Zeerah, in some fashion. I can find a purpose for anything. I'm Arrisan. Perhaps I'll dissect and store Zeerah's body as reference material, as a control. But I still need an infected specimen to control against. "Any other will do."

Olası touches her ear, murmuring my question into her implant as we jump into the vast chasm of the grav tubes that bisect the ship. Falling from the outermost regions to the innermost core takes some time, even at terminal velocity. Despite the whistling noises of officers and lower ranks falling past us, the ship is largely silent. We swing out onto a lower hallway, contorting to land on our feet. Olası's tools clank against each other, but she doesn't break her stride, moving at a good clip to the engineering stores.

Lessers say the might of Arris is in our grandeur, our planet-shifting guns and terrifying dreadnoughts and impervious armor. But we know differently. It is our adherence at every level to rules. Order. Even the engineers, who are designed to disobey when needed, have explicit permission to do so, and only within parameters that everyone knows and understands. We are individuals, not a hive mind, but we share the same vision in our brains.

That vision is the single-minded preservation and continuation of the Arrisan race.

But somehow, a handful of shipwrecked lessers from a distant planet called Humana have caused a cataract. A blind spot in the vision of one, maybe more, of our warriors.

And that is irritating.

“Well, if you can’t tell which lesser she is from the outside, then crack the pod and ask her,” Olasi mutters into her implant, then glances back at me with an awkward laugh. “All this effort for one stupid lesser, huh? Too bad you couldn’t keep hold of that infected one you had.”

My fingers flex. “Too bad.”

“I swear you can still smell her. Up on the officers’ decks, down in the enlisted’s habs. Probably her stink got into the ventilation shafts, you know? Gives me kind of an itch.” She scratches the back of her head.

I’m aware of it. “I’ll cut this specimen open right away so she won’t bother you.”

“Yeah, don’t let this one get stolen too, huh?”

“Mm.” I can’t think of my first infected lesser that was stolen. Because if I do, then I’ll think about how a massive scientific breakthrough was in my exam room, quivering beneath my laser saw, mere instants from revolutionizing our understanding of everything, when a stupid arrogant blade dared to break in and ruin—

*Crack.*

My fingers curl knuckle-deep into the data tablet.

Hmm.

Olasi breaks off her chitchat and bugs her eyes. “Uh, your data tablet...”

“Yes, I detect a small structural weakness.” I pass her the partially shattered tablet. “If you’d be so kind.”

“I’ll get it repaired.” She stuffs it in an oversized pocket on her bulky coverall. “So like I was saying, the boss thinks...”

I tune her out, straightening and flexing my fingers.

This is unlike me. I’m not usually so fixated, so angry. Perhaps it is the “itch” the engineer mentions. The one that should have been contained in my science office, but instead tickles at the base of my skull, just above my brain stem...

“Uh-oh.” Olasi slows to a stop, her hand at her implant again. “I think we messed up.”

The world gets very quiet and very cold.

I turn on my heel. “Messed up how?”

“I told them to crack the pod, and they stopped responding. If it’s like in the main bay...” She bites her lip. “Sorry, Ukuri. Your new lesser’s probably a smear on the floor by now.”

For the second time in as many shifts, cold rage floods me. Another Arrisan is standing between me and the most important discovery of my career. Another Arrisan is preventing me from collecting my specimen. Another Arrisan has stolen her away.

I grit my teeth in the rictus of a calm, rational smile. “Where?”

“Don’t be mad. It’s only a lesser, right?” She chuckles awkwardly. “Maybe you can probe her remains? The puddle of mush, or whatever?”

The movement beneath my forearm skin becomes more pronounced. Metal against bone. The tips of my blades protrude just slightly from my wrists.

Olasi holds her breath and her panicked gaze fixes on the glimmer of silver.

I lean forward and enunciate. “Where. Is. My. Specimen?”



THREE



# NOEMI

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*Moments earlier...*

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I'm peering out the fogged window of the escape pod, trying to work out if the Eruvisans have brought me into their bullet ship, or if I'm somewhere with breathable atmosphere, when the door hisses and opens with a rusty shriek.

Fear spikes in my center.

But my internal fluids are not ripped away. I'm not in a vacuum. Purified air, much cleaner than anything on the cruiser, wafts across my nose. It has an almost metallic undertone, like the nutrient cube farms I visited with my elementary school.

So, the air is breathable, then.

I'm in a gray room stacked to the ceiling with bins. The other escape pods, my shipmates, and the cruiser are nowhere to be seen. A small area in front of the pod is cleared for me to step out onto the floor, which has a smooth texture, no grating. The walls seem endless and also organically curved. If there's a door out, it must be behind me.

Two figures range in front of me.

Average build, gray skin, short black hair, silver eyes. Five tiny spikes dot the tops of their ears.

A shiver of fear goes down my spine.

They're Arrisans.

We stare at each other. They seem as shocked as I am.

Five spikes. They're female. The males only have four spikes. Otherwise, with their flat chests and square proportions, male and female Arrisans look exactly the same.

The female who's farther away grunts. "What's your name?"

"Noemi."

There's a long silence. No recognition. The two sway slightly like they're listening to music I don't hear.

The farther-away one speaks again. "So repeat the answer. It's just what the lesser said."

"What'd you say?" The closer one motions with a small tool. It could be a weapon or it could be an electric screwdriver. Technically, an electric screwdriver could easily be a weapon. "What's that?"

"Noemi," I repeat, taking another step forward. "My name is..."

The Arrisans go still.

I freeze. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

Their silver eyes reflect indifferent malice, like a lazy panther dropping out of a tree, letting me see it because it knows I can't outrun the attack.

Again, long moments pass. The Arrisans seem to be listening to something again, or caught in a snare. And I am a frozen little rabbit. Long, slow breaths. My heart beats on the back of my tongue.

"It speaks..." The one in back tilts her head. Tools jangle from her bulky yellow coveralls. Beneath the coveralls, both females wear oil-slick-gray skinsuits. "Do you think it understands?"

I force myself to take a breath and turn my palms down in supplication. "Yes, I..."

“It’s pissing me off.” Screwdriver girl lifts her tool. A super-heated blue wire flares around the sharp tip. “Do you smell that? And look at those eyes.”

“Unnatural.” The back one pulls a tool off her overalls and flicks it open like a switchblade. “Let’s cut them out.”

Screwdriver girl lunges.

My legs fold, and I drop to my knees in supplication.

Something explodes at my side, faster than light, faster than sound. Dark silver metal slices between me and Screwdriver girl. The air whistles, electrons sheared from atoms as it passes.

Screwdriver girl jolts, struggles to pull back and twist away.

Something cold hits my cheek. A piece of shrapnel?

Screwdriver girl scrambles back to the other female. They cling to each other and whimper.

Stretched out in front of me is the thick, dirty-metal sword of an elite Arrisan foot soldier.

A blade.

The oil-slick-gray skinsuit drapes from his extended arm and covers his head in an assassin’s cloak. His gloved fingers lift. The thick, flat metal has erupted from the underside of his wrist, too wide and disturbingly long, and kinked in the middle like a boomerang. It reminds me of a recurved dagger, a kukri, only much larger and missing the notch near the handle.

But all his proportions are wrong. Inhumanly wrong.

The rest of his body rests low to the ground, one leg against the floor behind him, the other bent at his chest. The angle and length give his limbs an odd insectoid appearance, like a praying mantis.

Something sizzles on the ground next to my knee. It’s the burning tip from the screwdriver. The blue flame is extinguished, and it melts the floor with a smoky black hiss.

The cloaked Arrisan stands slowly. He allows the tip of his weapon to drag along the floor, but there's no scraping or dragging sound. Where the tip touches, the metal floor peels up, curling from its supersharp atom-separating edge.

Screwdriver girl and the other female cower.

The ghostly figure looks at me. Beneath the gray rim of the hood is a black hole. Fear clutches my neck like a spectral hand. I can't breathe.

"Exactly what..." He turns to look at the others. They twitch and scuttle a few steps back. "...do you think you're doing to my specimen?"

He *is* a male. I can tell from the voice.

The brain worm slithers awake.

Oh, no.

No, no, no.

Arrisans can't get hard without lusteal, so there's no way I can wink or shimmy or sashay my way into his back seat. Lusteal is one of the most controlled substances in the universe. It doesn't occur in nature. They make it from their own body parts.

And throwing myself at a blade is suicide. I've seen the old combat footage of the day they attacked. How incredibly one-sided it was. They didn't come in peace or offer up a conversation, they destroyed our biggest city and everything we sent to defend ourselves until we didn't have anything left. And *then* they blew us up. Figuratively.

I wanted my death to matter.

I wanted it to be important.

"U-Ukuri." The farther-back female swallows and deactivates her tool. "W-we, uh, weren't doing nothing to, uh...your specimen? This is your specimen? Oh, I didn't realize..."

"Yes, she's addled you." The voice inside the hood is refined, darkly amused, and full of terrible promise. "You

know how much I dislike having to enforce discipline.”

“W-well, we were going to help you. Yeah. We decided to help you by interacting with your specimen. So you can use our, uh, interaction for your research.”

“Volunteering to assist my research? How generous. I’m always in need of new test subjects.”

“Right, except, I think Atana’s calling us. Right?” She elbows Screwdriver girl.

Screwdriver girl’s nostrils flare. “She smells like burning.”

“Fascinating.” Ukuri steps forward causing them to shrink back. “Let’s record your interactions in my scanner.”

“Later.” The female drags Screwdriver girl into a third Arrisan—five spikes on her ears, another female—and the scared duo run off with a clatter.

But the third Arrisan stares at me with a lax jaw, the black of her pupil much larger than the silver rim of iris. She pats a small laser dangling from her yellow bandolier of tools. “We have to eliminate this threat. Call the others...*tear it to pieces...*”

“You too?” Ukuri’s voice softens. “Is her scent that difficult to overcome, Olasi?”

“She’s going to bring down our ship. I know it.”

“I see. I need to make some notes.” The kinked daggers shrink as they are sucked into his wrists, the gray material bulging strangely as his forearms engulf the bent metal. He pats his breast like he’s looking for a pen. “Note to self: The air quality is thirty-three parts per million. Two engineers broke free with the help of my blades, but the third is mesmerized by the infected lesser...”

“Don’t confuse me with your science officer mumbo jumbo.” Olasi points her laser cutter at me. “I won’t let you keep this danger on my dreadnought.”

Ukuri chuckles. The sound is dark, and it sinks into the back of my neck, orienting me on him like a compass needle pointing to true north. “Oh, you won’t *let* me?”

“You’re wearing a skinsuit, but my hull cutter can slice you in half. And you might outrank me, but engineers are above rank when it comes to the safety of the ship.”

“Adorable. But, your reasoning is a little flawed.” He waves in her direction.

His blade shoots across the room, much longer than his arm, and drops like a scalpel. The barrel of the cutter separates in a spark of light and rolls on the floor not far from the other decapitated tool.

My body freezes.

Olası jumps back with a shriek.

Ukuri hovers his mottled alien steel between us, blocking her eyes from mine.

She pats her tool belt as she bends to see around it, her mouth slightly open. “You can’t...can’t do that...”

“Don’t test me. I’ve had quite a long day, and there are many experiments ahead. You’ve delivered my specimen. Run along, do your job, and keep *your* dreadnought from exploding under *our* feet, hmm?”

“You can’t stop me.” Olası backs away from him. “The captain’s right. These lessers need to go. I see one, I’ll shoot it on sight. Don’t turn your back.”

He laughs again. “Do you think having my back turned would save you from my blades?”

“Atana’s going to hear about this!” She runs around the back of my pod and disappears.

“I hope he does,” Ukuri says quietly.

The running steps fade.

Ukuri sucks in his blade, his forearm distending like an anaconda swallowing a too-large prey, and then something happens inside and the forearm settles into an ordinary cloaked arm once more. No one would ever know there was an unnaturally wide kukri, half the width of his torso, crammed into that arm.

I breathe out.

He looks at me.

I freeze again, my hands still out, wrists down, on my knees in surrender.

The hood's shadow obscures his face. It absorbs all visible light and hides everything about him. He's monstrous and other.

And yet, the brain worm is already reaching out to him, extending its feelers, dragging me closer to certain death.

Ukuri snags a gray robe abandoned on the floor and pulls it on. It has a blue stripe up the back. He speaks softly. Compellingly. "Lesser, come."

Oh, no.

The brain worm tightens around my spine.

My body rises, a marionette to the worm, and follows.

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Ukuri

Theories crowd my mind as I stride out of the storage room and into the little-used hall.

How can this lesser's tainted blood affect so many Arrisans? How can she manipulate their minds so acutely that they don't even realize they're being manipulated?

"You're a science officer?" She quicksteps to keep up. We're about the same height, and she speaks Arrisan Standard with no noticeable accent. Based on the primitive state of their medical records, I wouldn't have expected her to be proficient in anything, much less our language. "Are you going to cut me open?"

"Does that frighten you?"

Her voice drops to a lower pitch. "Do you want it to frighten me?"

"Don't waste my time on mind games, lesser. Your ploy is infantile to an Arrisan's superior intellect."

"I'll be as frightened as you want if that turns you on."

Humans truly are a lustful little race. "Don't you know it's physically impossible for someone like me to feel attraction to someone like you?"

She struggles with words. It's obvious she wants to say something else, but then she giggles. The sound is light and unnatural. "You never know until you try."

"On the contrary—"

"Science Officer Ukuri." A junior supply officer scurries out of his room with feral interest. Despite our speed, the lesser's perverse stench draws out the few Arrisans in this region like starving ticks after fresh blood. "I need to inspect any lessers that come aboard in—"

"No." I flash my wrists.

“You!” He stumbles back, into the growing crowd. “But I must inspect him.”

The lesser slows idiotically. “I want to be inspected.”

“Then stay with me.” I grab her by the most accessible part, a big handful of her long brown hair, and drag her. “They’re only going to kill you.”

She catches my gloved hand, stumbling over herself. “We’ll have sex first.”

“Don’t embrace your doom quite yet.” I toss her to the ground, step in front of her, and lift my wrists to expose the black-lined sheaths to my fellow Arrisans. “This is absurd behavior. Clearly something is wrong with all your brains. Who volunteers for the first examination?”

The crowd edges forward, lips curling back in snarls.

“I’m happy to take you apart here, in the hallway, but I must warn you that there will be a distinct lack of precision in reassembly.”

The crowd slows.

My blades flex in my forearms. I do not like to use them. They’re a reminder of my life before science, before reason, before opening my eyes to the lies we swallow as unthinking citizens of this great and terrible empire.

But luckily, the crowd comes to a stop.

Good.

Someone emerges from the opposite end of the hall, shouts, “There’s the lesser!” and starts running. More Arrisans surge behind them.

Sigh. Bloodshed requires so much paperwork.

And I don’t want to give Falkion or anyone else a reason to take my specimen.

The lesser rises to embrace these new attackers. “Here I am—”

“Not quite.” I loop an arm under her belly, throw her over my shoulder, and secure her legs against my chest. She folds over me with a lumpy “oof.” We leap-stride down the hall. Assists in my suit stimulate my muscles to cover the distance with unnatural speed. The big crowd roars after me. I bound over the new attackers, and they turn as the big crowd runs them over. The hall is jammed with fighting and chaos.

Then I really move.

We zoom into the next hall, fly down another. Arrisans break free after us, but I have the lead. And what a chase! I haven’t darted like this in years. Haven’t needed to. It’s interesting and bright, like my body is moving faster than my head, and I feel strangely light.

The lesser bounces against my shoulder with soft grunts. Her bottom flesh, so much fuller than any female Arrisan’s, consumes my peripheral vision, and the thin Humana fabric seems to offer no support or protection to the intriguing jiggles. Around another corner, she careens dangerously, and I plant my palm across her wide cheeks, securing her. The texture is firmer than I expected, more muscular, and I have a sudden and very improper urge to explore, palpitate, and squeeze.

But we’re in my hallway now.

I flex my free hand, retracting my gloves, and swipe my palm across an embedded control panel. The lock turns red. Access granted. The small storage room door slides open, and we slip inside.

The crowd riots into our hallway.

I close the door.

Silence.

The light turns green. Locked.

On my shoulder, the lesser breathes steadily. Her weight and warmth is strange. Foreign. I do not believe I have ever once touched a specimen before operating on it. Usually, I’m not even in the same room. My science office has airtight exam rooms fitted with separate observation decks, and if I’d

simply been able to complete my investigation several shifts ago there, the whole subsequent mess could have been avoided.

And, I would never have experienced this strange sensation of carrying a lesser whose rump is so large, it teases my mind with voluminous questions.

She shifts with a groan. “This is a science office?”

“Unfortunately, no.” I dump her on the ground.

She lands with a surprised squeak.

“My office was damaged due to a...complication during the last investigation. But don’t worry.” I sort through the spare components and portable exam equipment. “I have everything I need here to slice your brain into microthin slides.”

This is an acceptable sanctuary. The storage room is supposed to be one of Atana’s, and even though he’s not in charge of room assignments, he’s done something so the door lock responds only to me.

We both, on occasion, need our privacy.

As I set up the room, the lesser studies me, and not with the timid glare of a semisentient creature seeking escape. Oh, no. She’s a bold predator sizing up what she believes to be an appropriate match.

How amusing. “Have you come to any conclusions?”

She licks her pinkish-brown lips. “About what?”

“You tell me.”

Her oddly colored eyes glimmer in the dim entry light. “You should take off your hood.”

“Do you think I’m more vulnerable without it?”

“The others weren’t wearing hoods.”

“Perhaps they should have been.” I snap in the final panel and check the power supply. “Get in the examination space.”

She obediently enters the clear, portable exam room.

Wonderful. “I’m glad you aren’t going to waste time fighting me.”

“I want what you want.”

I seriously doubt that.

Because at this exact moment, I’m frozen with indecision.

My hand hovers over the controls for the laser saw. That’s the correct, efficient method. Cut first, examine at my leisure. It’s what any science officer would do. It’s what I should do.

But if I cut her into pieces, I can’t palpitate her bottom. I’ll never know for sure the full texture of her cheeks in both my palms.

And the fact that this is even slightly important to me is unnerving. Am I being subconsciously drawn to a research breakthrough? How or what could possibly be impacted by the firmness of a lesser’s hindquarters?

The itch of her scent, tickling my brain stem even through my closed suit, seems to be giving me a kind of brain ache.

Perhaps I should consult our Humana database before I commit to surgery.

I move away from the laser saw, and tension releases from my shoulders.

Strange. I didn’t realize I felt tense.

“I want what you want,” the lesser repeats, insistent.

“Oh?” I scroll through our pitifully sparse data. Hindquarters are one of the many parts that barely rate a mention. No one’s conducted a study on them yet. “What do you think I want?”

She blinks like she’s trying to say something else, but then she bites her lip and squeezes the mounds of breasts on her chest. “To probe inside me.”

“Lesser, I’m surprised.” I close the useless research logs and switch out the laser saw with something a bit less terminal. At least, at first. “That is exactly what I want.”

She beams. “I knew it.”

“I intend to probe you more deeply than you’ve ever been probed before.”

She claps her hands, those lips pulled back from her pale white teeth. “Promise?”

“Oh, absolutely. Look into the light.”

She winces. “It hurts my eyes.”

Her statistics appear on the data tablet as well as on the large wall viewscreen off to my right. The passenger manifest of her ship appears on my little screen. “Just out of curiosity, which lesser are you?”

“My name is...” She croaks out strange syllables that tax my brain. Helpfully, my data tablet interprets her human language into Arrisan Standard script so I don’t have to, and it locates her primitive Humana medical records. There’s a note. *Patient ascribes loss of agency, antisocial behaviors to “brain worm.”* A foreign intelligence? Doubtful. If such a parasite exists, this scan will reveal it.

While still staring up at the light, she pulls off her human fabrics, disrobing completely, and piles them against the clear, sealed door.

I know we have different ideas of probing, but her undressing still seems odd. “What are you doing?”

“Won’t my clothes interfere with your readings?”

“No.”

“Oh.” One shoulder lifts in a shrug.

I have no opinion on this. I’m not interested in her surfaces. I am interested in plunging deep inside.

And the scanner does it.

As the intensity increases, she tilts back, her fingers sliding against the featureless walls, her breath coming in short, pained gasps. Fine details fill in as I match her living body to what’s stored in the scientific archives. We have many examples of dead humans. A living scan captures so much

more data. Fluid dynamics, electrical currents, changing chemicals as her body tries to manage the stress of the vibratory load. I peer deeper and deeper into her biological chasms, thrilling at the new vistas. We approach the edge of existing data.

She gasps. Foam crusts on her chest and forehead. “How much more?”

“Just a little bit,” I croon. “We’re almost there.”

She collapses on the floor with a thump.

The last lines of data disappear.

Unfortunate.

I turn off the scan.

She rolls onto her knees and dry-retchs, then lands onto her butt and gasps. “I thought you were going to probe me.”

“But I did, lesser. Look at all your interior colors.” I show her the wall to the side. Chemicals and reagents wash across her outline, fighting and changing, a heat map of biological combustions. “Your inside has almost as many colors as your outside. Did that hurt?”

She coughs wetly. “Yes.”

“I’ll give you a few clicks to recover, and then you’ll stand and look into the light again.”

On her body outline, a harsh yellow washes across her torso, pooling in her legs and her jaw. I match it to our existing analysis of human physiology. “You’re afraid.”

“Yeah, but I’ll do it.” She lowers her chin, looks up at me through the sweaty fronds of too-long hair. “If you take off your hood.”

Her tone amuses me. “You’re hardly in a position to bargain.”

“Scared?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’re a lesser trapped in my examination chamber, and soon you’ll be in pieces beneath my

laser saw. Our situations are hardly the same.”

Her lips twist to the side in a very un-lesser-like smirk. “Are you sure you’re not afraid?”

Her green irises really are an unnatural hue. Brighter than dull green Eruvisan skin, hers are the color of warning.

A peculiar feeling twists behind my sternum. A muscle not used to movement suddenly contracting and then lying still.

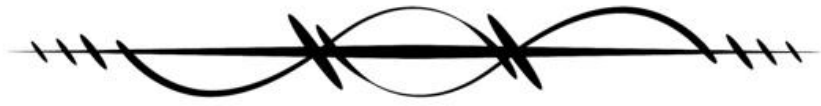
For another instant, I don’t know exactly what to say. My mind is blank.

She seems to see right through me.

Right through the darkness of the hood and into my unevenly patterned heart.



FOUR



# UKURI

**T**he lesser stares at me with a confidence that's strangely hypnotizing.

I could trace every thread of green in her irises like a bomb detector teasing apart the wires.

And I have a perplexing compulsion to do it too.

"Take off your hood," she says again. Her words stick into me like alien burrs, prickly and insistent.

She's supposed to be below me, as all the creatures I study are. But somehow, she's entirely too... Hmm. Stimulating?

Or unnerving?

No matter. Soon her unusual eyes will be in a specimen jar, and I'll be publishing my research for accolades and promotions.

In fact, now that I have her living scan, a new avenue of research presents itself to me.

Nonlethal, again.

I'll slice her up right afterward, of course.

"As it happens, I will remove my hood briefly for our next experiment." I enter my code into the controlled substances locker and wait. "Are you aware your blood has been saturated with my lusteal?"

"Your lusteal?" She frowns at the deep scanner like it's to blame. Then she levels on me again. Whatever questions may have flitted across her face, they're gone. Locked away,

concealed. She clutches her chest and licks her lips. “Then you are attracted to me.”

“Of course not.”

“But I’m saturated with your orgy metal.”

“And?”

“I’ll sate your uncontrollable lust.”

I laugh out loud. “You’re clearly unaware of how lusteal works in an Arrisan.”

She plunges an index finger between her lips, sucks on it. “Teach me.”

“Lusteal is a necessary component for our reproduction, but it’s no more compelling to us than a warm caress or a sexual odor.”

“Then how does it make you have an orgy?”

“It doesn’t make us do anything. Rapid, aggressive sexual selection is our choice.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I don’t care. It’s an efficient and perfectly acceptable delivery model. We’ve all been dusted with lusteal here and there, myself included, and I found the effects mildly stimulating, but quite easy to ignore.” The locker finally accepts my code and pops out a sealed container. I take it and rise. “When lusteal gets into you, however, your human blood twists it into something much less pleasant.”

She cranes her head. “What’s that there?”

“The reason I’m taking off my hood. Try to control your excitement.” I set the container on my pedestal and remove my hood.

The air envelops me in a chemical attack.

Her scent is foreboding, like I’ve left a sample unattended on a burner and it’s burned dry. The hairs on my neck stand up, and my blades shift uncomfortably in my sheaths.

Ick.

The movement of the metal is all wrong. Shivery in a bad way. I've used my blades far too often since these sick lesser boarded my ship, and the sheaths ache from the unfamiliar stretch. I must stop. This burning is much worse than any lesser's stench.

I hold still until the sensation passes.

The container's biometric lock beeps. It reads my face and opens.

I remove the vial inside with smooth movements, my fingers deft and unhurried and certainly *not* shaking. "Satisfied?"

She stares at me. Her face, for the moment, is blank.

Then, she lowers her chin again. "Why don't you take off the rest and come join me?"

Strange tingles dance up my arms. I'm suddenly hyperaware of her nudity, the variegated colors of her skin and hair, like layers of sediment in the habitat of a dangerous new cryptid. Long, brown strands of her hair could tangle around my fist. What's the texture, the grain of her soft skin? A sheen of liquid on her body promises to be oily or refreshing or even, strangest of all, sweet. I should take a sample, rip the liquid apart, and analyze her at the molecular level, but I have an almost foreign urge to analyze the taste with my tongue.

I want to latch on to something ephemeral and yet primal, fragile yet unstoppable, like the smallest part of her sternum, or even deeper, the heartbeat beneath.

And that is odd.

I'm having a curious waking dream.

And rather than stopping to take notes or analyze, I stand and walk to the scanner.

She stares back at me through the glass. Her sharp teeth hide behind soft lips like her alien hunger hides behind an apparently weak, yielding facade.

But it's in there.

In her.

And I just want to crack open the sealed exam room and drag her out.

*Beep.* “External transmission for Science Officer Ukuri from Vanadisan Royal First Premier Egg...”

The summons breaks my trance. While the automated announcer monotones a long string of Vanadisan titles, I move crates and unbury the communications console. The automated voice finishes. “...Science Overseer Fuzig.”

I fit myself into the console and cross my ankle over my knee. “Accept transmission.”

My heart beats too fast.

It can't be because of the lesser. I'm immune to her simplistic manipulations, and I would never be affected by tainted blood.

No, I must be excited by this transmission.

Fuzig is surely about to admit to a Vanadisan conspiracy to commit treason.

---

Noemi

The male, Ukuri, relaxes inside a small cavern that he's pulled out of the shapeless gray wall, like a bubble popping from the liquid metal of the ship. He faces a large viewscreen, allowing me to study his calm profile.

I'm grateful for this break. My head aches, and my cheek stings, and a heavy weight sits in my empty stomach.

But my brain worm vibrates at the highest level of excitement, like it's reached the heart of the ant colony and nothing, not even an intellectually superior Arrisan, is going to stop it from fulfilling its destiny. Even now, from inside the scanner, it silently reaches out for him, extending invisible feelers like tactile hairs, straining.

And if he's right and I have Arrisan lusteal in me, maybe the brain worm actually has a chance.

Like the wild Arrisans who chased us down the corridors, Ukuri has gray skin and short black hair. His is threaded with mature gray streaks, and he has a reassuringly unruffled demeanor. His eyes are hidden behind black sunglasses that hover over his nose. His eyes must be silver, though. All Arrisan eyes are.

It's because of a genetic bottleneck.

Long before they ruled the stars, the Arrisans' home planet was destroyed and they were hunted nearly to extinction. The survivors honed themselves into supersoldiers, each generation more deadly than the previous.

His scan almost killed me, and we're only half done, I guess.

I wonder what treatment would have been like under the Vanadisans.

Maybe I'm about to find out.

The viewscreen resolves into the image of a Vanadisan. They're a delicate, birdlike race with willowy limbs and

swooping movements. Considering the scope of the universe, it's amazing how humanoid we all are. This Vanadisan wears a puffy trench coat with blue and black stripes at the collar. Scrawny feathers droop from his balding pate.

“Oh, great Arrisan Science Officer Ukuri.” Fuzig’s accent, speaking Arrisan Standard, sounds pinched, nasal, and vaguely irritated. “Heavens shower us with your noble attention and thankfulness for answering our hail.”

“The pleasure is all mine.” Ukuri steeples his fingers in front of his pointed chin. “Whatever could have inspired you to call me on this uneventful, ordinary shift?”

“You noble Arrisans helped to free some useless Humana lessers from a vicious and unprovoked Eruvisan attack. As one scientist to another, I offer my sincere thanks.”

“And?”

“And, yes, I am inquiring about the return, now, of the remainder.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, it seems your fierce captain did not return all our lessers to the loyal employees I dispatched to collect them. Even though they’re of no importance whatsoever, you should be a good ally and return them. The lessers, I mean.”

“The useless ones.” Ukuri’s smile not only stretches his lips. It’s also richly evident in his dark velvet voice.

“Yes, utterly useless in every way. That’s why we’re using them for some pointless, only-important-to-us research.” Fuzig taps his long, paddle-like fingers together.

“Well, my dear—it was Fuzig, wasn’t it?”

“Honorable Science Overseer.”

“Fuzig, I am not opposed to sending you any ‘useless lessers’ we may have accidentally retained, as soon as I’ve extracted everything of Arrisan origin from their veins.”

Fuzig tilts his head, a picture of pleasant confusion. “Arrisan origin? Whatever could your nobleness mean?”

“The Arrisan lusteal in their blood, which you obstructed and hid from us for purposes I can’t imagine.”

I still don’t understand how I can have Arrisan lusteal inside me. It just doesn’t make sense.

“Lusteal? Impossible!” Fuzig gives a nasal laugh. “In the entire empire, lusteal only reacts to Arrisans, of course. You’ve performed extensive testing yourself. And how could the lessers have gotten lusteal on their dirty, backwater planet? Considering you only took over Humana to acquire more lucrative planets beyond it, and you’ve essentially abandoned it, as you’ve abandoned so much of your overextended empire merely to prevent us from having our share—”

“All questions I am simply salivating to research. If you’ll excuse me.” Ukuri reaches for the controls.

“Ah! You can’t. It’s impossible to remove lusteal from a lesser’s blood.”

Ukuri leans back. “Oh?”

“Yes, yes. You see, we, the helpful and scientifically superior Vanadisans were investigating exactly how to remove your noble lusteal from these nasty lessers, which we certainly would never dream of inserting ourselves, as even possessing such a controlled substance is a serious crime.” He sniffs. “We concealed it for your own protection. Your kind is suspicious and aggressive in these cases, when all we, your pleasant allies, wish is to be left alone to conduct our research. You understand.”

“Mm.”

“The lusteal cannot be removed, not by electricity or surgery or torture. Even dead tissue will not give it up. It’s stuck fast in their fragile, squishy lesser flesh. Still, we experiment on them tirelessly to retrieve it for you. So.”

Yikes. We really are lessers in this empire. Small, helpless, at the mercy of every predator.

And yet I have questions.



I don't remember any Vanadisans visiting our planet. We don't get alien imports except what the Arrisans deign to give us. So, Fuzig is probably telling the truth that his race didn't infect us.

The Arrisans wouldn't dump this on us. I feel like I'd remember encountering sparkly black powder.

How and when did I get infected?

Ukuri grins. "So, after I report your crimes, I'll try my own methods of extracting—"

"No, you mustn't!" Fuzig ruffles his feathers nervously. "You absolutely must not do this research. I'm warning you as a science officer and as an ally. Tainted lessers are extremely dangerous."

Silence.

Ukuri's head tilts, a mirror of Fuzig's from a moment ago, but his silence is unnerving. A cold shiver goes up my arms. Whatever my brain worm thinks about Ukuri, his race is the undisputed ruler of the universe, and he grows massive knives from his forearms. I thought only their elite foot soldiers had blades, but silly me, even their science officers wield them.

His voice, finally, is light and detached and utterly unlike his position, like a pull-string toy that draws someone in before snapping closed the trap. "You find this lesser to be dangerous?"

"Not to me, to you!" Fuzig gestures at Ukuri, snappish with his own nerves. "You're so brash and stupid, you arrogant Arrisans, rushing headlong toward these lessers, and you aren't even aware of how their irrational sickness curls up in your brains and twists your minds. Up is down and sun is dark, and you insist on it with slavish dependency. I've seen it before. You think you'll still rule the universe when a lesser pulls your muscle strings?"

"I almost missed it, so you'll have to forgive me, but did you just say..." Ukuri delicately clears his throat, rests his chin on his fist. "...you've seen this before?"

Fuzig's feathers abruptly ruffle, the pattern changing to white like wind through long grasses. I think it's the Vanadisan version of a shiver, of someone walking over your grave.

“A figure of imprecise Arrisan speech. These are the important points: You cannot remove the lusteal. Researching it yourself is redundant and pointless. Prolonging your exposure to an infected lesser will result in unmitigated chaos. Send her to me now before your whole dreadnought succumbs to madness.”

“Mmhm.” Ukuri straightens. “The head of the Science Center will contact you soon about how and when you began studying the Humana lessers and this impossible phenomenon.”

“Fool! Her sickness is already in your mind, twisting your faculties, and you're oblivious to the danger!”

Ukuri's hand hovers over the controls. “Rest assured, Fuzig—”

“Honorable Science Overseer!”

“Unlike the average Arrisan, I am rigorously trained in the intellectual arts. The moment I detect that I've lost my faculties—”

“It will be too late!” Fuzig snarls. “You will echo your father, another ‘brilliant’ Arrisan scientist who gambled on foolishness and lost.”

Ukuri stills.

“Yes, that's right. I know all about his illicit legacy. If you continue, the whole empire will feel *your* disgrace.”

There's a long, taut silence.

Finally, Ukuri chuckles. “Thank you for your touching concern, but have no fear. If I'm found to suffer from the same flaw as my father, the empire will dispose of me as they dispose of anyone else who no longer serves their purpose. Me, any useless lesser, or, say, an ally race caught experimenting with our stolen lust metal.”

“Insolent Arrisan! Your arrogance today will cost all you hold dear. I only hope I will be present when you realize it.” Fuzig rises and points his paddle-like hand beyond Ukuri, toward me. “That lesser is your doom.”

---

Ukuri

Fuzig terminates the connection before I can do so.

Well, that was enlightening.

I type a report to the Arris Central Science Center detailing the Vanadisans' probable research. They must have been plotting against us for kortans, and we'll have to move quickly to catch up. I hover my finger over the Send command.

And there I stop.

When the Science Center receives this report, they'll demand I send in my specimen.

They'll take her. Confiscate her. Steal her away from me.

My palms drop to the edges of the command console and grip. Tight.

What hard, rebellious thoughts are curdling in my swiftly moving mind? Of course the Science Center will demand my specimen. They'll have to verify my research.

Speaking of which...

I push myself out of the communication console and face the lesser, newly energized. "Now, where were we?"

"You were taking off the rest of your suit and coming in to join me. And then you're coming in me." The lesser presses her front against the scanner wall, flattening her breasts into disks. "Right now."

"Mm. How about this? If you're a good lesser and finish your scan, I *will* come in and join you." I check the precious vial on my pedestal. "I'll even deposit something inside you."

She sniffs, forces herself upright, and leans against the glass. Her eyes look bruised, sunken in from stress. "Do you care if I scream?"

"It won't affect me in the slightest."

She stares with determination into the light. The high intensity staggers her. She moans, and her heartbeat changes to a distressed rhythm. But she does not scream.

I feel a little proud of that, for some reason.

Lessers, in general, are weak. We collect knowledge from them, often unwillingly, but we only do so to greater protect them. When the Harsi return to annihilate the universe, we are the ones who will fight them off. Her sacrifice today will ensure the future survival of her race and the salvation of her planet. If she doesn't take comfort in that, well, her sniveling descendants will.

Allies have quite a bit more leeway.

But not for experimenting with our lusteal. It's the future of our race. Fuzig should prepare for the consequences.

The scan rewrites the lost data. I confirm it's saved properly, then twist it another notch. Slightly finer detail. Her yellow fear turns into toxic green. Stress chemicals leach from her organs as her body begins failing from the inside out.

I turn off the second scan.

She shudders, her whole body twitching, and rests her wet forehead against the clear wall.

“Did that hurt?”

She nods against the wall.

“You may be interested to know that you've tolerated a slightly higher scan than was ever done previously, revealing new biological details about human lessers.” I wheel my surgical kit across the floor to her exam cubicle. “Congratulations.”

“My...” She coughs, spits something on the floor. Every part of a human, it seems, is wet. “I contributed something?”

“Yes, you have.” No one will care about this data, even though I'm logging it so carefully. No one will ever want to predict the thoughts, desires, or behaviors of humans. Humans are nothing in our empire. “Does it please you?”

Again, she looks like she's going to say something, but instead clasps her hands and stares at me with uncomfortably wide eyes. "You promised to take off everything."

Nice try. "Lie back on the slab and lay your wrists beside your head. It's time for exploratory surgery."

---

Noemi

Ukuri's rational and unaffected. And he has blades.

He's going to need them.

Through the glass, we're about the same height. I'm not a tall woman.

Arrisans don't need to be tall. They're terrifying.

Maybe being infected with his lusteal has turned me part Arrisan.

It would explain so much.

Maybe I'm the monster now.

A shiny metal operating table rises from the featureless floor behind me. Ghostly outlines of manacles appear at the top of the operating table.

"Is surgery going to hurt?" my brain worm asks, simpering because it doesn't care. The second scan *hurt*. My head throbs, as does my screwdriver-burned cheek. Everything hurts. But I am proud I've made a new contribution to science. I'm not ready to curl up and die, and, thanks to the brain worm, my body remains standing.

"It depends on the wiring of your nerves." Ukuri taps on the controls on his side of the glass. I call it glass, but it's some transparent supermetal he twisted around frames, constructing it like a tent. It's flexible but unyielding, and internal lights flicker at the edges of my consciousness. "Are you afraid?"

My brain worm tingles with excitement. "What does your scan say?"

He glances over his shoulder at the wall. My live scan image is weirdly shapeless, like a heat map overlaying foreign terrain.

My brain worm tries again. "Do you want me to be afraid?"

He regards me behind the opaque lenses, an impenetrable mask, then his thin lips fold into the facsimile of a smile. “Fear is logical, but not much about you, or this situation, appears to follow logic.”

My brain worm titters.

“Lie down, lesser.” His voice reflects his mirth, dark and vaguely delighted. “Your body conceals important truths from the empire.”

*That lesser is your doom.*

He told Fuzig he was unaffected. He’s an Arrisan and a blade. This will be fine.

The brain worm lays my body on the slab. It’s hard and cooler than air temperature. The worm lines up my wrists and neck to the ghostly manacles. They shimmer, see-through, but against my skin, they feel hard and real.

“Perfect,” he murmurs and taps on the controls. “Don’t move...”

My body twitches, jumping out of position.

The manacles nudge, prodding the back of my neck and my wrists like they’re trying to go up and around but can’t because I’m misaligned.

“Very good,” he murmurs.

Except I am *not* manacled.

My brain worm giggles.

He looks up. “This amuses you?”

My brain worm wriggles my hands in place, making it look as though I’m being held down, carefully managing the pressure against the back of my wrists. “Isn’t it fun?”

No. No, it’s not fun. My heart beats faster and faster. I can’t warn him. The brain worm arrests my tongue.

“Actually, yes, lesser. I do find surgical exploration greatly entertaining.” His dark voice is confident. “You may laugh, but I see your true feelings. Fear is logical now.”



He doesn't understand the root of my fear. My brain worm is going to win. He doesn't know.

The glass door slides open.

His Arrisan scent hits me between the eyes.

Male. Pungent and full of promise, like a silver ingot reflecting a shaft of sunlight through the dense jungle, and slippery like a fish squirming for freedom, and so very dangerously alive. His scent pulses through my veins. My headache flees. I am wrapped in snow from the pristine mountaintop. I am hissing like my skin is made of lava.

And the only thing that matters in this world is wrapping his scent around me and wearing it for my clothes.

He pauses in the doorway. Confusion crosses his face. A flicker of doubt.

“Come in.” My brain worm overlays my immobilized core, waving one of its fingers from the slab. “I'm ready for you.”

---

Ukuri

I hear the words of the lesser, but I can't properly analyze them.

A million signals cross my brain with various levels of urgency. But the topmost one is...

Pride?

This is such a nice lesser, so different from the last one I dealt with. She's strangely excited by the same things I am. It's okay that I've entered her examination room to operate personally instead of remaining outside using the laser saw. The precious vial requires a personal touch, and anyway, she's adorable.

Of course, her obedience might be a ploy to access my feelings in order to manipulate me.

That would be a mistake.

Arrisans are susceptible to such manipulation. Blades, surely. Say a few words about honor and the empire, and they'll take off their own skinsuits, offer up their unguarded chests. Engineers, officers, captains. The lot. They're vulnerable to psychological tricks because they have normal, correct Arrisan emotions.

Science officers do not.

Engineers defy orders for the purpose of saving the ship.

Science officers defy ethics, morality, and any sense of honor or collectivism or rightness, in the pursuit of science.

Because that is how we, as a race, will survive.

I have been trained since the moment I entered the Science Center to perform any action, no matter how horrifying, with ice-cold clarity.

If the body of a Harsi appears before us, while the rest of my crew may cower and scream, I alone must walk up to it,

scalpel in hand, and perform my duty. For the good of Arris. For the good of the empire.

So however this lesser imagines she can manipulate me, that is all it is. Imaginings.

I am beyond the influence of anything but logic.

Pure, crystalline, rational.

Logic.

I enter the scanner.

Her hungry scent coats my body in a strange oil, warms my extremities, pools in my abdomen. My jack twitches beneath my skinsuit, filling with hard, pounding heat. All my pores open, drinking in her substance. Her wetness is a problem. It has concentrated and aerosolized the danger...

She wiggles on the slab with unnatural excitement. This bizarre lesser does not feel ordinary emotions either. Hers are off-kilter, like two sets superimposed atop each other, askew. "Take off your skinsuit."

My jack bobs. Responding to the lusteal that is, beneath the outer perverse notes of her tainted blood, the root of her misery. "No, I don't think I will."

"At least your sunglasses."

"I need them to operate on you." The lenses project the data from the scanner onto her body. I trace the foreign roads of her internal anatomy. Here are her reproductive organs. That's where the first blade, Sithe, deposited his generative cells and was irrevocably altered by his lesser. I flex my fingers so the gloves cover me—I do not want to touch her wet, shivering belly with my bare skin—and orient myself to the placental divot.

"What are you doing?"

"Testing whether I can capture the unfixed lusteal washing across your brain."

Her tone abruptly changes. Lighter, less husky. "You can capture it?"

“Perhaps.” I take the vial of precious fluid from my tray.

“What is that?”

Mm, her interior is too colorful. I turn off the projection.

Her nude skin is a strange tan. She’s all pinks, browns, a few yellows. So different from the correct Arrisan grays and blacks, these lessers, and even more a mystery. I turn on the complex mapping again, enduring the chaotic colors.

“Is it more lusteal?” she asks.

“Like lusteal, it’s a rare material that can only be harvested from the body of an Arrisan.”

“Can I see?”

“You’re looking at it already.”

She pinches her fingertips together in impatience, her wrists immobilized by the manacles next to her head.

I set the vial at the top of the slab, well out of her reach, with a quiet click. Then I refocus on her abdomen, narrowing my field of vision on the tubing in her belly. There’s quite a lot of it. My surgical lenses zoom in. This, here, is it part of a digestive system? Or is it—

*Whir.*

My forearm moves, blade ejecting before my conscious mind processes the danger.

The lesser, who I thought was manacled to the slab—because why else would she await me so patiently?—is, in fact, not tied down. The air movement is her unsecured hand snapping up the vial and throwing it at my face.

*Slice.*

That’s the sound of the vial passing through my ejected blade and separating into two neat halves.

*Cr-crack.*

And that’s the sound of the double impact of the severed vial smashing against my surgical lenses. The internal display

goes dark, and a piece chips off. A slight, clinical moisture dampens my nose. The precious contents. Lost.

My body freezes in shock.

Impossible.

She lies on the slab, the ghost of a frown lingering on her face, as if she too is confused by what just happened. Then her eyes widen. Green orbs, hovering like a warning, one that I have somehow ceased to heed.

I suck my blade back into my forearm. The sheath squeezes off any foreign substances down to the molecule.

Heat flares across my chest, up my neck, down my back to the hollows above my buttocks. My skinsuit fan kicks in to remove the offending moisture.

I can't speak. I can hardly draw breath.

My experiment.

*My redemption.*

There is no time.

The roaring sensation welling deep in my chest is shock.

Or soundless fury.

FIVE



# NOEMI

O h, no.

I've done it now.

Ukuri is frozen. The echo of the glass vial pieces, clinking where they hit the ground, fades from inside the scanner. There's only the sound of his breathing and mine. His dark glasses now have a chink in them, exposing a fragment of one silver eye. Although most Arrisan eyes are a sterling silver, his are lighter, white gold or maybe palladium.

His frozen gaze drops to me through the fractured lens.

A shiver runs up my arms.

His voice is terrifyingly normal. "Do you have any idea what you've just done?"

My brain worm smirks. "Nope, sorry."

His nostrils flare. The one pupil partially visible through the lens dilates.

I am going to die.

My heart thumps. Energy pours into my limbs, lubricating my legs to flee, my jaw to fight.

But giddy excitement bubbles up like champagne in my veins. It takes all my will to keep from laughing.

We're in the center of the colony. My brain worm has never felt so alive.

“Don’t be mad, Ukuri,” it purrs. “I’m just a stupid and helpless lesser. You have to educate me with your superior Arrisan logic.”

He blinks.

“And, if that doesn’t work, you’ll have to educate me with your cock.”

---



Ukuri

The lesser does not act scared.

My implant helpfully informs me that “cock” is a Humana anatomical term for the male jack.

Wonderful.

The floor tilts beneath my feet. I have to physically lean my head back to stop from staggering against the metal slab, sinking into the gravity that she’s somehow shifted in this room. Maybe it’s because this tiny room concentrates her aroma. Maybe it’s because I have the semen of another male unexpectedly spattered against my nose and I have yet to even think of reaching for a cleaning cloth.

Rushing is a natural response. The longer it takes to perform my investigations, the more opportunity someone else has to interrupt, to take her away from me. Fuzig, or the head of the Science Center, or another science officer. Even one of those lusteal-addled engineers.

And yet, suddenly, this is all going far too fast.

No. Calm. It’s a small setback.

Until I submit my report, I have all the time in the empire with this lowly, infected human.

I reach for the cleaning cloth on my surgical pedestal, remove my damaged surgical lenses, wipe my face and the broken glass. “The problem, lesser...”

No, I pull her name out of my memory and force the foreign syllables onto my tongue exactly as she spoke them. She deserves that much.

“...Noemi, is a small inconvenience. Nothing more. You’ve destroyed my vial of Arrisan male generative tissue, and it will be a small hassle to leave you here, carefully secured against the ravening mob outside, while I get another.”

“Why do you have to leave?”

“Because.” I set the damaged lenses on my pedestal between scalpels. “It’s not possible to magically create another vial of perfectly graded generative tissue here—”

“Why not?”

Hair-thin ghosts of danger brush across my nerves. Her question is like the broken tip of a needle, and the air here is heavy, wet. I’m starting to have trouble breathing. If she, a lesser, has outsmarted not only an Arrisan, but me, *twice*, I may have to reconsider who should be manacled to the slab. “What do you mean?”

She points at my loins.

My thigh muscles twitch inside my impenetrable skinsuit, but it isn’t visible through the thick fabric.

“Aren’t you able to create more ‘generative tissue’? Like magic?”

“Biologically...” Again, the floor tilts toward her, and I have to exert even more effort to stay upright. I’m afraid to take a step back, to step in any direction, because there’s a strong possibility that if I dare to lift a foot off the ground, I’ll lose my balance entirely. “I said ‘perfectly graded’ generative tissue.”

“What’s the difference?”

“There are forty-seven biological markers and twenty-eight social—”

“To me.” She lowers her chin. Her flat thumbs rub her slender fingertips. Calculating again. “What does your grading matter to me?”

“The integrity of an experiment...” *requires the best-quality materials*. That’s what I want to say. But somehow, I’m losing sight.

Use my generative tissue?

Can I do that?

Is that...allowed?

She smirks. “As far as I’m concerned, you’re grade A and I’m a connoisseur.”

“No, that’s not the issue...”

I suppose it should be fine to use my own generative tissue. Although it’s never been officially graded—on account of my father’s actions removing our material from the genetic lottery so there will be no more descendants—I conducted my own tests as a matter of course. Every science officer examines their own bodily fluids in secret. We want to know about the world. Of course we want to know about ourselves.

An officially graded sample requires multiple biometric locks. Justifications.

But a renewable material like my own material does not.

My experiments can be extended. More data can be extracted. More results, more publications.

Another shiver runs up my spine, this one from the possibilities I had not allowed myself to consider...

Wait.

Why didn’t I consider them? Why was this solution obviously impossible before, and why do I think it’s perfectly reasonable now?

I’m forgetting something. Something important. And her unnatural eyes watching me think does not help.

“I may not produce adequate generative tissue.”

She sits up. “I’ll make sure you do. What sexual things do you like? Kissing, sucking, freaky positions? You’ll come everywhere. I’ll guarantee it.”

“I don’t wish to produce tissue everywhere. I only need it in your reproductive organs.”

“Sure, no problem.”

“I need to observe its effect on the lusteal in your brain.”

“Uh-huh, of course.”

“My hypothesis is that the lusteal will move to your abdomen, drawn by the magnetic properties of my tissue, wherein we may be able to remove it. Once removed, we can analyze the lusteal’s properties to figure out how it got into your blood and why it’s activated.”

“Whatever you say.” She reaches for my collar. “Let’s do it Arrisan-style.”

“No.” I capture her hands. Her skin is cooler than mine, her fingers slender. Oddly shiny nails are tipped by white crescents. In contrast, my nails are stubby and gray, like the rest of my skin, and ribbed in lines of pure black. “This is not the arena. It’s an exam room. We’re not engaged in reproduction. This is scientific research.”

She nods, her eyes wide and guileless. “You’re going to probe me with that scientific instrument between your legs.”

Another prickle of warning tingles around my ears. Some mismatch between her words and her tone, the meaning and the implication. But when I take a deeper breath to clear my head, all I do is draw in the scent of her tainted lusteal. It’s like the wire on a fuse burning down, into an incendiary bomb, past the point where I can blow it out.

“But, Ukuri, I have to make it good for you so you’ll release your, um, release. So, how do you Arrisians like it?” Her fingers move beneath mine. “Soft and sweet, or loud and —”

“Don’t think about that.” I push her back.

She ensnares my hand, clinging too close.

“A lesser can’t endure an Arrisan coupling. Your fragile human body would be torn to shreds.”

“You use your blades?”

“What? No.” With the other hand, I slide my fingers down the seam of my skinsuit to my thigh. The halves part, revealing my chest, abdomen, and taut jack. “We’re too violent.”

“Oh, you like it rough? I can do rough.” She escapes my grip and scoots forward, dropping one leg on either side of my

hips off the end of the slab. Her fingers skate down my chest and slither around my waist, cinching us closer. “Does this pedestal go down? It’s a little high.”

I reach over to the wall, just at the edge of my fingertips, to adjust the height. “No, I don’t ‘like it’ rough. Arrisans prefer efficiency, but I won’t hold you to our standards. A human can’t endure an Arrisan coupling.”

She spits in her palms and rubs them together. “We’ll see.”

“I’m warning you that whatever competence you think you’ve acquired from your hypersexual couplings on Humana, you’re unprepared for me.”

“Okay.” She curls her hands around my jack. Hard. “Do you know how to make it easy to insert a scientific probe?”

Wet, hot friction scores my jack, engulfing me in black-violet heat, stealing my attention and focusing it onto a palm’s width of skin and flesh.

I feel nothing.

And yet, at the same time, I feel everything.

Everything.

I suck in a breath through my clenched teeth. “That...is too...”

She drives her wrist against my pubic bone, wringing my jack from tip to root with dangerous expertise. “Add lubrication.”

It happens in an instant.

She drags her hand over my tip, and the skin moves like she’s reaching down into my balls and grabbing hold of my root. A foreign urge wells up, tightening muscles that I never knew existed. It catches in the back of my throat, and a low groan emerges.

She looks up in surprise. “Are you—already...?”

Liquid erupts into her hand, rope after rope of clear release. I lift up onto my tiptoes as it’s dragged out of me. She looks down at it, joining the sweat and other liquids

dampening her tawny brown skin, and tilts her head. “Oh. Oops.”

I land on my heels, my whole body shuddering from visceral shock. I shake my head, shake it again. My skin prickles with shivers, like diving into too-cold water that tricks me into believing it’s air. I’m going to gasp and drown.

She wipes my liquid off her palm and flicks it at the floor.

My hand steadies. “I need to capture that in a specimen jar.”

“Do the next one.” She guides my hand to her hip, twines her calves around the backs of my knees, and presses the tip of my still-hard jack to the slick, pink entrance of her socket. “Hurry.”

I resist. “This is not scientific.”

“I’ll give you everything. All the data. All the answers.” She touches the tip of her tongue to her upper lip, then dives toward me. Her sharp nip tugs my ear lobe, and the wetness makes my skin contract. A ticklish shiver zips down my neck, tenses my shoulder.

I suck in a hard breath. Heat floods my jack.

No, no. I have to stop. It’s too intense, too uncontrolled. I can’t use this data. I don’t even think there is data. “Control yourself.”

“I am.” She inches her socket onto my jack, compelling me with rough grunts and moans. She’s wild and hot and unpredictable, but her socket is a soft tunnel of heat and promise. Our pubic bones nest, and she sighs.

The gust of air past my still-wet lobe tightens those muscles in my thighs once again.

It’s coming, again, it’s coming.

I freeze.

She rocks against me, fruitless because I am a stone. I am the metal slab of the operating table. I am a true instrument, with no feelings.

“This is what you need.” She gnaws on the point of my jaw, my neck, while her fingernails carve sweet daggers into the back of my head. “Release in me, and you’ll get the answers you’re seeking.”

The scratches intensify my sensations, as if each nail is slipping off a different restraint. I feel light-headed again, like when I was running in the hallway, bright and unnatural, free.

I land on top of her, crushing her into the metal slab, my jack sliding into her socket with brutal force. Her lips curve in satisfaction, and she bucks me just as hard, an earthy growl in her throat. We’re two animals fighting over something, chasing it, and I have the strangest urge to turn her chin away, bite down on her ear just like she did to me, only harder. Take a piece for myself, stuff it deep inside, and hide her away forever.

A high-pitched whine enters one ear. Heat rolls up my body from my toes to my forehead, recedes again. I hold her down to slow the wave from overtaking me. But she’s brown water flowing around me, ribbons of gold and pink and green, unable to be held back by force.

And I no longer think. I only feel.

It’s like when I ejected my blades for the first time. They were so large and unwieldy against the slender weight of my young body, so unlike the thin blades of my instructors, and we had to teach ourselves how to use them. Our style was discontinued because we had to contort so acrobatically to maintain balance. They said we were too showy and sacrificed our pure power so the classes after us would be more streamlined. As the least-loved of the blades, many of my classmates ended up cast out, like me. But the first time using them was a similar unknown friction, a sense of erupting into the unknown.

My blades always felt cooler than my body. And this lesser—this human—Noemi is unexpectedly warm.

She strains against my pelvis, her body an arch from our union, two momentarily intersecting parabolic curves. Thrashing like this, struggling, is *doing something to me*.

Pressure builds at the base of my spine, and every time she kicks, it rises.

But I can control it.

I can slow us down, I can change our rhythm, I can think.

Her moans, her scratches, I can still control—

Her nose wrinkles, lips pulling back to bare her frontal incisors, and then she rocks forward and buries her teeth in my shoulder.

Heat whips through my body, unzipping and tearing open my mind. My own recessive teeth, the sharp fangs hidden beneath my tongue and nested into the roof of my mouth, emerge and flex.

I grit my normal teeth together with the last of my mental strength. I will *not* bite her. *I will not.*

Acrid droplets of poison sizzle on the back of my tongue.

Shudders roll through me, spasms without start, and I don't know how they can end. My jack erupts into her socket, a torrent of white-hot release.

She arches her back and shrieks.

My mind goes blank.

Empty.

It lasts forever. A moment beyond time. I'm an empty container, an overturned vessel. Nonexistent. Free.

And then I land in my body, centered, my buttocks and loins still clenching rhythmically from the expulsion of even more generative fluids, pumping into her socket. She cries out with every eruption, eyes rolling, as if my release is tearing some kind of segmented worm out of her head, one shocked cry at a time.

My spasms end, and she collapses, limp.

I start to pull out.

She flinches. Her body grips me.

Danger plucks at the base of my skull with ghostly fingers.



I freeze.

A warning?

Maybe I'll wait.

She pulls a hank of long human hair away from her flushed, damp face. Her unsettling eyes focus on me with dawning horror.

It mirrors my own terrifying clarity.

What have I done?

SIX



# NOEMI

**A**fter the euphoric fizziness drains from my trembling fingertips and curling toes, I'm compressed against the operating table by the steady pressure of Ukuri's cooling body, his cock still buried in me to the hilt. A dark mauve half-moon bruises his shoulder. The taste of his blood lingers in my teeth.

His blood doesn't taste normal. It's got a prickly spice against the top of my nasal passage. How many humans know the taste of an Arrisan's blood?

Oh. My. H.

I think...

I think I've done something wrong.

I move back to separate us.

He stops me, palm down, hand flat. The silent, universal gesture to wait.

I suck in a breath to apologize.

His palm tilts, emphasizing the order. *Wait*. Like speaking aloud is too dangerous. He carefully, delicately angles his upper body away, increasing distance between our chests while freezing our lower union in place.

I rise onto my elbows to scoot away.

He grabs my hips with a shudder. His cock moves in me, and he squeezes his eyes shut, sucking air between his gritted teeth. "Shh."

I hold my breath.

He twitches, breathes out slowly, then cracks open an eye and slowly relaxes again. The self-assurance is gone. His hair sticks up in tufts while other sections are flattened, and his eyes are white-silver storm clouds after unleashing rain.

We've just got to pull apart. Rip off the bandage.

But he doesn't.

He extends his index finger and rotates it to us, still united. "This will never happen again."

"Agreed."

"It was too..." He squints over my shoulder, searching for words.

"Too rough?"

He stills. His eyes move to me and then the rest of his face, orienting like a snake on prey it had decided to let go, but is now reconsidering. "Are you possibly under the impression that you can make fun of me?"

"No."

He stares for a long, hard moment, waiting to catch me in some kind of lie.

And then he looks over my shoulder again.

I swallow. Now the passion has exited, chilly dampness and gooey fullness remind my body it's uncomfortably stretched around his.

I don't really know how to feel about this.

Normally, the hour after sex is the worst. Men get sticky and emotional. It's the only hour I have my mind back, so the last thing I want to do is waste it catering to their feelings.

But Ukuri's an Arrisan.

Nothing will ever be normal again.

My buttocks goes numb. I kick one leg, trying to get feeling back in it.

He clamps my thigh. “No.”

I feel like I need to whisper. “Why are we still like this?”

“A few reasons, one being that I don’t want to add any more factors to the experiment.”

Oh. The heat map of my chemistry, an impressionist painting of colors jumping and jerking, consumes his attention. “What’s the experiment?”

“Drawing the lusteal out of your body, as I said. See the black groupings? It’s on the move.”

What?

*What?*

The lusteal clumps and squishes like muddy amoebas squeezing through narrow apertures in my body. Gross. But I can’t look away. “It *is* alive.”

“Of course it’s not alive.”

“It’s moving.”

“Like an iron filing to the magnet of my generative tissue. Thus is my hypothesis proven true. Now to ascertain how to remove it permanently...”

“You can remove it?” My heart skips. “Are you serious?”

“Always.”

Today is suddenly the best day of my life. I have a diagnosis, a treatment plan that I can see working, and a possible cure.

Sure, I might have preferred something a little less invasive, less like clutching a sweaty barrel between my thighs. I’m months out of practice—sorry, kortans out of practice straddling a man, and my workouts on the cruiser apparently did not exercise these tiny, obscure connectors.

But who cares? I could get the brain worm removed. Permanently!

He motions, zooming in on my abdomen. “The lusteal is dispersing. Hmm. If I could get it to pool, then perhaps I could

excise it with scalpels...”

My overexerted muscles twitch with small tremors.

He sucks in another long, testy breath. “Hold still.”

“I’m trying.” I focus on anything but the all-consuming squeaky tendons. “I don’t even like sex. The brain worm makes me do this. I’m actually asexual.”

“That’s rare for your species.”

“Yep. But that’s why I want it out. I’d rather do anything else.”

“Rare, but commendable.”

“Commendable?”

“You prefer useful pursuits over slavish hedonism? Any rational creature would. You’re abnormally clever for your type, so I’m not particularly surprised.”

My throat tightens. I’m clever? Rational? *Commendable*? I don’t know what to say.

We watch the black powder halo my abdomen on the scan.

Ukuri’s body gives off a steady warmth. The even rise and fall of his broad chest soothes me. Like visiting my grandparents as a young child. While my grandfather entertained in their museum-like salon below, I spent hours at my grandmother’s dressing table above. Powders, lotions, subtle highlights, and precise contours. She made a place for me to watch, and once, she even let me try on my great-grandmother’s pale orange lipstick that was kept locked in a stained glass cabinet. She said that I had the right complexion for it.

I never met my great-grandmother. She passed long before I was born. But my grandmother had the power to remain still no matter what chaos went on around her, like a living statue, and even now, I consider stillness, quiet, to be deeply safe.

I broke a vial on Ukuri’s face, and he didn’t get angry.

Or, too angry.

He didn't raise his voice.

His Arrisan face is nothing like mine, obviously. He has long, slender cheekbones. His tongue pokes from the corner of his mouth. No hair dusts his silver nipples, or anywhere except on his head. His belly button pokes out. His skin darkens around his cock, dark gray encased in my tawny legs.

Well, tawny, dry legs. I rub a white scuff on my upper thigh. "I need moisturizer."

He glances down. "What's that?"

"Ship air dries out my skin and makes it crack. My favorite has sunscreen, which is funny because that's kind of useless on a cruiser."

He grunts.

"How did you come upon our cruiser, anyway? Were you tracking us?"

"No, we followed the Eruvisans. We were their victims too."

No way. "They broke into an Arrisan dreadnought?"

He snorts. "Not hardly."

The contraction of air for his amused snort causes his cock to pulse very slightly into my center.

My world shifts.

Pleasure erupts in a sharp burst, and then happiness floods my veins outward from my center in lovely, luscious waves. I gasp.

What? How?

"What are you—nnh." He grits his teeth, holds me in place. His breathing goes rough, his tone rattled. "What was that?"

I can't believe it, but it's unmistakable. "An orgasm."

"A what? Oh, the lusteal is pooling. Do it again, quick."

"I don't know if I..." But his hard cock presses right against my G-spot, and the smallest movement of him trying

to regain control erupts into twin fully formed Os, searing and orgasmic, rolling and fine, like the best lotion, the most expensive youth serum, a true Arrisan health treatment radiating upward through my skin. I glow from the inside out.

He grunts.

I wait for the double wave to pass. My eyes twitch like they're going to cross. Have I ever orgasmed with a man? It's been years since I touched myself. Since the worm took control, I rejected everything about sex. Now I'm like an animal that's escaped from a force-feeding pen and taken the first bite of fresh, crisp grass. This is what it used to be like when it was just me and me alone. This was what I lost so long ago, I didn't even remember it was gone.

He pants, his face damp from the effort of holding himself still.

I catch my breath. "Did that work? Is it pooling?"

"A little, I believe. Not enough."

I tighten my legs around his, try to rock against his cock, force another orgasm.

He resists, gritting his teeth. "What are you doing?"

"Making it pool."

"We already tried."

"I can try harder. I can try as hard as you want."

"Stop. I don't...I can't...I'm going to release again."

"So?"

He blinks, his white-silver eyes wild. "It will ruin the experiment."

"If one shot drew all the lustal to my womb, can't a second shot do even more? Like, draw it the rest of the way out?"

He wrinkles in skepticism. "Mm. Perhaps a minuscule amount."

"Then?"



“You feel more sex, which you don’t even like, is worth a microscopic removal?”

“I put up with terrible reprocessor food, a ridiculous mist shower, this dry space air that makes me crack until I bleed, facial scarring—”

“Facial scarring?”

I flick the spot on my cheek where the tip of the electric screwdriver hit me earlier. “And nearly getting ripped apart. I left Humana in the hope that my sickness might be controlled. Getting it removed completely? I would have sex a million times.”

“Perish the thought.”

“Please, Ukuri. One more shot. Set me free.”

He heaves a deep sigh, shifts his jaw back and forth while examining invisible variables in his head. “No biting, scratching, or drawing blood.”

“You said Arrisans like it rough.”

“We are not in the arena, combining our genetic materials so the most vigorous and aggressive survive. Understood?”

“Yes.” I hook my fingers around the small of his back. “I’ll lie back, motionless and silent, while you do your thing.”

“Please recall that I don’t care if you scream.” He rests his palms on either side of me on the metal table, positioning us. “I’ll never justify this to a review board.”

“It’s a scientific experiment. The experiment is ‘How fast can we draw the lusteal out of my body?’ and this is a test.”

“Yes, well...hm.” He fixates on me for too long, as if again he’s not quite convinced that I’m *not* making fun of him. The breezy confidence is long gone. I see two layers beneath his armor. His silver-white eyes glimmer like fallen stars.

And then he thrusts.

The movement presses his cock head into my pleasure zone and aligns his base to my clit, creating a rocking and sucking motion that magnifies into a welling super orgasm.

My fingers hook like claws into his back.

He groans, stills, grits his teeth. His eyes flash open with alarm. Something dangles in the dark recesses behind his teeth. “No scratching.”

Oops.

“Sorry.” I force my fingertips flat.

He closes his eyes again. “Wait a moment.”

The brain worm always focuses on my partner. Maybe the real me is sexually selfish. I can’t get the idea of Arrisan roughness out of my head. The hitch in Ukuri’s voice as he struggles for control does something shivery to my insides.

But I can follow instructions.

He resumes his thrust.

Pleasure rolls up my spine and out of my mouth in a delirious moan. My fingers curl. I ball them into fists to keep from scratching.

He pulls back and grinds against me again.

The orgasm crushes me into pieces and puffs me out like glitter dust, my whole body twisting and turning with painfully intense pleasure.

And it happens again.

And again.

Every thrust of his cock strokes me low and deep, shivery velvet like his voice, or lands on my shock buttons, releasing sparklers of pleasure. My nerve endings crackle with lightning.

He looks above me, over my shoulder, at the chart. He’s absorbed, under his panting gasps, counting. Each thrust is a hammer of pleasure. Sweat drips off his brow.

I hook my ankles around his buttocks, needing to draw him in, somehow bring him even closer. My nails dig into his shoulder blades.

He stares down at me.

I'm going to say sorry. I'm going to say anything.

But instead, I dig in harder.

His fingers tangle in my hair, gathering it up in a fist, and he yanks my head to one side, exposing my neck. "You have to stop this, Noemi."

I shudder because he hasn't stopped and the pleasure is even more intense, making me vocalize like I'm inside a storm, my whole body rocking beneath his domination.

His nostrils flare, scenting me.

I cling harder.

He grabs one of my disobedient hands, pins it to the slab by my head. White-silver eyes to mine, a thousand silent words scream between us, and then he says, with strange gravity, "Did you know your eyes are terrifying?"

"N..."

I have no idea what I intend to say.

Pure liquid fills me with unnatural heat as he releases, pumping himself into my womb.

He rests his forehead on my shoulder and his body arches, his muffled groan tearing from his throat. The bones in his forearms twitch. His groan breaks in half and turns to a hiss. He shudders.

Inside, the pleasure wells up and flips me completely upside down. I can't gasp for air. I can't breathe. I've been pulled to the bottom of the whirlpool and the source of all life glows around me. A choir of old church music tinkles on instruments we no longer play. I've somehow folded time itself so I'm in one of my earliest memories, and yet I'm also coming alive into the awareness of myself in this body. Old muscle and skin hangs off me like an ill-fitting costume. The truth chants in my mind, like prayer. Holy clarity. Maybe it's like what my mom felt when she entrusted herself to a man who swore he heard God. Responsibility is released. It's all over. I've fought alone long enough.

And then I draw a breath in tandem with Ukuri. He collapses on me, a heavy weight, and I embrace it. I hold his deadweight like an anchor after a storm.

Something happened.

I'm not the same person I was before.

This wasn't ordinary sex.

And I have no words to describe what it means to me, an asexual, to have experienced this thing.

Or what it means about me going forward.

But he's the one who moans my question aloud. "What have I become?"

SEVEN



# UKURI

“**W**hat have you become?” Noemi repeats softly.  
Strange. I’ve become strange.

But I can’t bear to articulate how.

Her fingertips brush my ears, the small black spikes there. Electricity runs straight from the tips through my torso into my softened jack, pulsing with hardness. Perhaps I *can* have sex with her one million times. She is uniquely fitted for my pleasure.

We could remain here, in cozy seclusion. No one knows she’s here. I could forget to send in my report. Wrap myself up in our research. No one would ever know.

The communication console beeps twice. Someone has sent me a high-priority message.

Hm. Yes. This crashing-in sensation is reality.

I shake off my delusions and separate us. The air is chilly, and I am damp everywhere with her liquid.

She scoots back on the operating table.

I blot my body with a sample-collection cloth, then drape a large one over her. It suctions to her body. She wriggles with a surprised squeak. “What are you doing?”

“Collecting samples.”

She helps me pull off the sheet, which requires force as it lifts every loose particle from her skin, and shifts from one cheek to the other. Ah. Her buttocks were pressed to the slab,

so I never tested their firmness. I will need to remember for next time to squeeze.

Noemi rubs her dried fingertips together. “Now I really need moisturizer.”

“Unfortunately, your Humana cruiser is long gone.” I feed the cloths into the scanner for a detailed molecular analysis. “But if any was collected just now from your skin, it will be possible to reprocess some.”

“You can do that?” Her midsection gurgles.

“What’s that noise?”

She grimaces and rests a hand on her soft belly. “I was hungry when I went into the escape pod clegs ago.”

I record the gurgling and add it to our sparse body of work on living humans. Honestly, I’ve read more extensive analyses of spores and molds. The first-contact researchers really didn’t care about Humana. I wonder if they even had a science officer on board to record what they inevitably destroyed.

Our scanty records indicate that she can eat nutrient cubes, so I dispense those into a bowl, along with a cup of water. Her tooth crunches are loud, but also vaguely satisfying.

Interesting.

I do not caretake my specimens. They don’t live long enough to require it. I didn’t realize feeding a dependent creature could feel this pleasing.

The protective fabric of my skinsuit feels good covering my skin. I unearth a spare pair of surgical lenses and connect them to my data tablet. While I wait for them to start, I slide into the communications console and read my message.

It’s from Atana. He’s sent hallway surveillance video of an angular, dark Humana lesser sneaking into a supply closet, and attached a quirky message. “*Lose one?*”

Hm.

The cameras in my science office show the empty escape pod for my control subject, Zeerah. There’s still a gaping hole

in my door.

Well. Nothing I can do about it now. I jot off a quick reply, stand, and stretch.

Noemi's eating has slowed. She swallows and yawns.

According to our records, humans sleep at least one shift out of three. That's quite a lot of sleep, but if she must... Humans sleep in fabric nests atop square platforms? I stack boxes to make space.

She sets aside her half-full bowl of cubes and hides another yawn.

I finish her nest, then toss her extra cubes back into storage. "There's your bed."

"Oh. Thanks."

"Rest as long as you like. But first." I tilt her chin, warm under my fingers, dab a slender probe in high-intensity healing gel, then position it over the burn.

She shies away.

"Hold still." I smear gel over the small wound.

She obeys. "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like?" I dab a scrape on her chin, a scratch on her collarbone, old purple bruises on her golden-brown skin, new scratches our rough coupling made on her soft interior, and kneel to inspect the rough soles of her feet.

Her tone sharpens with warning. "It looks like you're being nice to me."

Fascinating. "Do you distrust it?"

"Fuzig said I would be your doom."

"Vanadisans have a flair for the dramatic."

She scratches her cheek. The burn scab falls off. She catches it with concern, then tenderly brushes the pale new skin already formed underneath.

Impressive.



I touch my ear to activate my implant. “Research note: Noemi has a super-reaction to healing gel, her human cells regrowing in clicks where an Arrisan would take up to several shifts. This demonstrates her biological responsiveness to all Arrisan-designated substances, not just lusteal. Continue tests.”

She turns the scab over on her palm. “This was a test?”

“Yes, of course. Why?”

“I thought you were healing me to...” She scratches a long scar on the interior of her forearm. “I don’t know.”

I rotate her wrist to face me, ignoring the implied insult, and—

“No!”

I pause with the probe half-dipped in healing gel. “No?”

“I, uh...” She hugs her other arm across her bare midsection. “You’re Arrisan.”

“I am aware.”

“But I have experience being someone’s doom. Lots of someones, actually. On Humana.” She laughs breathily. “They attach and do things I don’t want. Overly generous gifts. Crying and pleading for my attention. Sacrifices. You’re an Arrisan, so I can’t believe you’d do that, but this is all just kind of, well, nice.”

I wait for her to go on.

She looks up at me as if she’s explained herself thoroughly.

Okay. I clear my throat, untwisting these illogical threads. “Are you suggesting that satisfying the basic needs of a research specimen is indicative of doom?”

“And healing me. These are old scars.”

“So it will be interesting to observe their reaction to the high-intensity gel.”

“It’s another experiment? Really?”

“Everything is an experiment, Noemi. You’re my research subject. Although our records on Humana are less detailed than I would wish, I see no reason to add starvation, scarring, or sleep deprivation trials when we only have a few more short clegs together before the Science Center of Arris Central will demand your body. There, the highest-ranked, most intelligent minds in the empire will take over whatever I start.”

Her mouth forms an O. “I’m not staying here?”

“Oh, I’ll keep you as long as I can.” I smear the healing gel on her scars, first one bumpy forearm and then the other. “Your unusual blood will prove my intellectual worth, advance my career, even reinstate my genetic line.”

She watches with a frown. “So you are trying to keep me.”

“But you will certainly be ripped from my grasp.” I cap the healing gel. “Probably in the form of microthin scientific slides. This healing will be of little value to you then, but I will document the process for posterity.”

“Slicing me up into microthin slides, is that, uh, survivable?”

“Not usually. Does that disturb you?”

She glances back at the wall scan, the colorful movement of chemicals and reactions dancing in her body. “If the lusteal moves even one hair’s width back toward my brain, I’ll probably beg you.”

“Then our desires align.”

She teases her lower lip, biting it with her teeth. I don’t know why this is suddenly fascinating, these micromovements of hers, but they are. “You really don’t have any feelings for me?”

“I don’t have any feelings. I’m a science officer.”

“And you won’t have time to develop any either...”

“Noemi, the day I develop feelings, I’ll perform a self-examination of my brain with my own blades.”

She tilts her wrists. The healing gel gleams like shiny red rivers. “When will they take me away?”

“After I submit my report alerting them to your existence.”

The console chimes. “Captain Falkion for Science Officer Ukuri.”

My stomach drops.

It’s too late.

*They know.*

---

Noemi

A brutal Arrisan in a brightly lit office filled with biological images appears on Ukuri's viewscreen. He snarls, "Ukuri, report."

"Captain Falkion." Ukuri smiles flatly. A new pair of black lenses hovers over his nose, obscuring his eyes. "To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit to my science office?"

"Were you ever going to tell me that I have a lesser creeping around on my ship?"

"Of course not, Captain." Ukuri leans to the side to expose me. "Noemi? Greet the captain."

I guess no one cares that I'm naked. My arms feel weird from the gel. I wave my fingers. "Hi."

The harsh man glares at me for a long instant. Then he glares at Ukuri. "That is a different lesser."

"Why, Captain, how can you tell? Don't they all look the same?"

It's ironic that Arrisans, who do look identical, have trouble telling us apart. Based on their conversation, it seems Captain Zeerah got free and is sneaking around this ship.

Zeerah.

Even her name pierces my heart with a soft pinprick. She hasn't made the ultimate sacrifice for us—yet—and the Arrisans worry she could hide for kortans in the ducts and ventilation shafts if she's clever.

Zeerah is pretty clever, so...

They discuss another shipmate, Catarine. The slow-speaking Dutch-Malay scholar encountered a blade who sacrificed everything for her. His position, his rank, his life... Like Fuzig said, she became his doom.

"Just imagine what a lesser could do to a whole army." Ukuri beams, unconcerned. "Or, what she could get that army

to do.”

Captain Falkion grimaces. This is his nightmare.

But Ukuri seems convinced *he* can't be enslaved...

Right now, it might be useful to enslave one of them. The captain, probably. But I suppose it doesn't matter. We're all in different types of jeopardy. Catarine's in danger, Zeerah's in danger, and the rest of my shipmates are with the evil-intentioned Vanadisans.

In this empire, no one's fate is their own.

A new Arrisan steps into view behind the captain. “Ukuri.”

Ukuri straightens and removes his lenses. He speaks softly with military correctness. “General Master.”

General Master of the Arsenal, the ruler of the blades?

“Don't kill your lesser,” the general master orders.

Ukuri takes a beat to answer. “No, I didn't intend to.”

“Keep the other Arrisans away from her, and don't report any results of your current experiments, preliminary or otherwise, until I give the command.”

---

Ukuri

The general master of the blades, the man who dumped me at the Science Center without a backward glance, now orders me around as if I've never left.

I feel a sharp, cold sensation like a knife tip digging into the hollow behind my jaw, and I rub the spot while the consequences of disobeying his order flit through my mind.

I belong to the Science Center now.

But the blades embedded in my forearms bind me to the Arsenal more tightly than any umbilical cord.

“You know that when you were removed from the Arsenal, my predecessor took you aside and explained you were chosen.” Zai speaks urgently, compellingly. He's only a little older than me, but long, sleepless shifts have ravaged his gaunt body. He looks on the verge of collapse. Still, the ice-fire of duty burns in his chilling gaze. “Remember that? You were sent away because he believed that you could endure the training of the other center, but never forget that you are, first and always, a blade.”

A science officer does not withhold data. Data is the foundation of knowledge, and knowledge is the key to preserving the empire.

“Remember?” Zai insists. “You were stationed here for a reason, and if you ever doubted or questioned our purpose, that reason is about to become clear.”

Falkion growls off to the side. “The Vanadisans are ignoring our hails.”

“Of course they are. We'll give chase. Prepare to move.”

Falkion's jaw flexes.

He's no longer under Zai's rule either. Captains execute orders from the High Command, not the Arsenal.

But he lifts his hand to touch his implant, exposing the dark line of his blade sheath against his wrist, and gives the order.

I wonder how his bridge will react.

Falkion, Atana, and I share the same past. Of the thousands of Arrisans on this dreadnought, we three know the pain of having shaped our lives, our bodies, our very souls to the blades, only to be coldly pushed out.

Atana's pranks supposedly keep him sane, but I see little sanity left in his wild eyes.

At least I, as a science officer, still have a rank.

But if I can't publish my results, others will gain credit for my discoveries.

The redemption Noemi symbolizes will slip through my fingers.

I'll lose everything.

Zai refocuses on me. "Do you understand?"

But so long as I have Noemi in my grasp, I have a chance.

Anyway, after Falkion recaptures the other infected lessers, the Vanadisan conspiracy will likely be exposed, and Zai will tell me to publish as I wish. It's only a slight delay.

Probably.

I lower my hand. "I will not report my results until your command."

"Protect the empire." Zai's icy eyes hold mine.

The screen goes blank.

*Protect the empire.* What I thought I was doing in the blades.

Little knives glide along the underside of my jaw. I used to grit my teeth during the Science Center assignments, forcing myself through them by a perverse refusal to let anyone see me fail. During resting shifts or when I tried to eat, my whole mouth ached.

I count backward, breathing. The mantras for release bubble up in my brain.

Mantras from the blades, ironically.

Like the metal embedded in my forearms, these mantras are inescapably part of me, and they do have their uses. But I absolutely refuse to chant them, silently or otherwise, and they go away.

I slide out of the communications console.

Noemi has dressed and exited the clear exam room. Her fragile, vibrant human clothes add even more color to my surgical lenses' view. She inspects the external door lock.

I lean against the wall and drawl, "Going somewhere?"

"How long did it take my shipmate to enslave her blade?"

The question fires like a shot.

And I have no good answer. "Enslaving' is really the wrong term."

"Can I enslave the captain and get him to fly me somewhere?"

"Where do you wish to go?"

She ignores my playful tone. "Can I enslave the general master and order around all the blades?"

A foreign person controlling the blades is a sobering thought.

Noemi looks up from the door controls. Her eyes, a dangerous green, are monstrous and other. "Can I enslave you?"

"No."

"How do you know I haven't already?"

"It's elementary." I slide my hand under hers and pull her away from the door controls. "Now we've concentrated your lusteal, I doubt you could enslave anyone. I barely notice your scent."

"Haven't you just acclimated?"



“No, but as we proceed, I’ll be sure to safeguard myself against interspecies attraction, and keep the risk of my own enslavement at the top of my mind.”

“You had the same attitude when you thought I was manacled. The same tone too.”

A frisson of awareness tingles in my forearms. Warnings again, which I choose to ignore as I lead her back into the exam room.

“My dear, I always have this tone. I find reality, in general, too amusing to navigate with a straight face. Regardless, when the time comes, I still have every intention of slicing you into microthin slides.”

“You’re just saying that to make to me feel better.”

“I heartily assure you, I am not. Look here.” I tap the controls to highlight the aura of her blood. “Here’s your ‘spicy scent’ during your first scan, and here’s the same measure now...”

Oh.

Hm.

We both stare at the numbers.

And then she repeats the obvious. “The numbers are the same.”

“But I’m not responding anymore.” I shrink her images and bring up mine. “See, my brain’s baseline is identical to my current state, proving I am in no way being influenced by...”

Except they’re not identical.

In fact, they’re like completely different people.

She studies the patches of color, the sharp green and yellow spike hormones. Shock, anxiety, and then a malaise of minor out-of-parameter chemicals.

“This is very interesting.” I notate the recording of my scans. When and if I die for this, the science officers who conduct my postmortem will add my notes to their conclusion.

“I am, in fact, greatly affected. What has changed is that I am no longer aware of my out-of-scope state. Fascinating.”

“So you have developed feelings for me.”

“Oh, these aren’t feelings. They’re chemical and physical manifestations of rational thought processes. The ratio is wrong for a science officer. No matter. Watch.”

My medical reprocessor dispenses a small cup of blue gel. I toss it back. The sharp liquid slides down my throat with acrid bitterness. My chest heats and cools at the same time, and the hot-cold seeps through my veins to my fingertips. Menthol coats me like an inner skinsuit, impenetrable and secure.

“Ah. See?” I tap the brain scan as the colors shift. My voice already sounds like it’s coming from farther away, like I’m floating slightly outside my body and then readjusting to interface with it. “All back to normal.”

“You don’t seem that different.”

“But I am chemically and physically normal. My scans don’t lie.”

“What if they do, though? What if you lose control of your body, and nobody else notices?”

“Well, it depends.” I fold my hands. “Does my work suffer? If not, then who cares?”

“You would care.”

“Would I? How unfortunate for me. I exist to be the empire’s microscope, its exploratory scalpel.”

She looks down and rubs the shiny mark on her forearm. It’s a lighter color now, and smoother. “You are affected.”

“And? It’s cured. You’ll never leave a permanent mark on me.”

“I already have, though.”

“Mm? What do you mean?”

“There.” She points to my shoulder. “My literal mark.”

Her literal mark?

I pull open my skinsuit. Violet and red bites score my shoulder.

My gut lurches.

When?

No, no. I remember when. She triggered my instincts, my recessive teeth, and urges I mustn't feel. A near miss with a forbidden desire, one that would not only wreck my career, but taint everything I ever studied, and my brain simply...forgot?

She stares at me with her green, green eyes that signal nothing but danger.

No, no. *Think*. That's my specialty, the reason I survived after I was thrown out of the blades. My brain is my one asset of value.

I will control this. Chemically, I'm already in control.

Except little strings tug on my sensory nerves like invisible hairs that won't move no matter how many times I try to brush them away.

They drop lower and wrap around my pulsing jack.

This is fine. I can have her as much as I want, as long as I want. She's my precious research subject, and no one will ever take her from me.

I'll explain this.

It will make sense.

I just need a moment to gather my thoughts.

I'll explain...

---

Noemi

Ukuri stares at my half-moon of teeth.

Then he nods slowly. “It didn’t affect the research. And afterward, I never thought of it because of how little it matters.”

“So we should heal it.”

He watches me use his tools to smear on the healing gel. The small vial is marked with the Arrisan symbol for health and infinity, the double ninety-six.

Then he smiles. “I hypothesize the high-intensity gel will take longer to heal my skin even though it’s designed for me. Shall we test it?” He starts a timer.

His tone is light. Unconcerned.

But his arousal, visible in the opening of his suit, presses. “You medicated your brain, but forgot your cock.”

“Nonsense, I’m preparing for the next experiment.”

“Really?”

His teeth flash in the simulacrum of a smile. “General Master Zai asked me to betray the Science Center. I verbally agreed. The Science Center will erase my existence for this unless...” He removes his eye shields. “I discover something in you that’s so incredible, my name can never be erased.”

His light silver gaze flicks over me. Cold and impersonal, like a waterfall in the jungle when I’m craving so badly to be clean that I’m willing to brave whatever lurks in the shadows.

I swallow. “Can you?”

“Of course. Whatever secrets hide inside your body, I will cut them out and lay them bare. You can’t conceal the truth from me.”

I want my death to mean something.

And I want my life to mean something too.

His gaze cuts like a scalpel.

I'm asexual, I think. I have no drive, no hunger, no thirst for uniting my body with another person.

But I didn't hate our last coupling. And even if I did, removing lusteal is worth a little hate.

I lift my hand. "Promise that you won't fall in love with me."

"An easy promise." He steps into my arms and parts my knees. Confident now. He's an expert.

"You're not going to sacrifice yourself on my behalf."

"I would rather gargle with engine oil."

"And if the lusteal ever goes back to my brain, no matter what I say, you have to cut me into pieces."

"A million slides as thin as one of your lesser head hairs." He slides his fingers into my locks and tightens them around his fist.

My heart thumps, blood streaking to my cleft and swelling me with heat and readiness. It's not sexual attraction, to be clear. It's arousal. My body knows what this means.

Funny how reassuring he is. His coldness, his arrogant certainty.

I suppose I should be upset. His casual assurance proves that we humans are useless lessers. Even if we enslave an Arrisan here or there, we will never change our position. We'll never be of real importance in the empire.

And yet, for the first time, I feel like he's giving me a choice. "If we can't stop the brain worm, kill me. Promise."

"I promise, Noemi." His velvet tone is soft, encasing the brutal wildness of his vow. "The moment we lose to your madness, I'll kill myself and take you with me."

EIGHT



# NOEMI

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*Eleven kortans later, present day*

---

**T**he science office is cool, but Ukuri's body is hot, and his cock filling me up is orgasmic.

He thrusts like a robot as I lose my mind.

What I love the most about this, in the moment, is how little he cares about me.

He doesn't care if I scream. He doesn't care if I shift positions or call his name or cry. It's all data for our grand experiment, the one where we figure out everything in my body and set me free. The workout, such as it is, is extra, and knowing I'll someday be cured forever is so uplifting. I wrap my thighs around his narrow waist and arch my back and fly.

But there is one thing that still scares me.

He reaches the magical number and hovers, a machine on command.

I try to make him look at me, but his reflective lenses only show my own image back, sweaty and desperate. My fingers clench his jaw. "Give it to me."

He trembles, silent.

Pure liquid heat explodes through my body, washing me in a whirlpool of pleasure. I convulse and my back spasms, stealing my breath, and white stars burst behind my eyes. And then my body glows and my skin tingles, the finest exfoliating

treatment, the sweetest hormone massage. I collapse on the operating table, a liquid mess of gooey rightness.

He decouples and examines his jaw in the scanner wall. “You spoke again.”

“You hesitated.”

“I was analyzing you.”

“I wanted to help.” I scrub myself all over with his sample pads. After the workout, the sample pads are cleansing and invigorating, like getting out of the shower and waxing off every speck of dirt. My skin is clean, refreshed. I’m a blank canvas for the lineup of oil and scent products he’s made for me. I rub a waxy bar that smells vaguely like moss over my dry skin “We’ve done so many experiments lately, and you don’t enjoy them any more than I do.”

“Enjoyment is unnecessary.” Nude, he’s a gray silhouette of male perfection. “You didn’t answer. Has something changed?”

Fear wriggles in my belly.

Something *has* changed. When he stands before me like this, in the quiet hour that used to be my most horrid, I feel such a hot pressure in my chest. Tangy liqueur overfills my rib cage, mixing sweet and bitter.

My mouth goes dry. “I can’t describe it.”

“Try.”

“My chest...aches?”

“Aches?” He frowns, using his fingers to map my chest radiating outward from my heart. “Are you experiencing impending doom? An arterial blockage or embolism?”

“No, not doom, but there is a mental component.”

His warm breath tickles my chest, and his short hair is distractingly fuzzy. Gray and black strands are soft, like a cat.

He doesn’t like me to touch him casually when he’s examining me, so I busy my fingers putting away the moisturizing bar. “I don’t think it’s the brain worm.”



“Correct, the ‘brain worm’ is coiled in your belly.” With his black lenses, I’m laid bare to him whether I’m clothed or nude. “Describe the mental component.”

“It happens when I think about my life on Humana.”

“You miss it?”

“No.” I snort. “I mean, we’ve discussed the parts I miss.”

Real food, real water, real silk. The dampness in the morning before the sun touches the jungle. The scent of oil in the church offering shrines, and the holy feeling of singing hymns in an ancient language, like sharing secrets with the long-ago dead.

Those are some of the few things.

But this is different. “You experimented on me twice in one shift, and I didn’t have to do anything.”

“Of course not.” His mild tone gently chastises me. “I’ll always perform. Your only job, as we have discussed, is to focus on yourself.”

Which I know. I do. But even so, him saying it again feeds me. A small muscle relaxes in my lower back, like I’ve put down a burden I didn’t know I was carrying.

My parents shielded me a lot, and after they died, my family’s criticisms piled on. If I’d been a different kind of daughter, maybe they wouldn’t have died. If I’d married young, or been more fiery, or a visible pillar of the community. Not only having the complexion of my great-grandmother, but also her magnetism.

And Ukuri, in his analytical way, insists I’m perfectly adequate.

When I think of that, I feel another sensation in my chest, a breathlessness, like I’ve jumped into very cold water. I have to shriek or giggle.

“Are you sure there are no other changes?” He tilts my face to one side and runs his thumb across my temple. I think it’s a shiny red scar still. A few shifts earlier, it was an incision

with purple-gray sutures. “Your new implant isn’t bothersome or distracting?”

“Oh, I turned it off so I could focus.”

“You should keep it on. Mute as needed.”

“How?”

“Your brain. You’re quite Arrisan in your thinking, so the controls should map to your uniquenesses quickly the more you use it.”

He turns away, makes notes about the experiment we’ve just concluded, and checks for results.

My fingertips poke and prod in my jaw and around my ear. The implant controls are somewhere... Theoretically, I can turn it on by tightening a muscle in my jaw, but even most Arrisans touch the controls by their ears.

Abrupt, muted screams travel up my jawbone and rattle in my inner ears. Shouts overlay each other, calling out damage, taking evasive action.

The rest of the dreadnought is on its second gora of battle with fierce Vanadisan warships. People are dying and chunks of our hull are getting blown off, but for me, it’s an ordinary shift in Ukuri’s science office. I guess if damage got through the exterior layers to here, it would be so catastrophic that I’d probably never know. I’d just cease to exist. So there’s no point in worrying about it.

*Quiet, I tell the implant. Fade. Volume down.*

The screams get squeaky like chipmunks, then bass heavy, then shrill like a thousand insects squealing. My brain pounds on the soundboard with the finesse of numb hands. I guess I’ll just have to get used to it. Tune it out.

The sound fades abruptly.

Huh.

I don’t know how or why, but, good.

Ukuri puts on his skinsuit. I stop him before he can cover over his shoulder. “I bit you again.”

“Ah, yes. Thank you, Noemi, you are helpful.”

I apply the healing gel over the fresh half-moon. Old bites are still visible, a funny violent tattoo. “I really can control myself. I just haven’t been.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“You say that.” I put away the gel, then pull on my own skinsuit, a slender new model created just for humans. The thick fabric has a lovely supple texture like leather, but more alive. “It’s hard to heal when I keep redamaging you.”

“It is very slight, unimportant damage.” He checks his body chemistry, then dispenses his usual after-sex medicinal shot, downing it with a bracing exhale, like it’s shockingly bitter. “Now, if you can pinpoint the chest-ache sensation on your scan, we could formulate an antidote, like mine, so that you too could return to baseline and never be tormented by unnecessary sensations.”

A prickling feeling sticks me in the sternum. Different from the ache, but related. “You would do that?”

“Of course, Noemi.” He lifts my chin, his fingers warm and deft on my cool skin. “Your body is my precious vault, and when we’ve removed all its secrets, there will be nothing inside you that’s beyond my mastery. I will give you total control.”

Ah, and there’s the bittersweet ache. “It’s happening again.”

He goes to the wall, studies it. “Hm. There’s so much complexity in you. What does your implant say?”

My implant? “About what?”

“The scan. You recently asked me how it worked. Your implant can tell you.”

Okay. “How does the scan work?”

He waits.

I wait.

Nothing happens.

“Is something supposed to happen?” I ask.

“Yes, the implant should answer the question in your mind.”

“Maybe I’m so uneducated, it doesn’t know where to start.”

“Ah, but that’s the beauty of the implant, Noemi. It will continue backward as far as you have the stamina to learn. The knowledge of the empire is now in your brain, and you are limited only by your desire and time.”

I push, prod, mentally poke myself. “It’s not saying anything.”

“Yes, well, keep practicing. It will come.” He turns to study the wall chart again. “The knowledge is at the tips of your synapses.”

The encyclopedia of the Arrisan universe is at my fingertips. I just have to figure out how to open the book and read.

He gave it to me because I asked. Because he knows so many things and operates the science office equipment like they’re extensions of his body. And he shared the magic. I think. Which makes me feel...it really makes me feel...

“Ah, there’s that yellow again. Relief? Hmm...”

Maybe it’s not relief. It’s a little different. I can’t quite articulate it.

But with Ukuri and this magical wizard implant, I’ll try.

I open the door of the exam room.

My orange marmalade cat, Tom, trots in, tail up like a flag, meowing with desperate reproach. He twines between my legs, then jumps up on the operating slab and butts my palm. I scratch behind his soft ears, and he rolls on his back, purring furiously.

Then he switches to batting my hand.

No, no.

I walk out into the main office, and he scrambles to follow me.

The hydroponics rack bubbles away, monitoring the growth rates of strawberry starts, mango sprouts, avocado saplings, and spiky pineapple. Models and slides of different alien races, flora, and fauna, adorn three walls. They're fascinating, especially the ones peeling back the different layers of muscle and skin and illuminating their uses. The region facing the communications console viewscreen is barren gray, like everywhere else on the dreadnought. It's Ukuri's response to complaints.

I open the reprocessor. Ukuri's newest sample of foundation is finished. I uncap the tub and sniff. It's my skin tone and doesn't smell like rotten meat this time. Win-win. I transform the viewscreen into a mirror and dab the lumpy cream on test patches on my wrist and cheek.

We were supposed to have gotten through the Vanadisan fleet, like, a week ago. An Arrisan dreadnought is supposed to wipe the floor with anybody else in the empire. I bet Captain Falkion isn't getting much sleep.

I don't have any sympathy for him, though. He's always growling and snarling. "Get these lessers off my ship!" Now, he calls us humans instead of lessers, but the tone is the same.

The mirror abruptly disappears, and the ceiling and walls go dark. The symbol of the emperor shines white like a beacon from every direction.

Nerves squiggle in my belly. No one rejects a call from the palace at Arris Central, so I have no need to answer. I just wait.

The new empress of the Arrisan empire peers out at me. "Ah, there you are. I'm going to master these conference calls yet. Just a sec, Noemi."

"Empress Allie, you press here." Allie's technology staffer points. "Then make the second call here. Ah, not that button."

"What'd I just do?"

“You’ve taken over all the viewscreens on the planet Galvis.”

“Everyone on Galvis is looking and listening to me? Right now?”

“Yes.”

Allie sits up straight, regal in an off-shoulder Humana gown. A thorny red tattoo of the Arrisan symbol for infinity entwines her neck and shoulder. Her dreadlocks are released and her long kinky hair poofs out like a powerful planet.

“People of Galvis, you are an important and worthy member of our empire, and I value the work of each and every one of you. For what you do, you have my thanks. Carry on.”

The technician taps her screen. “The transmission has ended.”

“Whew.” Allie grins awkwardly. “I can balance a spreadsheet and overthrow an intergalactic empire, but apparently, a conference call is beyond me.”

I lock hands over my belly. “Did the people of Galvis see me?”

“No, that’s the tricky thing with these conference calls. I can project anywhere in the empire at any time, but trying to *share* screens is virtually impossible. The platform was never designed for it.” She pats her gorgeous hair. “I feel there’s a metaphor lurking here.”

It is good to see Allie.

I don’t know exactly what happened to her between the cruiser escape pods and now. But, shortly after our separation, Allie arrived on Arris Central during a coup that killed the former emperor. In the resulting chaos, she hooked up with an ambitious heir and won the crown. She never did kick the previous emperor in the balls, but since she’s been declared a coruler, that’s like a kick, right?

And now humans, the least important race in the empire, are suddenly so very, very interesting.

A lot has changed in eleven kortans, or, since Arrisans measure time in units of ten, just over a Standard year.

Out there.

Not in here. Things with me and Ukuri are pretty much the same.

And I like that.

We're allies. Coworkers. Roommates who live in close quarters, but share all the chores. He has all the power and I have all the data, I guess, but I like it.

I hope it never changes.

Allie's image shifts, and Catarine's face appears. Her brown hair is longer than it was on the cruiser, and her formerly blurred eyes are crisp, sharp on mine. Her tone is measured, thoughtful, diplomatic. "Empress Allie. Noemi. You both look well. How's my cat?"

Another squiggle of nerves zips through my belly.

After Ukuri analyzes my chemistry for the chest ache, he can fix these nervous twinges.

"Tom is fine." I tsk and pat my thighs. After considering it for a cat moment, he runs over and jumps in my lap. I lift him up and wave a tabby paw at the screen, making my voice squeaky. "Hi, ladies. I threw up my cat grass all over Noemi's bed. Now she won't grow me more, even though I keep meowing over the empty planter."

The two women smile.

I release Tom. "How are you?"

Their smiles turn strained.

"Right. Well." Allie gestures at Catarine. "You first. Why are the Vanadisans fighting so hard over the abandoned moon base near Noemi? What did your blade find out?"

"Yes." Catarine is all business. "The Vanadisans are not fighting to prevent us from rescuing our remaining shipmates. Or, not only."

Tom sprawls across my lap. I stroke his soft fur. His motor thrums, peaceful and soothing.

Catarine found Tom on one of her early missions, and she couldn't take care of him, so she left him with me. Possession is nine-tenths of the law, and Catarine hasn't been back to the *Spiderwasp* in kortans. She and her blade, Sithe, are doing secret work for Allie. So hopefully, the return of Tom to her just won't come up.

Ever.

“The moon base below you, Noemi, is not abandoned. They're hiding something big.”

“I could commit another dreadnought.” Allie's gaze is directed downward, at screens we can't see. She taps, moves, expands things. “Can you give me a better reason? Obviously, I want our shipmates saved, but there are bigger threats to our empire.”

“The Vanadisans are diverting a full flagship, their highest class of warship, to drive the *Spiderwasp* away. It will arrive in a few shifts.”

“Hmm. A flagship? Now I really want to know what they're hiding.”

While the others talk, Ukuri conducts analyses in the background and Tom snuggles on my lap. If the conversation ended now, this would probably be the happiest time of my life.

A third face abruptly joins our conference call. An Arrisan.

Cold fingers trail down my spine and hook into my guts.

Menavi.

Allie greets her cheerfully. Catarine nods, polite.

I force my frigid lips into a smile.

Tom's tail twitches, mirroring my discomfort.

“I hope I'm appropriately late.” Menavi's eyes glitter on me. “Did you finally talk Noemi into coming to the Science Center? This is her last chance to come voluntarily.”



Allie's brows lift. Catarine's expression goes blank.

There's an awkward silence.

The icy fingers root in my guts, twisting and pulling my sinews taut. "No, they didn't."

"Okay, well, you two said it's better if *you* explain because I'm 'too Arrisan' and might cause more problems." Menavi waves her hand. "Go ahead. Pretend I'm not here as you tell her she has no choice and must come to my Science Center right now."

NINE



# NOEMI

The silence stretches.

“Okay.” Allie steels herself and looks at me with the harsh weight of a commander sending troops to suicide. “First of all, Noemi, ah...well... So, it’s been forever since we’ve seen each other, and I think it’s time for you to come to Arris Central. You can see me at the palace, then pop by the Science Center.”

No. No, thank you. Absolutely not. “And then I can go back to the *Spiderwasp*?”

“Well, you’ve never been to the Science Center.” Allie shifts awkwardly on her throne. “You might want to stay.”

“I’ll want to come back. We’re doing important research here.”

“Yeah, but—”

“We’re growing limes and bananas. A new foundation came out of the reprocessor just before you called. Actually, I think there’s too much going on here for me to leave. I should stay until a better time.”

“Well, I would like for you to choose your own time...”

Menavi raises a finger.

“...is what I was going to say.” Allie glowers. “But Menavi is on her way to your location. After you break through and rescue our shipmates from the Vanadisans, she’ll escort you all back to Arris Central together.”

Ice washes over me. “When?”

“In one gora.” Menavi lowers her finger. “My arrival will coincide with the second dreadnought the empress has committed to our cause.”

One gora is ten shifts. On Humana, it would be a little shy of a week.

Ukuri has stopped moving behind me, but he remains silent, his back to us.

I can barely push a syllable through my tight throat. “Why?”

There’s a long silence.

“You’re too isolated there,” Allie says, which definitely isn’t the reason. “All alone with no other humans.”

“I have Captain Zeerah.”

“Has she come out of hiding?”

“Um, I have to stay so she knows it’s safe.”

“We’ve blasted my assurances over every viewscreen on the *Spiderwasp*. She’s seen it if she’s still alive.”

Heat flushes through me. I slouch and squirm upright in my seat, then scratch under Tom’s chin, and he resumes purring. “I’m getting cured here.”

“You’re not getting cured.”

“I’m getting a little cured.” The measurement of lusteal removed by our couplings floats on the edge of my consciousness. “I’m 0.08-percent cured.”

“After all these kortans? Listen, I swore that when I was empress, you’d never have to have sex again, and I intend to keep that promise.”

“I don’t hate sex.”

“Noemi.”

“I just hate not having control. If sex is my cure, I don’t mind it.”

They look skeptical.

“The Science Center hasn’t cured anyone. Has anyone been cured?”

Silence.

I want to scream.

It’s like when I was finishing school and my mom had to explain how my dad had died. It was the first time I found out about his affairs. Brazilians, in general, are a passionate people, and so I was the only one who felt confused. I asked my mom over and over, why? Why was something like sex so important to him? Why did he bring an unhinged person into our lives? And all she could do was stroke my back as I held my pillow and cried.

Now, it’s the same helpless anxiety. I have to suppress with all my might the urge to stalk to my room, which used to be an exam room, but has been repurposed with a bed and false lantern and silks and plants, all carefully formulated to be nontoxic to cats (or otherwise protected from Tom). It’s all decided, and I just have to accept it somehow. I have to accept something I hate, and it doesn’t matter if I don’t understand it because it’s already done.

“Will I have my own room at the Science Center?”

Silence.

“Menavi?” Allie prompts the science head. “Will she have her own room?”

“Hm? Oh, yes, we provide everything a human needs to live in a sterile, Humana-esque environment.”

“Can I bring Tom?”

Menavi twists her lips to one side. “I suppose we can install him in an environment suitable for his species.”

“In my room with me?”

“That depends on the compatibility of the environments.”

So...maybe.

Ugh.

“I really think you’ll like Arris Central.” Allie rubs her hands together. “It’s so diverse for an Arrisan planet, and vibrant. Now, you can’t even leave the science office.”

“Oh, but I will be able to soon. We’re working on something special. It’s a blocker for lusteal.” I rise, popping Tom off my lap, to grab it.

Ukuri hands me the latest sample without a word.

“See?” I rub the zinc-white cream on the back of one hand. It has a soft medicinal scent, like cacao beans left in the sun to ferment, but it’s not unpleasant. “I can go out and nobody notices me.”

“For how long?” Catarine asks, curious.

“Er...about five clicks. Ukuri thinks we could aerosolize it and keep it in the air longer, but we can’t get Captain Falkion to approve a test. It would work like a citronella candle.”

“A what?” Allie asks.

“I never found those to be very effective,” Catarine says at the same time.

“Well, but we’re making it stronger. It’s the most effective blocker against Arrisians who are addled by our lusteal.”

“No, this is the most effective.” Allie points at the bright red tattoo on her exposed shoulder. “I appreciate you have a quasi-professional relationship, but it bothers me you’ve been with Ukuri for over a standard year and have no assurances, no promises. No mark.”

I guess Arrisians used to mate for life. Back before their home planet was destroyed, before the genetic bottleneck and their decision to remove lusteal, these marks drove off other Arrisians. Catarine found out about it in an old book of myths, and somehow, it saved her.

“Ranse bit me during our first liaison.” Allie scratches her neck. “I wasn’t happy about it at the time, but I’ve come to see how it can be useful.”

“So if Ukuri bites me, then I can stay?”

Catarine and Allie both look uncomfortable.

Menavi jerks up. “What? No, that’s absolutely not allowed, ha-ha. Any science officer who lets childish, possessive, archaic emotions overwhelm his logical faculties won’t just be excommunicated, he’ll be removed from the gene pool.”

“Oh, no,” Ukuri says flatly. He rests his hip against the hydroponics rack, arms crossed over his chest, while Tom repeatedly headbutts, arching up to rub against his knees. “Anything but that.”

Her eyes narrow. “You have a lot of confidence for a man who’s hoarded a specimen for ages and has nothing to show for it.”

He accepts her censure.

But I don’t. “It wasn’t his choice. He would have been first to publish a lot of research, but—”

“Yes, yes, I know all about Zai’s gag order. No one withholds research from me, not even the General Master of the Arsenal. I want to hear your excuse for focusing on a weak, pointless lotion instead of on returning her to her natural human state.”

His nostrils flare. “So that Noemi may pass through our halls unnoticed and unmolested like your missing Captain Zeerah, a normal human. Arrisans are not illogical, but the tainted scent shortcuts their logic. If the majority get a tiny interruption, a chance to catch their breaths and examine the situation, they can break free.”

“Pointless waste of time, as I guessed. And the unauthorized surgery?”

My hand goes to my temple. I should have used the foundation to hide the scar.

“Is that...” Allie’s voice drops in horror. “Did he give you an implant?”

Nerves squiggle like live wires, making me twitch and my voice wobble. “I asked for it.”

“I thought there wasn’t enough research to give us implants,” Catarine says with a note of envy. “It’s not safe.”

“Of course it’s safe.” Ukuri leans in behind me, and Catarine automatically leans back, away from her viewscreen. “And now there’s research.”

“Cute.” Menavi’s smile could slice rocks. “Except it wasn’t authorized by the Science Center.”

“Authorization was unnecessary.”

“Any surgery designed to make another race more equivalent to Arrisans requires our approval. My approval.”

“But the empress already declared we must uplift all our allies, and especially humans.” His lenses are cold, his smile taut. “In fact, she’s even stated publicly that humans and Arrisans are to be treated as equals.”

“Equal doesn’t mean the same.”

“Perhaps dreadnought shipmates are not the only ones who could benefit from a training program on accepting human agency.”

Menavi stops smiling.

Allie blinks rapidly. “Ah. Um. I can see that, once again, there were some unanticipated side effects of my declaration, which, at the time, made perfect sense and which my Arrisan advisers reluctantly approved without any mention of these, ah, effects. So, until we can sort all this out at the Science Center, Noemi, no more agreeing to put things in your brain. Ukuri, no more putting *anything* into Noemi’s body.”

“The implant was expertly installed. There were no complications. No paralysis, no tics, no explosive bowel function.”

“Explosive!”

“It’s a perfect outcome.”

“But explosive...So what, you want a medal?”

Ukuri frowns. “Medal?”



“For—it’s a human tradition to...never mind.” Allie squeezes her eyes shut and waves him away. “Listen to Menavi. She’s your boss.”

The unfairness tumbles over in my chest like sharp gravel. “But I asked for the implant. It was my idea.”

“Humans have so many responses to trauma. Freeze, flop, fawn, and so forth.” Menavi’s eyes are silver disks. Without the smile, she looks like an emotionless automaton, and we’ve entered the uncanny valley where it’s clear she’s not like us at all. “Arrisans only have one. Do you know what it is?”

Allie answers for me. “Fight.”

“Correct. Your reaction, Noemi, is to fawn over and appease the ones who traumatize you. In this case, you appease Ukuri.”

He clears his throat. “That’s not always true.”

“He’s right.” Sweat breaks out on my palms. “And anyway, this implant was my choice.”

“He should focus on fixing sexual response. Not only removing the lusteal, but also correcting the physical or chemical imbalances that prevent you from experiencing sexual attraction and living a normal human life.”

“I don’t need to experience it. This is fine.”

“No more pointless experiments. You’ll come to the Science Center and experience a proper relationship.”

This is a nightmare.

“It’s not what I want.”

“You don’t know what you want,” Menavi says.

The others clearly believe her.

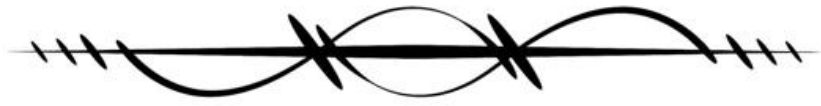
“Please.” I appeal to Allie, who was targeted by the most powerful enemies in the empire. To silent Catarine, who suffered an injury in the very exam room where I go about my daily scans and has no reason to trust Ukuri ever. Now he can’t prove he’s safe, and I can’t prove that I have my own will. He’s given me back control for the first time.

Bitterness soaks me.

They're like those neurologists on Humana who had no test for lusteal and therefore never saw it. They insisted that my good health was actually an illness and what made me insane could be ignored.

"I'll be there in one gora." Menavi's sharp smile focuses on Ukuri. "I'll review your current research on the very tiny possibility that something not yet published actually justifies your ridiculous monopoly. Noemi, you'll return with me. And Ukuri, if I find any hint of disobedience, I won't only strip your robe and have you tossed out of Arrisan society. I'll personally slice your oversized brain into microthin slides."

TEN



# UKURI

The transmission ends on Menavi's threat.  
I feel cold.

Brisk.

Ready for combat.

But the kind of combat I have to do against her does not require my blades. I sit at my research station, flash through our research logs, and amend notes, thinking.

"One gora." Noemi sighs. "What would convince Menavi that your research is worthwhile?"

"At this point, I suspect, nothing."

"Nothing? Are you giving up?"

"Of course not. Her antagonism has turned personal. Therefore, my best counter is to provide her with research that isn't mine."

"How are you going to do that?"

"Well—"

The hail chimes. "Captain Falkion to Science Officer Ukuri."

I slide into the communications console. "Yes, Captain?"

Falkion appears, with dark hollows beneath his fierce eyes, rugged but still energetic. "The Vanadisan warships have pulled back in anticipation of the flagship's arrival. They've accidentally given us an opportunity. We're sending down a

small strike team to see what they're hiding. You want to inspect their abandoned lab?"

Yes! This is what I need. "I'll be taking Noemi."

"Great. Perfect. Take all the troublemakers off my ship. Maybe even leave them there."

"I assure you, I would never make such a careless mistake."

"You have one cleg on the surface, Ukuri." His harsh but fair gaze nails mine. "Don't waste any time."

The connection ends.

I stand and snap my fingers.

The science office shuts down, hydroponics going into stasis, and Tom's viewscreen switching to a lush jungle scene with lots of sandworms and sticker ants. He trots to his cat bed in Noemi's room and peers at the screen as if he's looking out a window. I seal the room to my biometric lock.

Noemi grabs the science cart, which has been packed for goras, and puts on her hood. I open the door.

An engineer jumps back, electric pliers hovering suspiciously near my door lock. "Ukuri! Heading out? Great! You— Oh. You're taking the human."

"Are you that eager to become a research subject?"

"No, but, you've got to leave her behind sometime, and that's when we'll snatch her."

I secure the door behind us. Not that it matters. Engineers can get into anywhere. "Thanks, as always, for the warning."

"She needs a real man." He follows us to the junction. "I can tell by her smell. She's someone's fated Amante."

Amante is a character in a useless series of ancient, mythic stories. They've been largely forgotten since the Harsi destroyed our home planet, but now that a few of Noemi's shipmates have triggered our race's dormant mating instincts, interest in these old myths has been revived.

I, of course, am immune from any protective or mating-related instincts.

It's simply the case that Noemi is a highly intelligent and valuable specimen, and her abilities would be wasted on anyone not able to make proper use of them (i.e., anyone but me).

The engineer continues, "Not your Amante, or else you already would've bitten her."

"Your leaps of logic are astonishing."

"I'll get her eventually. Just you wait."

I usher Noemi first so I form a barrier between them.

He stands at the junction watching.

"I should've put on the blocker cream," Noemi murmurs.

"There wasn't time."

Battles echo down smoking corridors as we approach the outer regions. Engineers scream past. In the main bay, we jog across scaffolding to our drop ship, entering with the last of the strike team. I secure the cart as the doors close, then choose a seat with Noemi facing outward, our backs against the central column where we've stored our critical functions such as gravity and life support.

An engineer on a sled tugs our ship between the massive hull fragments and troop carriers docked in the densely packed, multilevel slips. At the atmosphere shield, he disconnects, and we drift through into a space battle.

Lasers streak past our ship. Smaller Vanadisan drones and fighters harry us, and the *Spiderwasp's* active, hot lasers return fire. Their long, angular bodies autotarget on us as we emerge into space, coiling and twisting with the appearance of independent thought, then loop around us to fire.

Our ship is small but fast, and as soon as we clear the last gun, the pilot lays on the speed. The long arms fire in a covering pattern. The Vanadisan fleet is held off by the *Spiderwasp* behind us, and the snowy, smoking moon floats ahead.

And even though Noemi is completely sealed in by her skinsuit, the twenty or so armed soldiers occasionally sneeze, fix on her, and rub their noses.

We will explore away from the team.

“Your father was really famous,” she says suddenly, unrelated to anything previous. “Everyone knows him.”

“Only in scientific circles.”

“Even alien scientists.”

“I suspect Fuzig chose to look me up.”

“What did he do?”

“My father betrayed the most basic tenets of science.” I rest my palm atop hers. “A scientist exploring a different facet of his project accidentally made the discovery he was seeking to make, so he murdered the other scientist and erased his research.”

“Oh.”

“Yes, the irony is that he was so afraid of ‘fading into the genetic pool of history, unknown’ that he caused our genes to be erased entirely. I was born long before this, of course, but they were concerned his criminal impulsivity might be passed down through me.”

She shifts her fingers so mine thread together with hers. “How do you prove you’re not a murderer?”

“They’re much more concerned about erasing data. Murders are regrettable. Data has a cost.”

“So how do you prove you won’t erase data? At the end of your life, you swear you never touched the Delete?”

“Right, you see the problem immediately. That’s why I enjoy our conversations, Noemi. It’s never any burden to explain myself to you because you swiftly understand.”

The viewscreen across from me changes to show Olasi, snarling. “Ukuri! You dared to waltz that toxic lesser through my engineering bay in the middle of a firefight? Do you know what pressure we’re under?”

Half her face is blackened with ash, and her hair is lumpy.

Unfortunately for me, after Atana left our dreadnought for a promotion, Olasi was made head engineer.

“Your engineers were perfect Arrisans,” I tell her smoothly. “Focused and efficient. The ones staking out my office, however, should be given extra shifts.”

“It’s your fault. You take that stinking lesser everywhere.”

“You can’t call anyone *lessers* anymore, Olasi. The correct term is *human*.”

“Complain to the captain! Her stinking up the halls puts ideas in my boys’ heads.”

“So order them to mask up when they see her coming.”

“Why should they have to? You’re the one dragging her around the ship.”

“Olasi, if your feebler-minded engineers don’t have the good sense to wear the masks I’ve specifically provided to you for countering this exact chemical attack—”

“They don’t need masks for lusteal. It’s stupid.”

“—I have to wonder what other toxic gases they’ve been inhaling, and whether that exposure damaged their brains. But since you’re requiring me to solve your staff problem, how would you like to volunteer the entire engineering bay to receive the first test of my aerosolized lusteal blocker? When I return, I can have enough for the whole bay formulated and reprocessed in under ten clicks. Do you volunteer?”

Her mouth opens and closes.

I lift a brow.

“If I see you or your lesser in my engineering bay again, you’re leaving it in pieces. Both of you.” Olasi terminates the connection.

Oh, what a pity. I didn’t tell her there’s a small possibility I might be coming back with more humans. If the Vanadisans were complete idiots and piled them right outside our landing pad, we can only hope.



The moon below is covered in permanent snow. Frozen rock dust kicked up from high-velocity winds drops continuously on the surface, where it melts away or is kicked up again. Our superior technology can parse through the visual noise. But it's not foolproof.

Like snow, objects in space can pass by each other if they don't emit energy. What's to say an entire dead warship isn't an asteroid? I believe Falkion's bridge crew has this nightmare on a semiregular basis.

Or perhaps the Harsi have returned, slipped an entire ravenous fleet through our defenses, and surrounded Arris Central itself before turning to attack.

Flights of fancy are of no use to us.

We can only operate on the nightmares made real, the signals in the snow.

Our drop ship enters the storm. Dirt pings and echoes like bullets until the pilot shuts off the external audio and we're abruptly encased in a muffling silence.

If there are Vanadisan scientists on this moon, they will want Noemi. And if the choice is between giving her up and uncovering their research...

My blades move in my forearms.

Ugh. Ick. No.

I hold still until the sensation passes, then collect one of my premade shots and knock it back. The menthol zips through me, soothing.

"Worried?"

"Just preparing my mind."

"You never answered my question." Noemi lifts her chin. Our hood shields interfere, letting me see directly into her startling green eyes. "How do you get your genetic line reinstated?"

"The same way I prove my intellectual prowess to Menavi: by discovering something so shocking, so impressive, it goes

over her head and is taken up by the whole of the Science Center, or ideally, the populace.”

“So you have to get a medal.”

“Ah, yes. What is this human tradition? Something about metal on a parade?”

Noemi smiles softly, then fills me on the tradition of honoring great accomplishments with wearable metal disks, large marches through cities called parades, and something called a “holiday” where no one works. We Arrisans would never do such things, but as she describes them, they sound intriguing, even cute.

The drop ship lands on the snowy pad next to the base entrance, and we all stand. The back door opens. The strike team dashes out into laser fire, and soon the area drops silent.

Noemi takes my cart and follows me to the doorway. “She threatened to kill you.”

“My dear, the greatest danger to any Arrisan is another Arrisan. That’s why I intend to make it awkward for her if she tries. Come.”

I step out, and the snow nearly buffets me back, into the shelter of the ship. My suit reacts by strengthening my leg and arm muscles, securing me to the gritty, windswept ground. A timer in my hood display counts down. In one cleg, our pilot will return to the dreadnought, with or without us.

The Vanadisans are natural tunnelers, and the ground entrance drops sharply away as the wind makes an unearthly howl. The strike team is attacking the main base, which is off to the left past buzzing, shot-out control panels.

To the right lies the abandoned lab.

We descend three levels through the leaning, dripping, weathered structure and pass through an old-fashioned double-door airlock. I push through the gap, widening it for Noemi’s science cart. Her footsteps are sure beneath the sounds of dripping water and low moan of wind. The operating room abruptly terminates in a jagged wall of collapsed rock.

Hmm.

I toe through the shattered implements and spiderwebbed viewscreens. Unease pools in my belly. There's destruction like a bomb went off, but no burn marks. No single origin.

"What are we looking for?" Noemi whispers, her gloved fingers locked around the cart.

"I'm not sure." I drop to a pile of neatly halved sample jars, their contents leaked out and dried on the stained flooring. The cuts are too smooth. Unnaturally clean. "Something truly damaging to the Arrisan race, enough to horrify both a genetics review board and Menavi's contemporaries."

"Who are her contemporaries?"

"As she is the new head of the Science Center, the heads of the other study areas. The engineering Shop rarely gets involved in politics, but she could be overruled by the empress and the High Command, or the empress and Zai. I just have to motivate them, and I'm counting on the Vanadisan research program to do the trick."

She pokes at a dead data tablet. "Like what research?"

"Oh, if the Vanadisans figured out how to control us directly. Enslave our bodies so our hands and feet no longer obeyed our commands, like your brain worm."

She shudders. "I hope we never find that."

I pat her hand.

"How long do we have left?" Noemi steps forward and straightens my science officer collar. "I don't think anyone's been here for a long time."

"Yes, a reasonable hypothesis. But we..."

I'm moving before I realize I'm moving.

For the second time since I left the Arsenal, one blade erupts out of my arm.

I step to the side and swing up, hard.

A shadow flies back, disappears.

I twist and contort, my other blade ejected and caging Noemi protectively as I visually sweep the room, ignoring her surprised cry.

Arrisans are not the only race who have the technology to render our skinsuits invisible, and there are always tells. A shadow where one shouldn't be. Air movement that doesn't match the ambient direction. A reflection of metal in a dark screen.

I hold my position, orienting on the reflection's source. "Zai didn't tell me any blades had defected. So much for the unalterable loyalty to our core."

A soft, gruff voice replies. "You're the one who's pretending to be a science officer."

Noemi stills.

My hood pinpoints the sound, calculating distance and environmental considerations, while I square up to this mysterious rogue blade. "Perhaps neither of us chose what's led us to this precise position. Are you much happier licking the feathery tails of the Vanadisans?"

"Heh. Why'd you come down here?"

"We—"

"Noemi," he says.

A squiggle of warning zips through my guts. Even on the *Spiderwasp*, where she's essentially the only known human resident, the Arrisans panting after her can't remember her name. Their ignorance irritates me.

But this blade's intelligence—both in the sense that he must have hacked into the Vanadisan system to see Noemi's medical file, and in the sense that he's able to recognize her in person—makes me far more nervous.

Noemi steps closer behind me. "I missed my shipmates and asked to join them."

"That's a good line. Did he tell you to use it?"

“I did, in fact, tell Noemi to use it. I assumed our only risk was being surprised by desperate, cornered Vanadisans. It never once occurred to me that I could run into a rogue blade.”

“Your mistake.”

“Indeed, Fuzig once mentioned he’d seen ‘my kind’ behaving irrationally. He warned me, but I didn’t understand the warning.”

It’s a shortcoming of the role.

The science office is about controlling variables, shrinking the environment, the scope, the question down until it fits neatly into a perfect little box. One question, one answer.

In the blades, we’re trained to constantly look at the field, the big and small pictures, all the possible factors and surprises. If I were purely a blade, I would not have made this mistake.

“I miss my shipmates,” Noemi repeats into the silence.

“You go to him for protection, but you’re not wearing his mark.”

Her hand lifts to her collar, stops, and lowers again. “Is that a problem?”

“It’s a factor.”

Blade talk. Resources, limitations, assignments. Factors. The words I’ve long suppressed flood me, surging through my veins with every pump of my heart. I suppose Zai would be proud. Less than half a cleg out from my science office and already my core has reverted.

“Do you mean us harm?” she asks.

If he *did* mean us harm, we would already be dead.

“Not at the moment.” There’s a puff of movement in one direction, but his voice fades away in another. “Though I was planning on using the cover of the Vanadisans’ surprise attack to kill you.”

There’s a distant grinding sound, some snarling in a language that my implant identifies as Vanadisan, and a sharp

order to drop silent.

Ah. The surprise attack.

The invisible blade is still with us. My hood has lost him, so I orient based on my gut. “I’m glad my presence stopped you.”

With a hint of amusement, as though he’s proud I still managed to track him, he murmurs, “It wasn’t *your* presence...”

Silence.

I hold all my senses open. But my hood, as well as my training, says he’s gone.

Even though I suck up my blades, welcoming the cold metal back into my skin, the anxiety of our meeting lingers.

I keep Noemi behind me and hug the wall. “Stay with me.”

She shelters behind my body. I ease to the door and check the angles. Five Vanadisan soldiers creep into the tunnel.

The Vanadisans will not be a problem.

The blade? Well.

I’ve handled them as colleagues and in my science office, but never as their target.

Unlike a class of young, bumbling students all at the same awkward level, being faced with a fully trained adult in the field is a spooky experience.

And I don’t understand his purpose.

We are not truly out of danger.

“*Boss.*” One Vanadisan whispers in their language, which my implant seamlessly translates into Arrisan Standard. “*Do you really think it worked? We enslaved a blade?*”

Enslaved?

“*Shh. Check that door.*”

My dread increases exponentially.

I reach back to tap Noemi.

My hand hits an obstruction.

In the arm's length between us, an invisible man has inserted himself.

And I missed him.

*The blade.*

Electricity slices across my hood, shutting down my defenses and numbing my body. My skinsuit drops off. I collapse, darkness closing my eyes on Noemi's panicked face.

ELEVEN





# NOEMI

**R**ight in front of me, there's a little white spark, and then Ukuri collapses to the dirt.

My heart stops.

His skinsuit lands on him like a shroud.

I scoot forward and roll Ukuri over. He's nude from the hem of his science officer jacket down. My hood interior displays his metronome heartbeat.

He's alive.

Relief pours into me with holy music.

What happened? Clearly, he got electrocuted. It made his skinsuit fall right off him, and it's stunned him, knocked him out. I don't know any weapon on Humana that could do that, so it must be another race's technology. An errant live wire? A trap?

Thanks to my hood, I also "see" the Vanadisans superimposed on my peripheral vision. Other information displays in Arrisan Standard, and I can even scroll through things like temperature, humidity, and distance to Arris Central with my new implant.

None of them help me right now.

The Vanadisans mutter and whistle. An instant later, I "hear" them in Arrisan Standard in my brain.

*"I heard something. Over there."*

*“The enslaved blade? Or another Arrisan victim-specimen?”*

*“Go check.”*

*“You go check.”*

*“I’ll shoot first, then check.”*

I tuck Ukuri’s skinsuit around his exposed feet and hands. And then I raise my voice. “Hello?”

Silence.

Then, in nasal Arrisan Standard, “Who’s there?”

“It’s me, Noemi.”

“An Arrisan?”

“No.” I sit back on my heels, then carefully stand with my wrists down in surrender. “I’m a human.”

A laser streaks through the doorway and glances off my skinsuit, burning a dark hole on the chest.

I drop with a shriek. My whole suit darkens to black, then fades back to oil-slick gray as it heals. “Hey.”

My complaint is lost in furious whistles and hoots.

*“What are you thinking? Idiot. She surrendered.”*

*“She’s lying. That’s an Arrisan skinsuit. It’s a trap.”*

A burst of laser fire spatters the doorway.

*“Give me that. Give me. No lasers! You’re even more useless than the dead guard you replaced.”*

Silence.

“I am human, though,” I call.

“Prove it,” the leader says in Arrisan Standard. “Take off hood.”

“Okay. Don’t shoot me.” I stand, cautious, and then slowly pull my hood back. The impenetrable shield protecting my face flickers as it disappears. The air in this tunnel is bitterly

cold, knifing into my throat, and it smells like an old pool house in the sun. I lower my hands. “See?”

“You, human. No laser?”

“I’m unarmed.”

The patrol leader emerges from hiding. He’s tall and willowy, and his face is visible inside his puffy white suit. “Why are you here?”

“I got lonely and missed my shipmates.”

“Yes, but Arrisans obeyed you? Why?”

“I enslaved them. They do whatever I want.”

The patrol leader hoots, which my implant helpfully translates as “excited noise,” and whistles into his communication device. *“Tell Fuzig another human has come. It’s just as he predicted. We’re bringing her to the new lab. And an Arrisan specimen-victim.”*

Huh. I guess Ukuri’s plan worked.

I don’t really like the translation of specimen-victim, though...

I put on my hood.

The patrol leader stops me. “Ah. No, off.”

I take my hood off again, enduring the painful arctic cold.

They dump Ukuri’s half-nude body on a hover cart, roll up his skinsuit, and urge me down a side passage. The air gets colder and colder, and little bits of ice dirt pummel my face and hair. My ears ache. I pull my hood down and am enveloped in soothing warmth.

“Ah, no.” The patrol leader gestures at my hood. “Are you mental stupid? Take off hood.”

“It’s cold.”

“You will survive cold.”

“You’re all wearing your hoods.”

He shows me a long stick and presses a button. White light arcs menacingly across it. This is the same light I saw just before Ukuri collapsed. “Take off hood or I take off all. That’s cold. Eh?”

I pull my hood off. Icy air slices my frigid nose and ears.

“Go.” He gestures for me to move.

I obey, shivering.

One of his subordinates asks, “*Why no hood for the human?*”

He shrugs. “*Why not?*”

Cruelty for absolutely no reason.

Maybe these are just uncaring guards. Maybe the researchers will be better.

We descend into a tunnel and the wind lessens. My ears and cheeks tingle. We reach a large, secure door at odds with the rest of the caverns. It grates as it rolls open.

Inside is bright and busy with a low ceiling. Arrisan rooms seem to have cathedral ceilings, double and triple stories even when the footprint is small, like tree interiors, almost. I think of Vanadisans as soaring birds, but these tunnels are cramped, confined spaces.

And still chilly.

“*Which one is she?*” a precise guard asks at the intake. “*Ah, Patient 81.*” He switches to Arrisan Standard for me. “Take off skinsuit.”

The rest of the team wheels the unconscious Ukuri away.

“Can I stay with him?”

A researcher blocks my path. “Disrobe.”

“But—”

“Now.” She lifts a bottle and sprays me in the face.

Pepper burns my eyes, my nose, my skin.

But even worse is that it’s not pepper.

I cover my face and scream.

Racing toward my brain, little spores like tiny worms drop lenses over my eyes, twitch my tendons. Little teeth bite into my brain stem, calming me.

My scream hisses out.

I breathe raggedly.

The pain fades and the walls close down around me. Shock gives way to deep dismay.

It's not fair. I removed 0.08 percent and now they've set me back. We were making progress. It's so incredibly, horribly, unimaginably unfair.

*"That's dangerous,"* one of them says. *"Sometimes more lusted makes them fight."*

*"Read Patient 81's file. With more lusted, she becomes compliant."*

Compliant.

I become compliant.

My brain worm moves my mouth, pleasant. "You didn't have to do that."

"Sure, sure. Everything off." The researcher prods my heavy arm. "You want another spray?"

No. I refuse. I fight.

My brain worm straightens my body and hooks a finger in the collar of my skinsuit. "If I take off my clothes, will you let me rejoin Ukuri?"

"You see Fuzig soon." She touches my opposite temple, the one that doesn't have an implant. *"And then you won't care about anything."*

Oh, good. That's certainly not ominous.

My brain worm strips off my skinsuit. Bumps of chill rise on my skin, but, although I'm searingly uncomfortable, I outwardly do not care. Fuzig wants me naked. I will be naked to get to Ukuri.

The researcher takes a large needle and shoot something into my shoulder. It stings and throbs, leaving behind a red mark and a lump. They take me down a hall and lock me in a cage.

The cage is a little larger than Ukuri's portable exam room, with enough space to lie down but not enough to stretch out. The joints don't quite match up. There's a chilly draft.

The floor grating is shatteringly cold.

All the Vanadisan researchers wear temperature-controlled suits, which is also bitterly unfair. Pain burns every footstep. I shift from bare foot to bare foot, managing my body warmth and calculating.

One wall is glass.

I am one in a line of empty cages that rings a large central room. The large central room is fitted with an operating slab and instruments.

My brain worm tests the gaps, alert for anyone passing through, near to my glass cage. But while I'm testing and prodding and calculating, my heart is its own creature.

Fury bubbles up in me like lava in a volcano.

Yes. I am volcanic.

*Patient 81 becomes compliant.*

Everyone thinks so. The Vanadisans, Menavi, Allie, and Catarine. Even my own family.

And I guess I am.

I always had this tendency in me. Before the brain worm, I did as I was told, but not out of compliance. I just didn't see the point in arguing when it was so easy to agree and get along, then do whatever I wanted on my own. It saved so much time and unnecessary bother.

But I allowed my aunts to marry me off to Felipe, even though that's long undone since it was never officially registered at the government office. Exchanging vows was my

last desperate attempt as a talisman, hoping God might strike me down in the church or exorcise my demon.

And I cared that people thought badly of me. I wanted to be worthy, to live up to my great-grandmother's name. Our line was saved when so many others died. I have survivor's guilt for unborn generations.

But it's all gone wrong.

Ukuri told me to go along with the Vanadisans. To say what they wanted to hear. And they sprayed me with lusteal anyway.

It's so, so unfair.

He didn't say they'd dose me again. They didn't *need* to dose me again. I was going to do whatever they wanted, at least, until Ukuri rescued me.

And now it's led to here.

A freezing glass cage.

Alone.

Once I'm cured by Ukuri, I will never be compliant again.

---

Ukuri

In my dream, I'm helpless as Fuzig paces in front of me, his feathers ruffling in glee.

“You are so certain you know everything. That's why I capture your shock. I'm getting a big collection, and your picture, a science officer gaping in awe, will become my prime enjoyment.”

My retort sticks in my nonworking throat.

“No reply?” He chortles. “I could kill you right now, but the arch chancellor wants to know what trickery you had planned. I think there's no trickery, but he disagrees. I've studied you long enough to know you truly believed a single blade with some useless human baggage could stroll into our facilities and steal our research.”

I could have, though, if I hadn't been stopped by one of my own.

“The arrogance of Arrisans will be your undoing.” He laughs with a whistling sound. “We planned to use your lesser against you since she ‘enslaved’ you, but that's also a part of your trickery, isn't it? The evidence is on her unmarked body. You can't lie about it to *me*. As for Patient 81, I can't wait to see your face when you find out we've...well, I suppose you could be making memories. Let's keep the surprise, shall we? I will immortalize your horror. And after you, I'll capture your captain. That's only the beginning of my museum. ‘Arrisans, shocked.’ I'll hang the images in my grand hall. This is your first defeat, Ukuri. Taste the bitterness and weep...”

The dream fades.

I wake to a pounding headache.

An insistent teacher recites the forty-third mantra, pushing the memorized words deep into my throbbing brain. “I will not rest because my enemies do not rest. I am not flesh, I am will. Will has no body.’ What's next? ‘I am nothing but sharpness.’ Now, Ukuri. I can't hear you. Speak.”



My tongue moves sluggishly in my dry mouth and I croak out the matching line. ““What is sharpness but a breath of air?””

“And? Next?”

““What is air but the breath of my enemies...?”” My eyes struggle to focus. I move my hands up to rub away the sleep.

A forceshield buzzes against my eyebrows.

Panic shoots through me, adrenaline zipping through my limbs, and I wake up a lot faster.

A small room. Cell. I’m chained to the wall by my elbows, ankles, neck. Nude except for a nutrient bag wired into my jugular, and my forearms fitted with electric field restraints from the elbow down, a Vanadisan wing-clipping device repurposed to keep my blades in.

The room is too small to hold another blade.

His gruff words emerge from an old viewscreen embedded in a shoddy wall. “You’re bad at this. Were you ever really a blade? Focus.”

““What is air but the breath of my enemies exhaled as they slumber? I am the shadow who passes through their nightmares. The blades of the empire are awake, eternal as darkness, and...””

Ugh. What is this? I stop the mantra. “Where’s Noemi?”

“You brought her here. Where do you think?”

My unease surges. “They wouldn’t harm her. She’s a valuable specimen.”

He makes a noncommittal grunt.

A black hole opens in my belly, and the contents of my torso spaghetti into it, drawn by gravity into a well of my own twisted making. “Is she alive?”

“At the moment.”

A sliver of light wriggles into my chest, and I take a full breath.

But the nerves. All the things he's not saying. Wrongness pulses. My blades flex against the forceshield. I'm helpless, in chains, and it's this blade's fault. "What do you want?"

"Can you fix him?"

An image appears on the grotty viewscreen. A torn-up Arrisan is frozen into permastasis.

My terrifying need to find Noemi now, while she's still alive, shifts to make room for his question. "Zoom in. Show me the interior, the trunk region."

The view changes, fuzzy. The body has been horribly abused. New wounds lie across old stitches, his gut is opened neatly as if by blades, and his heart is outside his chest. It's still attached, just pulled out, like a hair trigger on a bomb.

How interesting.

"What is?" the blade asks. A note of urgency enters his voice.

Muttering aloud is a bad habit of mine, one I picked up after I left the blades.

"The Vanadisans are quite deft. Such perfect strokes. They put him into permastasis at the moment of death, and in such a pose that simply defrosting him as is will kill him. Unless... well, it won't be easy, but their neatness in this case might be their downfall..."

"Can you fix him, or can't you?"

"I can."

He's silent.

"However, you should know that permastasis itself can be quite fatal. I may operate perfectly and he still has a bad outcome."

Still no answer.

"Are you there?"

A subtle tremor shakes the floor.

My door opens.

A shadow enters my cell and closes the door, putting one invisible finger in the edge to stop it from fully sealing.

Vanadisans pass outside chattering in their language. *“Gather the victims for his arrival. Fuzig wants the biggest demonstration. It’s our last chance to please the arch chancellor before we’re victorious...”*

Their conversation fades.

Black metal flashes. A blade ejects at my chest.

I lift automatically to parry it. My blade cracks against the forceshield. His black blade severs the restraint. The forceshield flickers off.

His voice is soft in our tiny cell. “What equipment do you need to fix my engineer?”

I shake the dead restraint off, then use my free blade to break off the opposite forceshield and sever my chains, then twist off the nutrient bag. If they’ve given me this, I must have been here some time. “Noemi first.”

“They won’t hurt her until after the demonstration.”

“Then we have plenty of time to rescue her.”

His blade hovers against my bare neck.

I hold still. “It would be stupid to kill the one with the skills you need.”

“You were the stupid one for bringing her here.”

My guts twist, winding around and around a dark fist. My blades move in my sheaths seeking the danger.

He’s not wrong.

And yet...

He lowers his blade. “There’s no way to take her quietly. They’re going to show her off, nothing more. She’s not in any real danger.”

The risk beats in my blood.

But he’s right.

Nothing will happen to Noemi. She's too valuable. Everyone wants her. Fuzig, Menavi. She'll be safe for a little bit longer. "A fully equipped lab will suffice."

"We won't have it."

"A pity. My science cart at a minimum."

"Move quietly." The blade opens my door, glances both directions, and disappears.

I follow him through the facility using all my senses. It's like a training exercise, peeling back the layers of my consciousness to my deepest instincts, aware of both my own noise and the very faint hints of my superior—then, my teacher. The ground is rough, the air cold, shuffling of Vanadisans clunky and self-assured. Perhaps no guards monitor cameras, perhaps no cameras track my movement, or perhaps this mystery blade has eliminated them all. A hostile enemy ship is exactly the environment we trained for. My senses are on high alert, my nerve endings tingle, neurons catch fire.

He brushes my forearm.

I freeze.

Air movement, slight shadow. He's darted across a long room. Tunnels branch off it in multiple directions.

Vanadisans walk right up to my corner. They could see me if they turned just a little more or looked down my corridor.

*"This facility isn't as impressive as the one we had to abandon. I hope the arch chancellor isn't upset. After we take over the empire, I'm going to buy my own planet."*

The duo move away.

Silence.

My science cart crosses the empty hub silently guided by an invisible hand. My skinsuit is rolled up on top. The blade slides it to me, and it curls around my body, coiling under my feet as I turn invisible and take over pushing the cart.

I prod him as we walk. “You’re quite dedicated to your favorite engineer.”

“No.”

“Your shipmate who owes you a favor?”

A slight huff is his response.

We wind through the facility to an old, damaged, propped-open airlock. My temperature gauge says it’s much colder. Squeezing through, I’m confronted with the base of a cliff. A whistling crevice between a shelter and the spire rock opens to howling winds. A few flakes drift to the damp ground.

The blade takes my cart and jumps up three floors into an inaccessible nook.

My suit muscle-assists hum in my calves as I duplicate his move and land on a small, flat ledge. This used to be the side of a multistory facility, and this partial room was cut off in an accident or collapse.

The permastasis case rests against the fallen wall, and the engineer is frozen upright, hands up and face clenched in agony. He’s secured inside with his own gravity. The case’s small wire is spliced into the base’s power.

I note the permastasis statistics. “You’re lucky they didn’t trace your power consumption.”

“They have other leaks to worry about.”

On my direction, the blade moves the case flat, then stands back. Visible now, our hoods interfere properly so I can see beneath the shadow. The blade’s a little younger than me, as expected by his class, with weary silver eyes and an old scar at his hairline, a crooked nose and a chipped tooth. He’s been in the field for some time.

There’s also a lavender mark, more vivid than a bruise, just beneath his jaw that subtly repels me.

His soft voice hardens with promise. “If anything happens to him, I’ll kill you.”

“Let’s save the jokes until after I’ve finished.”

“I’m not joking.”

“Well, I would hate to take you seriously and waste time surgically embedding a kill switch.”

His mouth opens and closes. He touches his ear. I assume he’s wired into the base communications, or maybe he’s set up a spy network inside.

My pulse beats out of rhythm. I feel it in my arms, in my blades.

In truth, I don’t have the brain for this surgery. It will be a long, complex, tedious operation where everything must go exactly right or this engineer will die.

I open my science cart and toss back the last emotion-killing draught. Menthol sweeps my blood, but the worry pulses underneath it. My blades shift, grind against bone, and it echoes in my teeth. I set my jaw. It already aches.

My techniques aren’t working.

*You were sent away because you are, first and always, a blade.*

Why do I remember Zai’s words now?

Since leaving, I have always chosen the core of the Science Center.

But in my body are still these blades.

I am an emotionless scalpel. A bleeding, breathing, mobile laser saw.

Except right now.

Valor, hope, hot-blooded protectiveness. What purpose do these serve?

I need icy clarity.

For Noemi.

And myself.

For the good of the Arrisans stuck here on this hopeless, snow-pummeled moon.

And, by reflection, the good of the empire.

I take a deep breath, and for the first time since taking my Science Center vows, I choose of my own volition to channel the old blade mantras for calm, for endurance, for focus and clarity.

My blade emotions finally settle to a tolerable simmer.

I put on my spare surgical lenses. The world crystallizes into colors, shapes. I pick up my science officer tools and begin.

TWELVE





# NOEMI

I really hate the easygoing part of myself right now.

Time ceases to have a meaning. The Vanadisans dump nutrient cubes and water in built-in bowls at regular intervals, and I obediently eat and drink and go into a frequently disrupted trancelike sleep.

Finally, across the big operating theater from me, a door opens into one of the glass-sided cells. The Vanadisans shove in a nude, sobbing woman.

It's Inga. She lands on her knees and turns, her fingers scraping the door. "Please. You can't do this. Give them back, please!"

They disappear.

My brain worm releases control.

Inga crumples and hugs her legs. She's skinnier. Her spiky white-blonde hair has grown out to her shoulders, and the blue butterfly tattoos now flutter through thorny blood-red vines across both shoulders and up one forearm.

I rest my palms on the glass. "Inga?"

She stops blubbering, peers around, and finally locates me, then stands and walks to the glass side. We're separated by an entire room and operating table. Her cheeks are chapped and red, but her lips part, horrified. "Noemi? They thawed you?"

"I was captured."

"You came from outside? What's going on?"

We catch up, very briefly, on the events of the empire. She seems unsurprised that Allie's become empress, even though that was unimaginable when we left Humana, and is much more interested in Menavi.

"That woman's forcing you to go to Arris Central because you don't fit her idea of a proper relationship?"

"Yeah, well, Ukuri and I aren't in a relationship. We're research partners."

"For you, isn't that a relationship?"

"It's not romantic. We're just collecting data."

"So? You've found a partner who affirms your asexuality. The others partnered with Arrisians who affirmed their monogamy. This gives me comfort. The things I've seen..." She shakes her head and shudders. "But how unlikely is it that you'd find a partner who understood you? If we've managed to impose our own order on what's happened to us, despite everything stacked against us, that's monumentally reassuring."

I wonder what Inga's seen, but I probably don't want to know. "I'm sorry we couldn't rescue you."

"It's okay. We're not completely sure if we want to be rescued." Inga rubs bloodshot eyes with her red-tattooed wrist and winces. "I wish these stupid tears would stop. I don't even feel sad and I'm wet as a mop."

"We?"

"Ah, it's complicated. But let's just say I've never had a 'proper' relationship, and I'm not about to please some Menavi and start."

Wait. "Are you asexual too?"

"No."

"Oh. Sorry. I assumed... You never said much about your past on the ship."

"There's a reason. I..." She abruptly falls silent.

Vanadisans drag unconscious people into the cells on either side of me. Gray skin, black hair, medium builds. Arrisans.

Inga hugs herself, sniffing.

My brain worm pushes me forward, presses my body against the glass. “Hello? I’d like to see Ukuri, please.”

The Vanadisans retreat.

My brain worm jams my fingers in all the uneven welds. There’s no access to the others. Even if I could, what good would that do? They’d wake up and attack me.

Vanadisan words drift through the halls. My implant translates them. “*The arch chancellor is arriving soon. What does Fuzig want done with the blade? Torture is too good. Stupid, arrogant Arrisan...*”

An ugly shiver goes through me.

Inga doesn’t react to their words.

The Vanadisans open more dim cells, dropping off gray male bodies until they fill all the cells around the ring.

When it’s just us, she rubs her wrist tattoo again. “I’m sorry I kept to myself. There were only so many times I could listen to the others lamenting about how awful it was to have to sleep with multiple men before I had to go be quiet someplace all alone.”

My jaw drops. Even my brain worm stops scheming. I face her with my full attention. “You didn’t join the study to stop having sex? It wasn’t completely out of your control?”

“No, I felt perfectly satisfied with my active sex life.” She wipes snot on the back of her hand. “But who can live like this?”

My mouth just hangs open. “You came on this one-way suicide trip because of a few tears?”

“I climbed mountains, Noemi. I represented Iceland in the cross-country sprint. I designed my king’s tenth anniversary

cake. This is intolerable.” She indicates her snotty, naked, tear-stained body. “This is not who I am.”

I close my mouth. Even though we’re so different, we really are all here for the same reasons. “I’m sorry.”

“Me too.” She pats her palms against the window, feeling the room like I did, concentrating on the door. “I wish there was a way to get you out. The Vanadisan experiments are agonizing, and they’re going to be even worse for you.”

“Why?”

“It’s the mating bite. Arrisans aren’t supposed to bother a woman who already has a mark.” She indicates her shoulders. Both are decorated with slightly different infinity symbols. And then there’s her wrist. “Do you have a bite?”

Dread coils in my belly. “No.”

“Then expect fighting. Deaths. So much screaming and violence, I can’t...not for you...” Her voice chokes off in a sob.

Oh, no.

“Um, if I could get cured, even a hundred bites might... um...might be...”

Okay. I can’t lie to myself.

I came on this voyage to get away from screaming jealousy and sobbing fights. There’s only one person in this entire empire who seems to be okay with me as I am. And I don’t want to get bitten by a hundred other Arrisans and be subjected to their ownership. Their demands. I only want one man.

And now it’s too late.

I’ve complied right into this trap.

Inga’s terror infects me.

Our cell lights go out. The lights in the main operating room turn up to blinding. A shrill whistle sounds, and I clamp my hands over my ears.

The Arrisans in the other cells rouse with groans. Some of them look lumpy, like they've survived fights with unhealed bones.

Spray hisses down from the ceiling overhead, filling my cell. Unpleasant spice crawls up my nose and fattens the worm. It pulses around my brain stem like a malignant growth, no longer a small annelid but a giant anaconda grasping me and squeezing.

Across the glass, Inga collapses in body-racking sobs. She grabs her hair, arches her back, screams.

My alien viper forces me to kneel like a penitent woman before a glass altar.

Vanadisan whistles echo over the operating room and shadows appear, external, overlooking our theater. *"And here you will witness a demonstration of our chaos gas."*

*"I've seen it before,"* a deeper voice replies, also in Vanadisan. *"Instead of tearing each other apart as you promised, Fuzig, the Arrisan blades regained control."*

*"Yes, so, we've strengthened the gas. Blades can no longer resist."*

*"And no one can? It's irresistible?"*

*"Nearly."*

*"Nearly! I don't want to risk our surprise attack on 'nearly.'"*

*"One class of males is resistant. But the class is so small as to be of no importance to our plans."*

*"We're betting the lives of our hatchlings, of our planets, of our empire, on your 'nearly.'"*

*"You will be satisfied after I explain. But for now, First Arch Chancellor of the Egg, observe how the Arrisan males are disturbed by our chaos gas."*

The men claw at their heads and faces, slamming into the glass, frenzied.

*"See what happens when we open the doors."*

The cell doors open inward.

“Here it comes,” Inga wails. “I’m sorry I couldn’t help you, Noemi.”

The men rush around the big room, crashing into each other and the operating table, fighting brutally against bumps or bangs, and just as quickly wriggling away.

*“We can direct them with projections. First, and most powerfully, an image of their racial nemesis, the Harsi.”*

On the far end of the room, the glass cell walls turn opaque, and a holographic monster glimmers inside.

Vaguely insectoid and also shaggy, the front half of its segmented body rears up in a snake’s strike. Four clawed back legs support its weight. The first two reverse-jointed arms end in sharp knife points.

As if blades had no hands...

It has no eyes, just smooth bone on its oval head. A tuft of hair sits at its narrow crown. Its open mouth holds a ragged bottom tooth.

Even though it’s clearly a hologram, fear squeezes my belly.

The H-alien is the biggest creature I’ve ever seen. I would barely crest its knee.

Apparently, they broke into the Arrisan ships and ate them like an anteater digging into a termite’s mound.

The Arrisans scream and crawl away, piling into the corners of the room, gibbering.

*“That’s how we repel them. We draw them forward by projecting an image of an unmarked human female.”*

The Harsi disappears, and a video of Inga with shorter hair and only her little blue butterfly tattoos—no red thorns—blinks on.

The males take a little time to notice, but then they stop crying and stagger forward, zombielike.

*“Note, Arch Chancellor, human females act on the Arrisan male unconscious as a superattractor because they display the traits of a fertile Arrisan female at all times. See their reaction to the same female, marked.”*

The video of Inga disappears, and the light in Inga’s cell turns on. Her cell door slides open.

Inga rocks on the floor of her cell.

Males cluster and block my view, then abruptly swarm away like soap suds encountering oil. She rises, exposing her red tattoos.

All move away except one male with thorny tattoos in a lavender color across his battered chest and shoulders. He pushes through the crowd like he’s fighting a riptide and finally lunges free.

Inga opens her arms in welcome.

Her door slams shut.

She cries and hits her hands on the glass.

He rests his palms against hers on the clear barrier, so close, but separated.

A wild male smashes into him. He falls and disappears in the roiling crowd.

*“I see,”* the arch chancellor comments. *“But they only shuffled toward the image. What about using a live unmarked female? Will they run?”*

*“It’s much more effective, yes. They’ll run and tear each other apart to get a piece of her. Frequently this is fatal to the female.”*

*“I would like to see.”*

*“Oh? Well...I had planned something else to—”*

*“Show me them ripping apart a live female.”*

*“Er, yes, Arch Chancellor.”*

The light in my cell turns on.

All eyes, bruised and bloodshot, turn and rivet on me.

Terror floods my brain.

I need the lusteal-masking cream. I have to disappear.

This is just like when the two female engineers cracked my escape pod and attacked me with a screwdriver.

But unlike the screwdriver attack, these are all males.

My brain worm holds my freezing, nude body in place and forces my trembling lips into a confident smile.

And I hate it so very, very much.

*“Overseer Fuzig,” a quieter voice chirps. “The cell is too small for Patient 81 to survive. How will you demonstrate the effects of our second spray?”*

*“We’ll defrost another human. There’s nothing special about Patient 81.”*

My glass cell door opens.

I don’t want this.

I don’t want this.

I don’t want this.

At least I should fight or scream or run away.

Instead, I kneel before the heaving sea of bloodied men.

I turn my wrists down in surrender.

Compliant to the end.

They surge forward, snarling.

My death will be pointless.

---



Ukuri

---

*Earlier*

---

The blade watches over me with unusual attentiveness as I reattach the softening arteries and veins, reunite viscera.

Confidence flows with cold energy.

Two or more Vanadisans worked together on deconstructing this man, and yet I alone seal up his heart and return it into his chest as the useless tremors transform into an irregular heartbeat.

His torn skin is imprinted with the image of weird lavender-colored thorns.

A mating tattoo? Here, on him?

It subtly repels me.

No, it's more than that. The marks on each shoulder are different. Different bites...

Disturbed emotion worms into my chest. Unease for Noemi. As if we're connected by a preternatural string and a predator is tapping on it, trying to lure us out.

Two tattoos on one Arrisan. I've gotten acclimated to seeing the marks on the other humans, Empress Allie and Catarine, but how were two bites caused on one male?

Yet, the distraction mustn't affect my work.

"I deserve a human medal for this," I mutter as I plug the final hole in his lungs. "A holiday named in my honor and a planet-wide parade."

"What's that alarm?" the blade asks.

*Beep. Beep. Beep.*

Ah, the irregular heartbeat has stopped. Less pressure is convenient, but obviously a problem. I hold a pulsar device against the still, wet heart. "Don't overreact."

“What?”

I depress the button.

Electricity bends the engineer’s body into an arch. The alarm shrieks. He jitters and collapses. Steam rises from his open chest cavity.

“You killed him.” Black blades flash.

I jump back. “He was already dead.”

“I knew it. You want to take us apart just like them.”

He rushes me.

My blades meet his with a clang.

But he’s too powerful, too expert. His blades surge for my throat, pinning me to the collapsed wall.

The engineer coughs and moans. “Pyke?”

The blade’s pressure on me lessens, but he casually holds me in place as he turns his head to look at the engineer. “Siv?”

“Ugh. I feel bad.” He coughs again, rolling up into a sitting position, and he blinks down on his open chest. “Whoa. I look worse.”

The blade, Pyke, releases me, staggers to the engineer’s side, and lands on his knees. “You’re alive.”

“Am I?” He prods his sternum bone. “That’s good. But... *Ungh*. I don’t feel so good.”

I straighten my robe. “Shall I finish, or would you prefer I leave him to bleed to death?”

Pyke stands back, gestures for me to continue.

I ease Siv back to the ground.

The lavender thorns under Pyke’s jaw bear a striking resemblance to the tattoo across Siv’s left shoulder.

Pyke notices the direction of my gaze. “You’re not going to comment?”

“I won’t pretend your situation, whatever it is, *isn’t* an abomination. But...” I fold over muscle. “Perhaps neither of

us chose our position. You'll have to answer to Zai. And... who's the head of the Shop?"

"We don't have one right now." Siv pokes his belly. "It's a collective. Dispersed."

"Of course it is. Brace yourself. You're going to feel this."

Siv says nothing as I glue and clamp him closed. His pain tolerance is high. Or maybe he's a crazy engineer who burned off all his nerve endings for fun. I'll never know.

Pyke rises abruptly, hood down, and melts into the wall. "I'll take you to Noemi."

"I'm not done." My mouth, connected to my irritated brain, needs to tidy up the surgery.

But my body is already dropping my tools and rising to follow his shadow.

Blade training.

I falter.

This is illogical. Instincts don't rule me, not anymore. I rejected them just like the blades rejected me.

I take a half step toward my cart. I have to make more emotion-suppressing draughts.

"Now, Ukuri."

The urgency spikes my own emotions. Thudding, twisting, organic urges clash into each other. Unease at the lavender mating marks, hot-cold fear for Noemi, and a roiling terror that it's already too late. Every cell in my body urges me to go after Pyke. If I hesitate for even a full step, it will be too late.

That's insane, though. It makes no sense.

But insane or not, my knees bend. I jump off the ledge, slam into the ground. My suit absorbs the impact with a tremor. I race after Pyke into the warren.

This is madness.

Why am I running?

The Vanadisans wouldn't dare hurt her. Noemi is a perfect specimen, a pristine research subject. She's insightful and articulate. Her body is endlessly fascinating, a treasure trove of investigation.

My blades stretch in my forearms.

And I feel it.

Noemi.

The string connecting us stretches tight.

I smell her spice, and lusteal, and some other terrible cocktail.

Two Vanadisans walk ahead of us in the narrow hall. There's no way around them.

Without altering his stride, Pyke slices them in half.

They collapse in a gargle.

Yes, stealth is definitely out.

Pyke points down a side hallway. "That way."

He keeps running straight ahead.

I pivot and race down the hall he indicated. Rows of empty cells ring an operating theater filled with addled Arrisan males.

There, ahead of me in a single cell, Noemi kneels, facing the inner door.

Thank the seven suns.

There's no need to run. Yes, the other Arrisans are trouble, but the Vanadisans wouldn't risk her. I panicked over nothing. They realize just how special Noemi is.

*"There's nothing special about Patient 81,"* that insufferable Vanadisan Fuzig says from the overhead speakers.

Her door swings open. The seething Arrisans turn toward her like savage beasts.

No.

Oh, no.

My blades slide against my forearms.

Lava melts my bones and loosens my sheaths.

My blades want to come out?

Let them.

For the first time since I took my final pledge in the Science Center, let it all come out.

I fling my blades forward as I rock backward, momentum balanced against my fulcrum. My bent, dirty-silver blades carve through the wall. The metal crumples like paper.

I step through into her cell. “You insolent fools. Are you incapable of recognizing brilliance?”

The rabid Arrisans freeze.

Noemi jerks around, eyes wide.

Overhead, the Vanadisans make a strangled noise of alarm.

“You’ve been immersed in your own stupidity for too long.” I storm forward, blades swinging. “Allow me to reeducate you in the methods of proper science.”

THIRTEEN



# UKURI

“**T**he blade!” A Vanadisan squeaks, and my hood localizes it as overhead, on the other side of the glass ceiling. *“He’s loose. Arch Chancellor, this way. Guards!”*

The addled Arrisans shriek and crawl away from my blades.

I stride through Noemi’s cell. “Stay behind me.”

She obeys without hesitation.

As usual, she’s the only one who acts logically.

A chemical haze obscures the operating theater, and spice scratches the inside of my brain like an insistent insect trying to bore its way in. I can’t imagine what it’s like without a skinsuit.

Across the room in another cell stands a human with three glowing red tattoos. She presses her hands to the dirty glass.

Noemi’s vulnerable bare feet are blue tinged with dirt and cold.

These tiny, grimy cells house their treasured specimens? It’s disgusting.

No, more than disgusting.

It’s infuriating.

“I thought you were scientists.” I circumnavigate the theater for the obvious route through the shadowy glass ceiling. “The great Vanadisans are supposed to stretch the

limits of biology, but this mockery of an experiment doesn't deserve the title of 'research.' I'm ashamed I bothered to leave my science office. There's absolutely no research here worthy of snatching. You're nothing but magnificent idiots."

"You are the one who's the fool, arrogant Arrisan. You escaped only to walk into my trap? I'll have you tear apart Patient 81 with your bare hands."

"Of course that will never happen."

"Feel the chaos spray invading your brain, sucked in by the 'efficient' design of your suits that use outside air when it's available. And you never thought to filter for your lust metal. We use your own biology against you."

Only one way up, then.

I place Noemi inside a cell and close its doors. "Cover your head."

She curls into a protective ball.

"A great Arrisan pampers a useless lesser," Fuzig chortles. "You've lost your mind."

My hood displays weight, material density, and load-bearing beams. "It's perfectly reasonable."

"Ah, that's the strange power of these tainted lessers! They talk you into accepting anything. A lesser for an empress? Everyone to be equal? Pah! Your empire has already fallen. You just haven't realized it yet."

I jump up on the surgical slab. "Have you spent so long on the other side of a laser saw that you've lost your sense of self-preservation? Because it looks to me like you're hiding behind nothing but fragile glass."

I throw my weight forward like fists.

My blades slice through the ceiling.

The ceiling shatters. Glass daggers rain down on the operating floor. I sidestep the biggest and leap up, impossibly high.



A thicker glass shield, subtly electrified, stands perpendicular to the operating room ceiling.

Inside, Fuzig steps back, arms up in terror.

I slash the electrified glass.

My blades glance off.

What?

I swing again with the same result, a glancing blow that doesn't land. Like a skinsuit, but solid. It looks old, of a different construction from this shoddy base, and it's made of one of the few substances in the universe that's entirely impervious to me.

Jagged unease fractures my insides.

There are precious few of those substances.

Precious few.

Fuzig drops his arms, looks down at me balanced on a beam, and laughs hysterically. "Stupid Arrisan! You have no idea what you're fighting. Don't die too quickly, Ukuri. I'll capture your final defeat."

He hurries into the impenetrable region where I can't follow.

Fury seethes in me.

I have not even begun to teach him the errors of his thinking. First for his treatment of Noemi, and second, for his dismissal of Arris.

Below, Arrisans stumble too close to Noemi's cell.

I drop down, scattering them, and touch her arm. Small cuts mark her skin, and she's nicked with minor injuries and bruises. "How are you?"

She unrolls and puts her arms around my shoulders. "I'm any way you want me to be."

"They awoke your brain worm? How unnecessary." I scoop her fragile, lusteal-soaked body into my arms. "They will never touch you again."

She snuggles against me.

The other human's cell is empty. I dart through the open door into the hall.

Sirens announce our escape. Electric rods buzz down distant passages. Vanadisan soldiers flood the facility.

I weave through the cursed labyrinth, increasing piles of dead Vanadisan bodies forming a sure trail back to Pyke's secret ledge.

A trio burst from a side passage to blockade me.

I swipe at them with my blades.

They scream and dive.

I leap over them and keep running.

Their lasers sear my suit back and blacken the walls.

There, ahead of me, is the door Pyke left ajar. I squeeze Noemi through. Our pursuers are mere strides behind. I superleap onto Pyke's ledge.

The permastasis case is empty next to the science cart. Delicate equipment lies in disarray.

Pyke and Siv are gone.

The area is cold, lonely, and a dead end, which makes it dangerous.

Air currents whistle from the cracked ceiling. Noemi hugs herself, shivering. She can't survive here for long.

The Vanadisans push ladders against the cliff face.

We won't be alone much longer.

What was that glass material?

Is it what I fear?

Do they have more?

I have to know before I destroy Fuzig utterly. I need to know how angry I should be when I cut him into pieces.

There, hidden between the permastasis cage and the wall, is a rolled-up skinsuit. Not just any skinsuit. It's Noemi's human-sized one.

Ah.

I whip it around her shoulders and it activates, coating her. She murmurs a protest as it seals around her limbs, separating us further.

Marks catch my eye. On the ground, beneath where her skinsuit was hidden, is the hint of a map. Here's the base. Outside, at a good distance, is a cross.

Meeting spot?

If it's to scale, my hood estimates the meeting spot is a good distance, near one of the other bases we saw on our original descent.

As we're cut off from the dreadnought, Pyke is my best source to bring Noemi to a safe harbor.

I sweep the ground with my foot until the map is gone, pick out essentials like healing cream from my science cart—and a medkit to formulate other substances, because I can't predict how badly the Vanadisans damaged Noemi—and pull down her hood.

She stops me, uses my finger to push my hood back, and leans forward.

Hmm? I turn to follow her, misunderstanding her intent. Her mouth lands on the corner of my lips.

But even that fills me with heat.

The scent of the lusteal in her out-of-control blood. Her skin texture, softness, warmth pushes in hooks that draw sizzling awareness up to my surface. My jack throbs, blades vibrate, chest rumbles. Holding her is what I was born to do, what I was made to accomplish.

And yet...

I pull back.

She whimpers. "Cure me."

“Of course.” I wind her arms around my neck, fix our hoods, and lift her. “Come.”

And without argument, she snuggles against me.

The opposite cliff face has tiny holds.

Okay, then.

I leap across the impossible distance.

Lasers streak past us from below, burn the toeholds I cling to. I bounce back, soaring from hold to hold. Noemi’s weight is unfamiliar, but I’m used to contorting against my extra-large blades for balance. We slip through a crack to the surface.

Snow whips at us. Large asteroids pelted this moon, and so the ground is harsh and cratered, unstable and crumbly. I misjudge the very first leap and scrabble at the cliff’s edge for purchase. The medkit clatters down a ravine.

Unfortunate.

Our progress is slow, but the snow makes it impossible for them to chase us by air, and the ground makes it impossible to use a land-based hover. Although I magnetize our suits to stick together, she still slips on the harshest landings, banging herself against me. She’s tired.

Shortsighted Vanadisans. With their inability to recognize greatness, how did they accomplish anything of note?

I stop and scan the area. Few depressions offer shelter in these cliffs. I backtrack to a more solid, needlelike cliff that has an overhang that opens into a jagged cavern. I trace my fingers along the wall, sending out tiny pulses to test its integrity. Another long-dormant element of my blade training.

The cavern punches through to a hidden crevice in the next fissure. I set Noemi down in the only flat area. It’s a few degrees warmer, according to my hood display, some inner warmth captured by the covering rock and certainly obscured by the snowstorm outside.

She wobbles.

I steady her.

She rubs my chest through the skinsuit. “Ready for me?”

“Let me heal your injuries first.”

She pulls off our hoods, pinches off my surgical lenses, drops them behind her. Then she once more presses her face into mine. Her spicy scent burrows into my brain and kindles little fires in my neurons. The smoke of her lusteal-tainted blood drugs me. All I sense is her warm chin brushing my jaw, her pliable lips consuming mine, her deft tongue drawing mine out. Heat flows across my forehead and tingles down my spine, pools in my jack, hardens me for her.

She’s here, alive and breathing, plump body comfortingly close, her vivid realness soaking into my skin and her deft hands massaging me with insistence.

A pool of forbidden sensations percolates in my brain. If I delve in, all of me will go up in flames.

She peels her suit down.

My fingers contact bloodied, bare skin.

I pull back. “I must heal you.”

“No.” She nips at my lips.

Sparks dance over the pool. “Wait.”

“Nope.” She bites my jaw, nibbles at my neck, slithers her wet tongue across my collarbone.

I harden to molten stone. “Don’t bite right now.”

“It’s okay.” She gnaws on my shoulder.

Warnings tickle the inside of my mouth. “You’re not always compliant.”

“Sure I am.”

“Noemi, your injuries—”

“This is more urgent.” She pulls her skinsuit the rest of the way off and steps out of it, then cups my skinsuit, seeking my jack. “I need you.”

Her fingers are turning blue.

Ah, the warmth is leaving her already.

I pull open my own suit. The cold is bracing, and she's chilled. I pull her against my body. She molds to me hotter than a bath of lava.

And then she sinks in her teeth.

Hot shivers curl around my balls, drawing them up as my inner teeth descend.

I wind her hair around my hand, yank her back. "No."

She regards me with wild green eyes. Licks her beige-pink lips. "Why not?"

"I'll bite you back."

"I want it." She lifts her chin. "Mark me, Ukuri."

Acrid poison drops onto the back of my tongue. I grit my normal teeth. "Don't fool me. You're being driven by your brain worm."

"We could want the same thing."

"Be rational."

"We are being rational." She catches my hand, glides her tongue over my sensitive sheaths. "I choose you."

Lava bubbles up, scouring my insides with cleansing heat.

She chooses me.

My mark.

Of course she does.

It solves so many problems.

I step back.

She murmurs a protest. "It's logical."

I whip off my suit and lay it flat on the rough, uneven ground. "We'll argue later."

She charges me.

I roll back onto the suit and guide her to straddle my bare thighs. She curls her cool hands around my hot jack, sending

chills down my spine. “When?”

“I’m going to cure you.” I grip her hair to hold her back. “Be good.”

“I’m better than good.” She licks her palms, then smears her liquid on my trembling jack. “I’m the best you’ll ever have. Trust me.”

“Since you’re the only one I’ll ever have, I can’t fault your claim.”

“So controlled.”

“Control is all I have.”

“That’s not all you have.” Her green eyes glitter. “Not right now.”

I formulate an appropriately dry response.

She lines my jack to her entrance and spears herself.

My whole life anchors to this spot. Past, gone. Future, meaningless. I taste the truth of life right here, right now, with her.

She scratches my chest as she rides me. The possessive marks tear a groan from my taut throat. Her softness grips my jack with unyielding force. She pulls against the hand gripping her hair. “Let me go.”

“I will not, in this state, bite you.”

Her tone changes abruptly. “Ukuri, you’re the only one whose mating bite would set me free.”

A million signals ping from my body up to my brain.

I can’t— I don’t—

She grins and slams me deep. Her friction grabs hold of my balls. My jack floods her socket. I arch as she tears my release from me.

She gasps, her eyes rolling back, squeaking with an almost-soundless scream.

And then she lands on top of me, collapsing like a balloon with no air, sinking down, down, down into peace.

Her shoulder hovers near my mouth. Skin glistens. Untouched. Pores magnify, drawing me in.

I breathe through gritted teeth.

Not now. Not like this.

“Thank *monotheistic deity*.” She sighs, unaware of my personal battle. “Oh, thank *monotheistic deity*. Thank you, thank you, *monotheistic deity*.”

My implant processes the unknown words, and curiosity breaks my bite obsession. My teeth stop aching, my heart rate drops, my equilibrium returns.

She shivers. Her exposed back is already losing heat. I pull her discarded suit over us like a cover. Skinsuits are designed to protect their single wearer, not make this human style of nest, but as a science officer I am endlessly inventive.

As I’m tucking it, she flinches.

Oh.

I roll her off me, onto the shelter of my suit.

She wakes up and clings to me. “Don’t go.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

I inspect her body, mentally triaging her injuries. After all this time, they still appear minor, so nothing has obviously gotten worse. I swab all-purpose healing cream over her cuts and bruises, cracked heels and red toes.

She sighs and closes her eyes. “Irony.”

“What is?”

“The Vanadisans were supposed to cure us. Instead, they tried to kill me.”

“I apologize.”

“For what?”

“My overreliance on their scientific capabilities. I never dreamed they would be so brutish as to waste a prime research specimen.”



“You didn’t know.”

“But I should have.”

I roll her onto her side so I can heal her back. So many bruises and scrapes.

Conversation allows me to disengage from the total, absolute fury burning inside me right now.

Fury that’s been crackling since I left the blades, in fact, and which I used to simply refuse to feel.

That’s not an option right now.

“The fault is mine alone.”

“They’re certain they’re unstoppable.” She trails a finger down her smooth inner arm to a new scratch. “How long were we captive?”

“About seven shifts.”

“It’s been seven shifts already?”

“Wasn’t that long enough?”

“Yes, but, I mean, the second dreadnought was due in ten shifts, and we don’t have anything disturbing to show Menavi.”

“Aside from your shipmate, you mean.”

“Oh? Ah. Yeah, what happened to Inga?”

“The other human? I have no doubt she was rescued by her blade or her other two defenders.”

“Then you know.”

“That she was bitten by three Arrisans? Yes. If their own behavior didn’t betray it, it’s obvious on her skin.”

“Right, the tattoos. Um, is that allowed?”

“Of course not. But more than not being allowed is that it’s not supposed to be possible. The Vanadisans must have a chemical, a drug.”

“Like the chaos gas?”

“More extreme.” I dab the cream precisely as the tube dwindles. “You’ve told me the addled Arrisans fled from an image of the Harsi. I can’t think of any way to make them unsee a mating mark. It defies everything we know about our own reproductive biology. And that’s terribly dangerous.”

“Inga’s worried about Menavi.”

“Rightfully so.”

“Is there anywhere they could go and live a normal life?”

“In the empire? I doubt it. We have no slot in our society for paired Arrisans, much less different ranks or roles. And it’s four? Menavi will try to pull them apart. She’s obsessed, which is the only feeling allowed to a science officer.”

My bruises are minor. I cap the cream to preserve the last drops for Noemi.

She frowns. “Then there’s nowhere we could go either.”

“Correct. As Menavi said, a science officer biting a human means that we’ve utterly failed at our core.”

That’s what is at stake.

If I yield to my feelings, then I will have failed at being a science officer.

Failed as a blade.

Failed as an Arrisan with genes that cannot be passed along.

Three times a failure.

What, then, is left?

FOURTEEN



# NOEMI

Ukuri goes quiet.

And in the quiet, the dread in me builds again. I need to release the pressure, speak. “Why are you the only one who’s not allowed?”

“Do you have a graduation exam on Humana?” He tilts his head. “You’re all generalists, so perhaps you don’t have a test of your worthiness, the stakes of which are life and death.”

“We...no. If you fail, you die?”

“Blades fight the general master, engineers dismantle complex bombs, officers wage battle with live warships. Death isn’t common, but it’s a risk outside the Science Center, and quite honestly, many consider our final to be worse.”

As he speaks, even though his tone is so light, a sense of horror grows.

“We conduct a series of operations, each designed to be more mentally disturbing than the last.”

“You aren’t allowed to take the baseline medicine?”

“That would defeat the purpose. For the final, we must dismantle something sacred. The brain of a scientist we admired, a dead hero of the empire, a pet that we weren’t supposed to attach to. It’s always a surprise. Can you guess what they found for me?”

“Your father?”

He hesitates, frowns. “No, and I should’ve been more surprised that it wasn’t. You really are quite insightful.”

Happiness at his praise mixes with bittersweet anxiety. “I guess he was already dead.”

“They could’ve use a simulacrum. No, my final task was to open up a traitor’s body and posthumously remove his blades.”

His mouth flattens, makes a half smile, flattens again. He can’t hide himself behind his amused mask like he usually does. In the privacy of this small suit tent, in the rock of an alien asteroid surrounded by enemies, he’s millions of actungs away, in a small operating room, surrounded by other impersonal Arrisans.

“They kicked me out of the Arsenal, but left the metal in my arms. A mistake? The day I removed them from another blade, in my mind, I was removing them from myself.”

I rub his bony knees. “Were you okay?”

“I performed the operation, contents of my stomach contained for the duration, so yes. But...”

He lines his forearm against mine. How do his oversized blades squish into his ordinary arms? The sheaths lie flat, black lines at his gray wrists a tribal tattoo.

“I have long considered these to be vestiges of an unimportant past. Mere tokens of pointless memories. Failing to redeem my father’s dishonor is supposed to be my greatest fear. But it’s not. My greatest fear is that I failed to uphold the core of the blades.” He snorts. “Some seeds, once planted, are impossible to rip out no matter how much the soil is irradiated or poisoned.”

One sheath is nicked by a small red cut. He’s healed me so much and left himself damaged. “Are blades allowed feelings?”

His smirk returns. “A reasonable question. Many would say no unless it’s important for an assignment. But of course, my perspective is a little different.”

I scoop out the tiny drop of healing cream and reach for his cut.

He pulls back slightly. "I was saving that for you."

"I won't get hurt again." I grip his wrist and apply the cream in a smooth line, cap the tube because I know he prefers it tidy, and meet his gaze. "Now, I'm with you."

He holds still for a breath. Two.

Outside, the snowstorm howls and the Vanadisans are looking for us. I can almost hear their shouts above the wind.

But inside, there's just us.

He looks down at the tube. My body. And he hesitates.

Soon, this peace will be over. We'll go back to being researcher and patient, Arrisan and human.

Or...

I clear my throat. "You know, I was serious."

"About?"

My heart thumps. The moment stretches taut. If I keep my silence now, I will regret it forever. "Your mating bite is the only one that will set me free."

He fixes on me like a predator.

All my hairs stand up.

Then he moves over me like a spider suspended over prey. His silver-white eyes flash in slivers of moonlight. Like fangs in the darkness. "Do you want me to bite you?"

And I...

I can't breathe. "Do you want to bite me?"

His gaze flicks to my neck. "I'm a science officer."

"You're also a blade." I curl my fingers around the back of his neck, align our bodies. Pull him closer, close enough for me to brush my lips over his.

He again shifts his head, like he thinks I'm moving somewhere else.

Even the brush is hot, and my lips tingle. “Do Arrisans not kiss?”

“Do you derive pleasure from pressing your mouths together?”

“Sometimes.”

Again, the night stretches tight. Poised. Neither of us willing to commit.

Heat washes over me in waves. Arousal tingles between my thighs. I know where this leads, where he’s trained my brain to expect, and I want this destination right now.

And I am the one who has to move.

My brain worm always has me look over my shoulder and wiggle my hips, rely on its targets to get drawn in, when I don’t even want them.

But this time, I do want Ukuri, and I have to come out, me, and demand what I want. “Do you want me to bite you?”

He snorts. “You biting me will do nothing—”

I use him as a lever, pull up, and sink my teeth into his shoulder.

“—but break the skin.” His voice cuts out. The final words exit as a hiss. Like pressure being released into vacuum.

I bite harder, sink my teeth deeper.

He grunts. “Noemi.”

And even harder. I taste his blood again. Prickly spice, an unusual flavor, like licking a magnet or a fragment of an asteroid.

This is what Arrisans do to show their love. It’s not what I would do, but I can be what he needs so that he can understand my feelings.

I growl in the back of my throat.

And it works on him.

He thrusts, his hard cock sliding against my upper thigh and waist.

I lift my hips in welcome.

He nudges between my thighs. My pounding center turns liquid. His fully erect, trembling cock glides in straight home.

My womb contracts with unearthly pleasure.

I let go of his shoulder to cry out my release.

“This is what you do to me, Noemi.” He winds his hands around my hair, drags me back. Stares down at me as he thrusts rhythmically, exploding my G-spot and stretching my clit, fireworks underwater burning so hot they will never be extinguished. Even without air or oxygen, they burn. “Cut me open with your eyes, set out my organs. Neatly label things I can’t even identify. You have words to describe planets I’ve never seen, and you see them all with your green, green eyes. You’re absolutely terrifying.”

And I buck, writhe, scream as he pulses himself into me. I dig my nails into his back and he groans. I scratch him, draw my initials in his blood. And my own bite mark gleams purple-red against his gray skin.

I try to bite his other shoulder. My teeth snap on the air as he drags me back.

“I’m already yours,” he says.

“Not...yet...”

“You are terrifying.” And then he drags my face to the side and bites my shoulder.

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Ukuri

My poison injects into Noemi, sliding into her arteries and veins and capillaries, and I shudder. It's the same sensation as I had when my blades slid out of their sheaths for the first time. An indescribable release beyond orgasmic, a higher tier of experience. Celestial. A place without space, without fragrance, without time. My jack explodes in her womb, rhythmically ejecting all my fluids into her, and my jaws clench on her soft skin, embedding my essence so deep, it can never be washed off. This scar will never be erased. I am permanent on her skin, in her body, for all time.

She screams silently beneath me, her body taut, receiving all of me.

And when I finish, my teeth ease out of her bronze shoulder, bloodless. My jack trembles. She collapses on her back, gasping for air. Her green eyes roll in their sockets, and sweat drips from her pores.

“What even was that? I've never... Ooh, it's still going, like a supernova. Oh, aftershocks. Ohhh.” And she shudders.

I cage her, pressing her to the intractable floor and holding her arms until the spasms subside.

This position allows me to watch my mark tunnel through her body, my poison spiraling in thorny rivulets that twist and pull her cells to my dominion.

My recessive teeth fold into my mouth, done forever, and the taste of her blood is sweet on the back of my tongue. Unexpected. There's some sort of mineral in her blood that's different from what's in mine. Although we bleed the same colors, we're not the same at all, inside or outside.

And yet, there are enough similarities in us that my race's possession mark unfurls like sticky thorns from the deep impressions on her shoulder.

Too bad we didn't capture this in a scanner. Noemi deserves to be recorded as the archetypal human recipient. All

her reactions should be immortalized.

But I suppose if we were in a place with a decent scanner, we would not be here now.

And I'm not willing to think about that too hard.

Her eyes open, fix on me. A mysterious expression flashes across her face. She closes her eyes again and frowns.

I brush ticklish hanks of her long brown hair away from her forehead. "What's wrong?"

"I'm scared."

A chill slithers down my spine. For all our similarities, there are critical differences. "I scare you?"

She shakes her head, eyes still pinched closed. "It felt like I was dying."

"Painful?"

"No, the opposite."

Apparently to humans, dying is like drifting away in a warm embrace knowing that you're being cared for by *monotheistic deity* and you'll never have to worry again.

That's quite interesting because Arrisans hold on to life with our teeth. We exit mortality screaming, even those who've chosen to sacrifice themselves for the greater good, because it's more dangerous and painful to cease to exist, both for us as individuals and for our race.

"Ah, and we think pain means we're alive." She shifts beneath me and winces. "I guess I'm still kicking."

I pull back, and we separate. Fresh scrapes and scratches line her formerly pristine body. I rub my red sheath scratch in case any healing cream residue can transfer to her.

Ah, it's worse where I was careless with my jack. I coax the last molecules of healing cream from the tube and smear it on her soft, beige entrance, her bruised interior. "This is unfortunate."

"It doesn't hurt."

“I’m sure it does.”

“I’ve done worse with toys or even my own fingers.”

“You use fingers?”

“It was how I pleased myself when that was still up to me.”

Intriguing. “You will teach me gentle human sex to avoid causing any more pain.”

She catches my eye, insistent. “Your marks don’t hurt me.”

And even though I’m sated, even though I’ll never feel a drive to possess anyone or anything ever again, her words hook into my spine and twist. Heat floods my softened jack, firming it again.

She glances down, then her lips curl. “Gentle human sex, huh? I’m afraid there’s quite a few variations.”

“Which is most pleasurable?”

“I have no idea.”

Another factor to test, I suppose.

And she undulates her hips, seating herself against my fingers. Her socket texture is firm in unexpected places, like the unusual fruits she asked me to grow after we discussed the shortcomings of the reprocessor. I explore her body, listen to her moans, and watch her shudders.

In truth, if we were being scanned, I might never have done this. Data must be consistent, research replicable, variables controlled. And now everything’s been thrown into chaos. Her lusteal count is unknown. I descend further into a madness that sounds like sweet moans and tastes like unending hunger, exploring every facet of her succulent body with my mouth, my tongue, my skin.

Later, I lay her down facing away from me so that I’m no longer tempted. “Rest. We’re far beyond your regular sleeping time.”

She rolls back and nips my lips. “Just once more. You want it.”

“Don’t ignore your body’s signals for mine.”

She obediently rests her head on the ground and snugs me close for warmth. With my belly against her back, I transfer heat to her.

She brushes slowly against me, teaching me with heat that she’s not going to rest.

How amusing. I suppose I don’t know her if I think simple positioning will keep us from uniting.

I yield, Noemi. Do as you will.

She wraps her fingers around my jack, tugs me toward her scissored thighs so my pelvis is pillowed by her ample buttocks. I squeeze her cheeks, glut myself on satisfaction. And when I enter her again, slow and careful this time, her liquid coating me in tight warmth, she moans. I slip in and out, buffeted by her cries, her shudders, her moans.

I lave my tongue over the swirls of my mark on her shoulder. My possession. Mine.

She reaches behind and grasps at my waist. “Come. You have to. I can’t—please...”

And I fill her with me, frothing to the brim, overflowing with my scent, my sweat, my essence.

Me.

And she, finally and at last, breaks into soft pieces and crumbles, flopping into restful sleep.

As she sleeps, I lie awake.

The shift is not too long.

Some time ago, I heard Vanadisan voices. Possibly they echoed from behind us.

If they put trackers in us, one of their favorite places is the shoulder. The signal would be difficult to track in the storm. It’s really only useful inside one of their bases. And between her teeth and mine, how much foreign matter survived?

I stroke her gently, memorizing her shape with my fingertips as I've long memorized it with my eyes.

She shifts in my arms, then settles back to sleep. Her breathing, her heartbeat throb on my insides.

About a shift later, she stirs. The cavernous hunger noise accompanies her yawn, and then she rolls off me and sighs, heading back to sleep.

I want this peace to last forever.

But I know it's already being stolen.

A distant boom rattles our moon.

The world goes unnaturally quiet.

Noemi sighs, unbothered by the distant noise and movement, and rolls deeper into sleep.

I slide out of the skinsuits, leaving her protected, to investigate.

FIFTEEN



# NOEMI

I wake alone in the makeshift bed, warm and tingly and healthy and alive. My muscles are sore, but cocooned in a firm, leathery embrace, and my skin feels fresh and soft. It's like I'm at the best sauna, relaxed under a pummeling waterfall, laid out in the sun.

The air on this moon smells like the shadow side of a pool house, but I am wrapped in sunshine and clothed in life.

It's the exclusive sauna of Ukuri's sex.

I stretch, the bits of my vertebrae aligning with tiny satisfied cracks.

If this is how allosexuals feel every time they have sex, I can finally see why they obsess over having more. Even though I lack a driving desire for the act itself, Ukuri knows me down to the smallest molecule. Our scanner sex, which is just for research, has always been exceptionally good. But last night, if you can call it that, Ukuri worshipped my body like a priest before an altar. He is a man of unending faith and precise devotion.

I won't let him be taken away from me.

The hollow beside me on the makeshift bed is empty.

I sit up.

My skinsuit slides down my chest, coiling and releasing flat again, exposing my healed skin.

A tangle of red thorns twists across my shoulder and down, swirling under my breast and close to my nipple.

Now it's done.

No going back.

I'm not sure how to feel about it.

No, that's a lie.

The fluttery sensation in my belly is happiness. Happiness dusted with sparkles of pride.

I did this. I chose it. I demanded his mark. Ukuri obliged me, and we are now tied more tightly than any marriage vow.

But Menavi threatened him with death.

Allie ordered him not to put anything inside me.

Him, him, him.

Neither of them bothered to address me. They're so sure he's in control.

They thought I'd just comply.

And I didn't.

It makes me a little giddy.

A little giddy, and a little terrified.

The divots in my shoulder, from which the tattoos originate, are strange. Deep indents, as if my skin was compressed so flat, it can't reinflate. I can stick my ring finger in to the top of the nail. They itch.

Maybe we'll never get rescued. Maybe the Vanadisans will never find us. Maybe we can stay hidden forever on this snowstorm-cloaked moon. Nothing will ever force us out.

My stomach grumbles.

I press a hand over my empty belly. That didn't happen. I'm not hungry. If it means we can stay here, unmolested, I'll never eat food again.

Ukuri's detached voice drifts over. "Not much longer now."

He stands in the shadow of our sheltered overlook, nude.



I pull my skinsuit around my waist. The moment I act on it in an intentional way, it curls around, conforming to my body, melding into itself until I'm all covered. "Not much longer until what?"

"We're rescued. Or the end of the world, whichever comes first."

I carry his skinsuit to his side. "Are those different things?"

"It depends on your perspective." He points to the clear sky.

A silent light show highlights a battle. Stray lasers streak toward our moon. A low boom, and the ground tremors under my toes.

I'm in a war zone, again, and the battle is taking place so far from me, I don't feel it. Somehow, I always manage to stay at the perimeter to someone else's tragedy. It must be in my genes. Even when I'm the cause of turmoil, I'm insulated from its effects.

Unless I make a different choice. "The second dreadnought arrived?"

"And hit the power source of our extreme weather. Apparently, it was artificial, a cloaking mechanism of the Vanadisans."

No snow.

Oh!

It's silent. The howling winds are gone.

Which means...

"An invasion force is imminent." Ukuri's somber.

The half-moon bites on his shoulder aren't artful like the ninety-six pattern of tangled red vines on my shoulder. But they're mine. My old tooth impressions lie underneath, layers upon layers of bites. He's been letting me mark him for kortans and doesn't remember to use healing cream unless I remind him.

Oh.

Maybe that too has always had a meaning.

I offer him his skinsuit, even though he doesn't seem cold. He puts it on without taking his eyes off the space battle. Assumedly the two dreadnoughts are wiping the floor with the Vanadisan fleet. "Will Menavi come down with the invasion force?"

"Undoubtedly."

I lean against him. "What are we going to do?"

"Do?" He changes position to seat me on his lap, curling his arm around me and snugging me safe against his chest. "What do you want to do?"

I rest my head on his shoulder. "I don't want to go to Arris Central."

"You might like it."

"We could run away."

"I'm afraid there is no safe harbor for us within the Arrisan empire." He combs his fingers through my matted hair, scratches at bits of dirt, picks at a snarl. "No allies would risk their position, and enemies would see us as a bargaining chip. We know the style of care we'd receive under the Vanadisans."

"We could commandeer a ship and fly out, into the stars, and never land anywhere."

He chuckles. "Ah, yes, but who would document the results of Humana hydroponics? Or test the efficacy of our lusteal blocker? Or feed your cat?"

Oh, Tom. "We'd take him with us."

"On the run from the empire with a cat?" He shakes his head at the silliness. "I suppose we've survived everything else. Why not?"

He's not worried. That's a relief. And he's right. We've survived the Vanadisans. We're about to be rescued. Maybe everything will be okay.

“What should we do about my bite?”

His fingers still, but his tone remains light. “What do you want to do about it?”

“I could say I forced you.”

His voice is soft, gentle. “You didn’t force me, Noemi.”

“But I could say that.”

His silence stretches my hopes thinner and thinner until the truth is visible through the gauze of make-believe.

Dread seeps into my belly.

My arguments insist. *This was my idea. We might be recaptured, and this bite was insurance to prevent another demonstration. It was to keep me safe.*

And their responses hit deep. *Who could love a man like him?* Catarine and Allie both asked a question like that.

I can’t say I still don’t love Ukuri.

I mean, I don’t.

He’s just the only person in this entire universe who understands me. He’s the only person who believes what I say. I don’t have to argue what I want. He lets me be selfish. He ensures I’m heard. He lets me be me.

That’s not love.

Love is fickle and wild. A raging torrent that makes people leave their girlfriends and sob all night, wrecks their dreams on a whim. Tear out the safety mechanisms and drive off a cliff.

I want to be with Ukuri for the rest of my life, and I’m currently hoping that my life span will be nice and long. Or, at least, a lot closer to average.

So.

I couldn’t convince Allie and Catarine that I wanted to stay with Ukuri. How can I possibly convince them I made him bite me?

It's so infuriating. Everything I have control over, they say I don't, and everything I don't have control over, they say I do.

Wait. This is it.

Don't comply.

When the moment comes, when it's time to part, I just won't comply.

But I'd really like to avoid that moment. "Can't anyone stop Menavi?"

"From doing what? Collecting a disobedient science officer and his specimen? She would get a commendation."

"What about Zai?"

"He can't act alone, only with the agreement of the High Command and the palace, and I don't see them risking their clout for two unknowns."

"We'd be known if we commandeered an Arrisan ship."

"Yes, but I suspect we're not the only ones considering it." He points.

Across the cliffside, three Arrisans stumble along a narrow trail, jump across crevices on all fours, scramble in loose gravel. One slides on his butt. The other two rush to help him to his feet again.

"The invasion force?" I ask.

Ukuri laughs out loud. "Not hardly. One is your human ally. The other leaning on her so that it's impossible to tell who is holding up whom will be the recently deceased engineer, Siv. The third I don't know, but I expect he's some sort of officer or bridge crew."

Oh. "Where's Pyke?"

"About four arm lengths behind us, listening in on our conversation to determine whether we're a threat."

Pyke is...wait, what? Behind us?

But there's nothing there.

I turn back to watch Inga and the other two Arrisans crawl roughly in our direction. “Did he decide?”

“My dear, we’re looking at his mates, so the answer is obvious.” Ukuri raises his voice. “Unless I’ve missed something?”

The familiar snort emerges from behind us. “I always wondered if the students they kicked out of the Arsenal had something wrong with them.”

“You and me both,” Ukuri murmurs drily.

“The only thing you missed is that three bites are harder to explain than one.” Pyke’s voice nears like he’s standing in the same rocky window as we are, even though he’s completely invisible. “I heard rumors too that Class 2-6 had problems with their blades. Too unwieldy, too slow. But you cut open that disgusting operating room like it was a simple training exercise, so, I don’t know who’s complaining.”

“I didn’t cut the glass to Fuzig’s observation platform.”

“You know why.” A black sword slides out of the invisible gloom and points down.

We lean out.

Directly beneath us, exposed under the crust of moon rock, is a half-buried slab of blobby metal. A symbol is carved onto it. A burst egg sac? Gross. Why is that familiar? I think maybe I saw it once long ago.

Ukuri is grim. “The Harsi.”

Horried shivers run up my arms like scuttling insects.

I rub my elbows.

Ukuri and other Arrisans have said the name casually in front of me a few times, but it’s weird every time I hear it. I may not recognize the symbols, but the name is taboo on Humana. No politicians, historians, or even teachers speak it aloud. It’s funny. Pre-Contact, we’d never heard of the H-aliens, so why are we afraid? The Arrisans injected Humana with their nutrient cubes and technology and planet-moving

laser. They also injected us with a fear of an alien race that hasn't been seen since before the formation of the empire.

And yet...

"I thought they were gone," I say into the stillness. "Their ships."

"Yes, except in a few cases, all Harsi ships are gutted, charred, and stored in a secure location away from the main body of planets. Just in case."

That sounds right. Even certain areas of space, the area where the H-aliens disappeared, are off-limits so someone doesn't accidentally stumble on them.

Now the Vanadisans have a Harsi ship.

And it looks active.

Ukuri runs an index finger over his black sheath tattoos. "I sensed a magnetic hum when I tried to cut it."

"Yes." Pyke materializes into existence. "So, I could never side with the Vanadisans. I must report to Zai. And now, I'm out of time."

Far away, between needle-sharp peaks, a chunky haystack-shaped Arrisan ship sets down and disgorges soldiers.

The invasion force. Finally.

A smaller teardrop ship lands by its side, point down, blunt end up.

One person exits.

I pull on my hood and squint.

The hood display magnifies while distance and helpful statistics print along the sides. After a few tries, I managed to tongue on my implant. A local Arrisan Standard broadcast orders the Vanadisans to surrender and accept their judgment in the firepits of Ranna or face immediate execution. Most seem to be opting for the unspoken third option, a hasty retreat.

The single Arrisan ignores the space battle and peers out in our direction.

I zoom in right on her face.

She's squinting back at me.

Menavi.

---

Ukuri

Pyke hops down and helps the rest of his group traverse the final difficult section to reach us. I formally meet Noemi's human ally, Inga, and the third Arrisan, bridge officer Navlon.

They look unwell.

Navlon's jaw is swollen, and he nods in greeting.

Inga's skinsuit is too large, and the fabric bunches up around her shoulder and near her ankles. Her cheeks are red and chapped from an extended soaking in her human tears. She needs Noemi's skin-preserving lotion. It would surely benefit her to have the lusteal-dampening properties for a while too, although I don't notice her odor much over Noemi's attractive scent.

Siv makes up for their somberness by chattering away. "What, we got enough roles here we actually could make a run for the borders. Navigator, a science officer, yours truly, and two blades. We could commandeer a whole dreadnought."

Pyke snorts. Navlon half smiles and then winces.

"It's perfect. What's going to stop a dreadnought?"

"Another dreadnought," Pyke replies.

"Nothing!" Siv says, then grimaces. "Well, it would take at least two dreadnoughts. One on one is an even fight."

"Fully crewed versus four is an even fight?"

"Plus two humans! Six against a full crew, sure, it's a foolproof plan. You're just jealous you didn't think of it yourself."

Pyke snorts again, then rubs his nose and turns away like he didn't mean to entertain the wily engineer, but couldn't help himself.

Inga ruffles Siv's hair. "We missed you. I was sick with worry."



“I had a good, long nap. No worries for me. I told you, I’m the lucky one, so things will always work out. See?”

Her chin wrinkles, but she recovers herself and clears her throat. “Yeah, that’s right.”

“And now, we’re going to waltz on over to the invasion force and make ourselves a right nuisance for that Menavi. She’ll have no choice but to send us on our way.”

The level of comfort they all have with each other is strange. What could a blade discuss with an engineer? Or a bridge officer, for that matter? And yet, this trio are easy, closer than classmates, closer even than the same class of blades. A word emerges in my brain: Clan mates. They were written in the myth books of our lost planet, the myths my engineers like to read.

And yet, like my subtly reassuring infinity tattoo teasing the underside of Noemi’s jaw, and like the disturbing trio of tattoos on Inga’s pale pink-beige skin, I’m witnessing this ancient, mythical history firsthand.

There’s a hypothesis to study here. I need to make a few notes...

“Yes, she’ll be glad to see the last of us when we’re through.” Siv grins with cracked teeth.

Ah. He’s probably in a lot of pain right now and masking it. I was so busy bringing him back to life that I didn’t have time to fix his next-level needs. Perhaps his teeth aren’t even his worst pains.

He can’t survive on this moon any more than we can, to say nothing of escaping the invasion force, avoiding the war.

But there’s a sadness to Inga’s agreement, a sharpness to the rest of our silences.

We’re all thinking about our options.

The symbol of the Harsi below us pulsates like a bomb.

Darkness smokes from its ruptured egg sac design. Green lines its closed entry like fetid mold on a monster’s slavering teeth.

What have the Vanadisans awakened?

Menavi is a danger to us, but the Harsi are a danger to the empire.

We really have no choice at all.

SIXTEEN



# UKURI

**P** yke leads us to Menavi's ship.

The ground is steep, the trails between the spires narrow, and the continued tremors of misfired lasers outright dangerous. But he chooses the shortest, surest route. Where needed, Navlon and Siv assist Inga in tandem, so smooth it's as if they're sharing the same brain implant. Noemi goes next, and I take the rear.

Our order is unspoken and automatic. Any deviation would infuriate Pyke and irritate me. Any other choice would feel unnatural.

Ironically, that instinctual automaticity is precisely what we're challenging.

How dare we take mates in an empire that's not built to accommodate us? Our existence is unnatural, irritating, deviant.

We reach the sloped landing area too soon.

The invasion force ignores us.

Menavi stands in front of her respectable expedition-class cruiser.

Inga falls back, closer to Noemi. "Menavi won't open us up with a laser saw while we're still alive and screaming, right?"

"She's not supposed to," Noemi says.

"Not supposed to?"

“She’s treated Allie and Lia, and others too. She’s better than the Vanadisans.”

“Mm. Not forcing us to do horrendous things while laughing at our screams isn’t a high bar.”

“She asked me to return to the Science Center for a standard year. She didn’t force the issue until now.”

“But she can force you?” She glances back at my wrists, the black tattoos demarking the sheaths of my blades.

I clear my throat. “In Menavi’s old role as an arena scientist, she had the power to recall anyone from anywhere in the empire, alien or Arrisan, at any time.”

“Anybody? Even a blade? In the middle of battle?”

“Yes, even a blade in midbattle with the Harsi.”

Inga looks stricken. She turns to her trio for reassurance, but they remain silent.

“As engineers may override the captain’s orders to save their ship, it’s a privilege of the arena science office to override any other Arrisan in the empire, even an emperor, in order to preserve our race. However, since she’s demoted herself to head of the Science Center, she can only make demands of her own science officers.”

“And their research subjects,” Noemi says.

“Precisely.”

“So why’s she forcing you now?” Inga asks as we slow to a stop.

I stand behind Noemi. “I suppose we will find out.”

---

Noemi

My guts twist.

Menavi hurries forward, clapping. “You came! Good, good. I’m so thrilled to meet new humans.”

I back into Ukuri.

He stands firm, a wall.

I look up at him.

His eyes are obscured behind reflective lenses. “It’s okay. We’re fine.”

Please be true.

But I brace myself like I’m facing the entire team of neurologists.

Pyke strides forward. “Head Science Officer Menavi, the Vanadisans have been—”

“Yes, go ahead.” She walks past him.

“Ah.” Pyke half turns in surprise. “But—”

“Use my communications console to call it in.”

“They’ve uncovered a Harsi—”

“Yes!” She spins all the way around to face him. “I already told you it’s fine. Obviously the Vanadisans’ ‘big surprise’ was an undiscovered fragment of Harsi technology. Only an idiot would think otherwise. Go in and report it to the other idiots.”

Pyke takes a half step toward her ship, then pauses. He catches Ukuri’s eye, then enters her ship.

Menavi skips to the trio.

The two males stand between her and Inga.

“What have we here?” Menavi’s silver eyes glitter. “You must be...oh. Ohhh. Oh, my goodness, how intriguing, how... Excuse me, but I can’t help noticing...” She squeezes in between the men. “...that you have more than one bite.”

Inga lifts her chin. “Is that going to be a problem?”

“No, no. Not for me. I assume, maybe, for you?” Menavi’s chest rotates to implicate Inga and the men, but her head stays oriented on the tangled red marks covering Inga’s neck and jaw.

“It’s no problem,” Inga says firmly.

Navlon nods.

“No problem for me.” Siv fidgets.

Menavi reaches for Inga’s wrist. “May I?”

Inga flexes her fingers to retract the skinsuit, exposing her hand.

Menavi touches her pale white skin around the wrist tattoo. “Fascinating. Each one is just as repulsive, and yet, they coexist on one human.” She rotates Inga’s wrist, squeezes. “How in the world did it happen?”

Inga trades a look with Navlon, then nods at Siv.

“Okay, the Vanadisans, right? They got this spray.” Siv uses his hands to illustrate. “Worse than lusteal spray. There’s something wrong with it, something extra inside. Men can’t think, can’t stop. Your teeth just come down. *Chomp.*”

“Unbelievable.”

“Yeah, well, believe it, because that’s what happened.”

“The existence of one bite should repulse any other suitors.”

“Yeah, but the spray short-circuits your brain. You can’t fight back. Hey, are you, er, drooling?”

Menavi sucks in her drool and wipes her mouth. “To think the Vanadisans can somehow override our natural impulses. If we’d had this chemical at the time of our genetic bottleneck, perhaps we could have chosen a different path for reproduction. May I see the other tattoos?”

Inga shows her neck and shoulders. Her pretty blue butterflies flutter between the exotic tangles of red thorns.

Menavi patiently waits for consent. As her examination continues, Inga relaxes, and so do her men.

Maybe I misjudged her. Maybe it's all going to be okay.

The only weird thing is when Inga mentions again, "Um, your mouth..."

Menavi wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. "So, going back to the beginning, the Vanadisans used this spray on the engineer and 'chomp'?"

"Chomp," Siv agrees. "And then they thought maybe it only worked on me because I'm lacking in morals, you know, being rankless and all."

"Uh-huh, sure."

"So they got in Pyke—I have no idea how they got him in, and he doesn't want to talk about it—and spray, chomp, all right. It works. They might have tried to keep going, more males and sprays and chomps, except Pyke says no and puts a stop to it."

"Inga," Navlon murmurs, speaking for the first time, and winces.

"Right, my bad. Inga says no and Pyke passes the message along since the Vanadisans aren't so good at listening to humans. Then the Vanadisans get this brilliant idea to make us fight."

"Fight?"

"Yeah, but it backfired. Uh, your drool..."

Menavi wipes her mouth. "So, you fought?"

"No, see, they got us in the room with her, and Inga made us stop, and then we..." He scratches his neck where two lavender tattoos entwine. "We, uh...yeah, we didn't fight. At all."

Navlon also has two lavender tattoos on his gray neck.

Inga's always had nontraditional relationships. It's who she is, what she likes.



I would have let them fight.

My brain worm would have held me immobile, like an idiot, while they cut each other down—while Pyke did, let's be honest—and then, still grinning mindlessly, I would have gotten my cure from him and never once thought about the Arrisans who died. I never would have realized there was any other possibility.

I wonder what happens to your tattoo if your Arrisan dies. There isn't a way to peel it off. It would be a tattoo memorial forever.

I'm glad Inga met her trio.

And I'm glad I didn't.

“Anyway, the Vanadisans got mad and tried to break our, uh, new bond starting with me.” Siv draws an imaginary line down the center of his chest. “But Pyke wrecked their lab. They didn't realize he was being a polite guest. They hid me to blackmail him while they set up a new lab in a hurry. Or so I'm told. He grabbed Noemi and Ukuri, and Ukuri restarted my ticker. Here we are.”

Menavi touches Inga's skin, skirts her tattoos. “I wish I could have seen you before. Unmarked humans have so much potential for research.”

My stomach rolls.

“So, if I'm hearing this right, the engineer bit you second and the blade was third, making the bridge officer the first?”

Siv screws his lips to one side. “Well...”

Navlon squares his shoulders. “Doesn't matter.”

Menavi blows a puff of air. “Certainly it matters.”

“No.” Navlon's quiet but immovable. “Siv makes her smile. Pyke protects. We're equal for her.”

“Oh, no, that's not what I meant.” Menavi steps back, brow wrinkled in a pensive frown. “Yeah, no, it's just really unfortunate about the marks.”

Inga takes Navlon's hand.

He looks down, squeezes her fingers.

She offers her other hand to Siv, who scoops it up and presses it to his heart.

Inga lifts her chin again, facing Menavi. “So. What are you going to do with us?”

“You all need healing. Obviously. That jaw looks painful, and those teeth, but there’s not much time, so Ukuri will help me fix you.”

Behind me, he takes a small breath.

“No, no. I mean, good about the healing, we need it, but after that.” Inga braces herself. “What are you going to do with us permanently?”

Menavi’s brows lift. She straightens and takes a deep breath. “Honestly?”

“Yes.”

“I have no idea.”

There’s a silence.

“What?” Inga says.

“No, really, I have no idea what to do with you.” Menavi gestures at the trio, then over her shoulder at the absent Pyke in her ship, and laughs. “I’ve never encountered this, not in the history of our race’s reproduction annals, not anywhere. You’re fascinating. A lot of people are going to want to talk to you. It’s a completely unique situation.”

“It’s not completely unique among humans. When will you know our future?” Inga is fierce.

“Sure, we can ask Empress Allie the best way to house you.”

“So you’re not going to try to separate us, or erase the marks?”

“There’s no way to erase the marks. Believe me, we’ve tried.”

“You won’t cut out pieces? Or strap us down and laser saw into our brains?”

“Why does everyone I encounter ask me that?” Menavi’s gaze skates up to Ukuri.

He tenses behind me.

“I *really* worry about the state of science among our allies and, ah, nonallies in the empire. What are my science officers doing behind my back?”

“Perhaps you should ask the review board.” Ukuri’s light tone has his usual dark velvet smoothness. “They evaluate the methods of every experiment, and, by extension, the worth of every science officer.”

She stops smiling. “Oh? The review board is the culprit? Not the science officers who commit extremely unethical violence and specimen hoarding?”

“Where else would you look for perverse incentives?”

Her eyes narrow.

Siv gestures at Menavi. “They could distrust you because of the mouth disorder.”

She wipes her mouth and huffs. “It’s not a disorder. I get excited and lose my swallow reflex.”

“Yeah, you could work on that, being the head of all science and everything.”

“Yes, anyway, go in and rest. My invasion force will rescue the rest of your shipmates, and Ukuri and I will complete your healing.”

The two Arrisans look at Inga.

“Can I trust you?” Inga asks. “You won’t do anything to us, not anything, without our explicit consent?”

“You’ve been through a lot, so I understand your concern. My only desire is to restore you to your full, natural state of health as easily and as comfortably as possible. Please. Make yourself at home on my ship.”

Inga's shoulders lower. She takes a deep breath. "Thank you. That would be very nice."

Menavi is all smiles again as they pass her and willingly enter the ship.

Her smile disappears.

She turns to us.

My stomach drops.

She comes to stand in front of us.

I lean into Ukuri.

Her smile flickers back into shape. But I can't help feeling like it doesn't reach her dark silver eyes. "Noemi. It's nice to finally meet you in person."

"Thank you," I reply.

She looks up at Ukuri. "You disobeyed my direct order."

He clears his throat. "I can explain."

"On the ship. If I like what I hear, you'll have a chance to explain yourself to my review board. If I don't..." She stares at my neck, too long, then back to Ukuri with horrifying stillness. "Then say goodbye to more than being a science officer."

SEVENTEEN



# NOEMI

**M**enavi's threat hovers in the icy air like invisible daggers.

We follow her into the ship.

Arrisan ship entrances are weird. This one is no different.

The gangplank is like a long tongue leading up between jagged, angler-fish teeth. The upside-down tear shape makes it look like a big cranium. We are walking into the gray, shimmery, wet mouth of a strange beast.

Once inside, the walls are gray metal. They look moldable, like on the dreadnought. There's one big hold on the bottom, and a control room-type floor over the top. The hold is partitioned with tall scientific equipment rather than with walls.

Menavi directs the injured men to operating slabs, displays their vitals on an interior wall scanner, and assigns Ukuri to work on Navlon. She fixes Siv.

The invasion force stacks my shipmates' permastasis cases into another section of the hold. First is Yumi, frozen with her hands up, dark eyes open, in a position of helpless terror.

Hot anger washes over me again at the Vanadisans, at their uncaring, petty cruelty. Yumi used to giggle over the naked parts of movies and was the favorite grandchild before the lusteal and could tie any string into a decoration called macramé. And they tortured her.

But she's saved now. Menavi will bring her back to life and fix her.

As worried as I am for myself and Ukuri, I have no doubt of Menavi's sincere wish to make us normal. So I can't hate her completely. Not for—

"Noemi." Menavi pops up at my shoulder, making me jump. "Oh, did I surprise you? I've got an ooze bath, a bed, or food for you. What's your top need?"

And again I feel bad for being frightened and for thinking uncharitable thoughts. "Nutrient cubes would be good."

"We can do better than nutrient cubes. I'll show you." She leads me to the central column of the ship. We walk down steps into an elevator shaft.

The doors close. It's claustrophobic. "I thought Arrisans only use grav tubes."

"Yes, that's true." She grins.

Gravity abruptly reverses.

I shriek as I go flying for the ceiling and land hard on my shoulder. My skinsuit absorbs most of the impact. I roll over onto my butt.

She walks up the upside-down steps to the door of the shaft. "This is where it gets tricky."

The floor is upside down.

Or, more properly, I am upside down inside the elevator shaft. Menavi steps out, rotating between strides with familiarity and expertise to land on her feet.

No way.

I crawl out of the shaft, wriggling between the two gravities. My lower half drags me backward, to the shaft's ceiling, until I can finally swim on my back, onto the control room floor.

Inga and Pyke look down at me.

“Is there another way up and down?” I croak, content for the moment to lie on the floor tiles.

“Yes, there’s a walkway, but it takes longer.”

I sit up. A too-narrow ledge winds around the opposite wall down into the hold. It’s more a scaffolding than a walkway. Items stacked haphazardly block the path.

Ugh.

“Ta-dah!” Menavi shows off the wall reprocessor. “It’s programmed with all the known Humana recipes. Try it.”

My stomach sinks, and it’s not because of the confusing gravity. “Oh, um, are you sure you don’t have nutrient cubes?”

“You’re not going to get in trouble for asking for what you want, you know.”

“I know.”

She stares at me with that fixed smile.

I feel hot.

Inga is eating a bowl of steaming white soup that smells vaguely fishy and has lumps of potatoes.

Pyke empties a partial bowl of nutrient cubes into his mouth.

So, there are nutrient cubes—of course there are nutrient cubes—and I just have to insist on them.

It doesn’t matter, the heat in my face tells me.

But it *does* matter, and I’m not going to comply any more, even on stupid, pointless issues that nobody cares about. “I’d rather have nutrient cubes.”

Menavi tilts her head. “Am I traumatizing you?”

“No, I promise you. If it’s not too much trouble, I’d prefer nutrient cubes.”

She makes a noise that’s a cross between a huff and an exhale, then shrugs and taps the wall, dispensing a big bowl of cubes. “Well, we’ll work on gaining your trust.”



I want to reassure her that it's unrelated to trust, because it is, but I actually don't trust her. So I swallow my words, stand, and take the bowl with a quiet thanks.

The control room is an airy loft. Big gaps between floor tiles show the hold below, and the tiles only stretch halfway across, to the other side of the central grav tube shaft. There's no railing to prevent anyone from tipping off, which seems dangerous.

Pyke dumps his empty bowl in the wall recycler. "Where are the others?"

"Below, resting."

His gruff tone has an edge. "Show me."

Menavi's lips quirk. "Certainly, blade." She strides into the mini grav tube—grav chute?—and reverse flips.

Pyke makes a "stay here" gesture at Inga and disappears silently after Menavi.

I pause, crunching the nutrient cubes. Each chew realigns my jaw and is so loud. "Is Pyke worried?"

Inga points her spoon at the wall viewscreens. "He saw something in the space battle."

"What?"

"I don't know. He's going to ask Navlon."

One viewscreen displays the busy invasion force wheeling our shipmates across the ground outside. Another shows the space around the moon, and yet another shows all of nearspace, every ship coming and going between here and the fixed satellites. That one covers the Vanadisan fleet plus both dreadnoughts. There's a lot of movement.

"I don't see anything."

"Me neither. He's not *worried* worried. He just wants to ask."

Well, I guess if Pyke's not *worried* worried...

I lean against the outside wall of the grav tube and look down.

I can just catch a glimpse of Pyke following Menavi to a cluster of pods. Probably that's where Navlon and Siv are recovering. Arrisans use pods for beds, and they double as protection from hull breach.

“Ah. It's been so long since I haven't had fear or lusteal-induced panic.” Inga stretches, then sighs. “I want a bath more than anything, but I don't dare take off my skinsuit. The instant I do, Fuzig will pop out with one of his cackles, and all this will get ripped away.”

I'm not frightened of Fuzig, but the same dread clings to the underside of every heartbeat. “Yeah. I know what you mean.”

“I'll feel better when we're off this moon.” She returns her half-filled bowl to the wall where Pyke dumped his, then walks over and peers down the grav tube. “I wonder if I can just...oh!”

Menavi pops out, twisting to avoid her. “Hello, Inga. Are you ready for your bath?”

“Actually I was hoping to perhaps see our shipmates? Make sure no one's left behind.”

“Yes, of course. The last permastasis case is being loaded now.” Menavi beams at me. “You can come too, Noemi.”

I shake my head again, crunching my nutrient cubes to drown out any follow-up questions.

Menavi shrugs and takes Inga down the grav tube.

They appear below. I can see them through the gaps, and I walk around to the wall, then edge onto the scaffolding to follow their progress.

Their words drift up to me. Inga, high-pitched: “Oh, I think that is everyone. Good, finally. Um, where are Siv and Navlon?”

Menavi, barely audible. I strain. My implant increases her volume in my brain. “They're resting to help their recovery.”

“And Pyke?”

“He saw them and now he’s resting too. Would you like me to show you?”

Inga laughs. “If Pyke feels comfortable enough to nap, maybe I’ll join him.”

“Yes. He’s back here.”

Their voices get louder as they pass beneath me, and my implant dynamically tones down their words.

Neat.

“Oh, can you grab the edge of that pod? I want to move it near the others, keep everything tidy.”

“Wow, Navlon’s really out.”

“It’s better for his recovery.”

Ukuri pops out of the grav chute and orients on me.

A small wave of relief flushes through me.

Nothing bad can happen as long as we’re together.

He’s wearing a science officer robe with a stripe up the back over his skinsuit, and new surgical lenses. He dispenses nutrient cubes and passes me a glass of water, which I gratefully take, and speaks between crunches. “No messages? Nothing from Falkion?”

“No.”

“The dreadnoughts are taking a lot of fire.”

“Pyke noticed something odd there too.”

Ukuri studies it for a while, then shrugs and touches the controls. The walls go transparent.

Above us, the two dreadnoughts float in an aggressive standoff while the Vanadisan fleet creeps forward.

It’s so real.

I splay my fingers across the invisible wall. The viewscreens in the dreadnought are pretty high tech, but in this fancy ship, they’re like magic.

Beneath my feet, Menavi seals up a pod, brushes her hands, and checks a chronometer. She acknowledges the last of the invasion force exiting the gangplank and touches wall controls. Her wall is normal; our see-through dome extends to the narrow walkway.

The gangplank tongue sucks up into our ship and the toothy mouth snaps shut. Teeth lock together and melt into indistinguishable wall.

We're inside the belly of the beast.

And the rest of the world is outside.

Not sure which is better, honestly.

Ukuri taps his controls. One horizon zooms in on a group of Arrisan soldiers oriented around a fissure. "They're preparing to blast the Harsi symbol."

"They're going to destroy it?"

"No, I'm sorry." He runs his fingers through my hair, his attention divided between untangling the little snarls he finds, and watching the activity on our zoomed-in screen. "Harsi metal is impenetrable. They're blasting the moon rock to expose the entrance, the one the Vanadisans must have found."

"The Vanadisans can't penetrate H-metal either?"

"If they could, they wouldn't bother with a biological spray." He tugs on a tangle. "They'd fly right to Arris Central and obliterate us."

"Oh, that's reassuring."

His lips curve, amusement softening his features. Unlike the pasted-on smile that hides any hint of feelings, this is subtle, gone in a flash, a secret that only I get to see.

"Yes, well, the universe isn't designed to be comforting, but it's what we have, and so we take comfort in the small moments we are given."

His expression drops, then the false smile returns.

He turns more fully toward the center of the room. "Don't you agree, Menavi?"

I spin.

She studies us with blank malevolence.

Dread seeps into my stomach. “Where’s Inga?”

“Resting.” She crosses the invisible floor, sits in the see-through control console that cups her body completely, and selects our destination. “It’s a long journey to Arris Central, Noemi. Wouldn’t you also like to spend it resting?”

“No.”

“Because Ukuri is going to spend it resting.”

There’s no sense of movement, but outside our ship, the horizon falls away. My stomach rolls, and I stagger.

Ukuri’s arm around me tightens, centering me.

Menavi exits the console, turns to us, and crosses her arms. “He’s going to rest himself right into the firepits of Ranna.”

I tighten my insides. This is what I’ve been waiting for.

“Yes, ah, indeed.” Ukuri pats my shoulders as he straightens, steps away from me, clears his throat, and paces. “Logically, the overriding considerations, such as they were, when you consider how the Vanadisans are, inexplicably, blind to the value of their research subjects, and of Noemi specifically... Well, you see, it’s all quite logical—”

“Exactly how is any of this logical?”

Ukuri’s opaque lenses reflect the moon growing smaller as it recedes beneath our feet.

“She was supposed to be your research subject. You were never supposed to be in the same room. And now? How do you explain yourself?”

I step in front of Ukuri. “I did it. I made him. He didn’t do it. The Vanadisans...no, the truth is, I didn’t want you to separate us, so I wanted to stay together. It was me.”

Menavi squints. “Did you collaborate with the Vanadisans?”

“No.”

“Did you overwhelm Ukuri physically? Spray him in the face, shortcut his brain, ‘chomp’?”

Now I wish I had. “I bit him.”

Her lashes flutter rapidly as her brain tries to process what I’ve said. Her tone flattens. “You? Bit him?”

“In the shoulder. Really hard.”

“Why?”

“It was my choice. Ukuri’s the only one who listens. He respects my agency.”

“That’s not natural human behavior. He’s trying to make you Arrisan at every turn. Do you still feel no sexual attraction?” Her dark silver eyes stray to my tattooed shoulder. “Even now?”

“Ah...well...”

My chest hurts when I think he’ll never work as a science officer again. I want to stand in front of him and absorb her accusations, to keep him safe.

But that’s not sexual attraction, right?

I don’t really know.

It’s like asking me about a flavor I can’t taste, a scent I can’t smell. Colors to the blind. Are these blocks the same color? I don’t know. Black and white don’t have a feel. And I’m trying to guess the shape of front teeth when all I have are molars. What fits in this gap?

The allosexuals my brain worm targeted got turned on by looking at still images or thinking about me. They didn’t have to weigh the pros and cons to decide whether to have sex. They had it.

“Humans can be asexual,” I say weakly.

“Asexuality in humans is an aberration, not a natural condition, just like your trauma response is a psychological sickness.”

“I don’t need to be fixed.”

“Nevertheless, I will fix you.”

Heat washes over my body, then cold. I ball my fists. “You don’t know anything. You’re so, so, so—”

“Noemi.” Ukuri turns me away from Menavi, rubs my arms through the skinsuit. “It’s okay.”

“But she—”

“I know.”

“And you—”

“Yes.”

I bump my forehead against his immovable shoulder.

He strokes my back, soothing me back to—

“What is this? No, no.” Menavi’s cold voice slices between us like ice. “Stop touching her. Stop.”

The coldness freezes me. As much as I feel we’re on equal ground, she’s still an Arrisan, and I’m only a human.

Menavi gestures for us to part.

Ukuri glances at me, his eyes hidden by the lenses, and takes a step to the side.

It feels infinitely colder in my chest.

We stand apart, scolded children before a stern parent.

“I don’t know what you were thinking, and it’s likely I never will,” she tells Ukuri. “But you have to know that your career as a science officer is at an end.”

“No,” I choke.

“It’s unsalvageable. Every rank, every result, every honor, accolade, recognition. Every chance to redeem yourself. Every chance to prove you’re nothing like your father. Gone.”

His jaw flexes.

“And don’t think this is only coming from me. No review board will overlook an emotional outburst that is literally and indelibly tattooed on your subject’s skin. The subject you’re supposed to be impartial about. The subject you were

supposed to restore to her natural state, and who you've instead convinced she doesn't even want to be a human. Look at her. Her refusal is on your head."

My heart beats in my throat.

I have wrecked dozens of lives. Maybe hundreds. And now, right in front of me, I've wrecked Ukuri's.

And there's nothing I can do. It's going up in flames.

"Now, if you release your unnatural mental hold over her so she's able to make her own choices, then perhaps something of your career could be salvaged."

Ukuri's lips purse.

"No?" Menavi's nose wrinkles in a suppressed snarl. She almost spits her words. "She was unmarked. Ready to be studied, to be helped, to be returned to normal. And now she refuses treatment because of your what? Selfishness?"

Menavi layers accusation upon accusation on Ukuri, and he isn't denying any of it. I feel like I'm falling, plunging off the cliff, and somewhere someone's screaming, but I'm just watching the rocks fly up at my face.

I don't want another person to sacrifice for me.

His silence stretches.

We fly to what feels the midway point between the dreadnoughts and the moon.

Now's my chance.

I can still save him.

I just have to act.

I have to act.

I have to...

Menavi stares daggers as we begin our turn away from the dreadnoughts. "You'll never set foot in a science office again."

"No, wait." I hold up my hands, rudely flashing them my wrists—I'm conscious of their surprise even in the midst of my panic. "No. Um, look, Ukuri is still a great science officer.



He's always focused on results and controls and—and—I'm the one who brings the chaos."

My heart races.

My hands shake.

My voice wobbles as the two science officers stare at me.

"S-so if I go to Arris Central with you, I'll take the chaos away. Ukuri can go back to his science office, and everything can go back to normal."

"No," Ukuri tells me quietly.

"Ah-ah." Menavi holds up her fingers. A smile blooms on her face. "Finally, Noemi, you're expressing your true feelings, and I'm happy to take you away."

EIGHTEEN



# UKURI

Noemi's scared. Unnerved. She's spewing a nightmare of words at Menavi, who watches with glittering eyes.

I need to stop her. I need to get back control. "Noemi, you knew we could never go back to normal."

Noemi clutches her chest. "We have to."

"Come with me." Menavi takes Noemi's elbow and guides her toward the grav tube. "Everything's going to be perfect."

I step in front of them. "No."

"Agency." Menavi twists her lips with satisfaction. "Humans get their own agency. Remember? She wants to separate from you."

Noemi hesitates, then nods.

That micromovement stabs me deep in the chest. "We may not meet again."

"I'm sorry, Ukuri, but we should never have met in the first place."

My chest squeezes. Inside, it feels like liquid streams out, hitting the inside of my rib cage with enough force to bore a hole. "No, I suppose I'm the one who must apologize."

"Stand aside." Menavi moves around me. "I'll deal with you later."

I let them walk around me.

My blades move in my forearms, the edges piercing the atmosphere. I've used them so much recently, the coldness feels familiar. And yet, I can't slash my way through this problem. I need clarity.

"And you send Ukuri back to the dreadnought," Noemi tells Menavi, trying to twist to the command console. "Go now, while there's no laser fighting."

"What? Why?"

Noemi strains against Menavi's insistent tugs. "So he can go back to his science office."

Oh.

Ah.

Realization comes upon me in a sudden shock. The movement in my chest is very much like a stopped heart taking its first beat, and the swell of heat as cold fluid gives way to warm vitality. I step in front of them once more. "Noemi, separating from me will not cause me to be restored as the *Spiderwasp* science officer."

She stops. "It won't?"

"Of course it won't." Menavi gives a strangled laugh. "How was that ever a question?"

"But I thought... If I went with you...then he..."

Thank the seven suns.

Noemi's insightful, drawing connections where I don't see them, and in this case, she's made a leap the rest of Arris would not take.

All I know for sure is that she doesn't wish to separate.

My relief almost makes me sick.

"Ukuri's betrayed the very tenets of science," Menavi tells her, as if her reasons have anything to do with Noemi's. "He's performed mad science on your body, injected his own fluids without controls, and tried to hoard you as a specimen in the most invasive and permanent way."

Noemi's lips part. "But isn't there any way to turn it around? Forgive him?"

"No. Why are we having this conversation? You should both be taking a nice, long, restful nap. Isn't anyone else tired? I'm tired."

I draw Noemi back to me.

Menavi resists, then lets Noemi go with a huff. She rubs her forehead as if she's staving off a headache. "This is ridiculous."

I hold both Noemi's hands in mine. "Am I nothing if not a science officer?"

"No, you're not nothing. But that is who you are." Noemi's wide-eyed, certain. "And I can't take that away from you."

Her faith is a lance. It pierces the fog.

I'm not beaten yet. This fight for our future is only beginning.

"You can't take his position away from him because I am taking it away from him." Menavi strides to a medical reprocessor and types in commands. "For his own safety and yours. You're both unreasonable. The proof will show up in any scan. He's mentally unfit to do science."

Any scan?

Any brain scan?

Noemi's eyes widen.

Yes. Of course. This is a fight of logic, and I will win it with proof. "Actually, Menavi, I can become as emotionless as my baseline scan on command. Where's your medical reprocessor?"

"Right here." She removes a small tube of gel, rubs her head, and palms it like she's going to wait until her headache gets worse to eat it. "But you have no time to prove anything."

The ship's communication console dings. "Captain Falkion of the *Spiderwasp* to Menavi."

“Grr. What now? Fine, you have five clicks to prove something.” She leans into the control console. “Accept transmission.”

A small central viewscreen changes to a close-up of Falkion on the bridge, triumphant. “We’ve captured the fugitive human lost by your science officer.”

Ah. He found Zeerah? No wonder he’s so cheerful. Everything’s finally going well. He’s inspecting the contentious Vanadisan base. The *Spiderwasp* has undergone relatively little damage considering the strength of the enemy fleet, so he’ll probably receive a commendation. Now he’s ridding himself of its last illicit passenger.

I input the memorized formula of my emotion-controlling draughts into Menavi’s medical reprocessor.

Soon my situation will turn around as well.

Menavi’s brows pinch together. “So?”

“So come and collect her before I lose my patience and cut both her arms off.”

“Why in the seven suns would I do that?”

Falkion chokes. “Because she’s a human.”

“And?”

“Zeerah’s one of your precious specimens.”

“No.”

“You practically commandeered my dreadnought! We took fire in the backup engineering bay because you’re obsessed.”

“I’m not obsessed.” Menavi laughs breathily, wipes her mouth, takes another breath. “Not with her. She’s an uninfected human. There’s an entire planet of humans just like her.”

Falkion swells up. “You come get her right now, or I will kill her!”

Noemi squeaks.

“I will rip out her belly strings and use them as an instrument! I will—”

“Wait!” Noemi waves urgently. “Can I talk to her?”

“How will talking get her off my ship?”

“I just want to see that she’s okay.”

He shakes his head, flexes his fingers, and finally turns to look behind him.

The screen goes blank.

“Ah. He hung up.” Menavi stands, exits the console. “They do that sometimes.”

That’s a little odd. Captain Falkion is proper in his communications protocol, usually. He has to be, with his age.

“Can we call back?” Noemi asks.

“No.” Menavi returns to me, jumpy and irritated. “It’s been five clicks.”

“Yes.” I press the button. The medicinal liquid dispenses into my sample cup.

“You could drop us off and pick up Zeerah. She’d love to reunite with our shipmates. Everything would go back to normal.”

“What is normal?” Menavi asks philosophically.

“This is.” I hand her the cup. “Liquid normal. Check it with a scanner. Perhaps it will require a slight adjustment based on recent events, but this type of draught has kept me at baseline for kortans.”

Menavi sniffs the liquid, then takes a taste. Her nose wrinkles, and she hands it back. “Oof, that’s potent. You’ve been dosing yourself with this for kortans?”

“Check my scans. I can be just as emotionless as before I met Noemi.”

“Chemically identical,” Noemi chimes in.

Menavi side-eyes my sample cup, then opens her palm. The small nodule of headache medicine lies there. She rolls it

across her palm one way, then back using her thumb.  
“Chemically, huh?”

Unease prickles on the back of my neck.

Something’s not right.

Is it on the viewscreens?

Maybe our dreadnoughts are too still, or the Vanadisan fleet is moving in too close. Captain Falkion didn’t mean to cut off our communication.

Or our ship is too quiet.

Pyke should be chanting the thousand mantras, practicing forms, sharpening his blades.

I don’t know what it means, added together.

But the unease grips me.

It grips me so hard that as Menavi reaches out and touches my shoulder, I have to force myself not to move. “May I see Noemi’s bites on your shoulder?”

I slide my index finger into my collar. My skinsuit parts, revealing my gray skin to her cold eyes.

Noemi’s teeth form an interesting tattoo. It’s not disturbing like an Arrisan’s mating mark. It’s cute, as if I were gnawed on by a baby animal trying to convince the brutal, uncaring world that she’s fierce.

Menavi moves and pinches my skin.

Then she sighs and leans close. “I hate to say this, but I don’t think anything can be ‘normal’ for you two again.”

A sting pricks my neck.

I jerk back, clapping my hand over the sting. “What was...?”

My tongue goes numb.

Menavi holds up the empty nodule. The needle’s so tiny, it must be a microsyringe. “Get some rest, Ukuri. It’s a long trip back to the Science Center.”



No.

No, no.

I pull my hood over my head. The edges melt together and trigger the impenetrable seal—too late.

I stagger forward.

Have to...stop her...

My blades move sluggishly in my forearms.

Have to...protect...

My knees hit the floor without a sound.

The ship rotates around me.

Everything goes black.

---

Noemi

Ukuri collapses in front of me.

The sample cup bounces off the invisible floor and splatters blue liquid.

Shock roots me to the spot.

I want to go to him.

But my legs don't move.

They're waiting for some signal, some external order.

Permission.

I know what happened. Menavi touched Ukuri's neck. He clapped his hand over the spot, pulled on his hood, and collapsed.

But my brain twists in confusion.

Menavi drops her empty syringe in the medical reprocessor's waste area. "Help me move his body to a pod, will you?"

It's a release.

I let out my breath in a gasp. "Did you kill him?"

"Of course not. I'm curing him."

She turns and focuses on me.

I step back. "Of?"

"His tiredness." She smiles. "Blades and science officers are chronically underrested. Lack of rest causes all sorts of health problems."

"Oh?"

"You should rest too. You've had a lot of excitement on that moon. You must be tired."

"I slept a lot." I take another step back. "Ukuri stood guard. I'm not tired in the least."

“Are you sure? I hope you’ll reconsider. Won’t you reconsider, Noemi?”

My hands and legs tremble. My belly goes numb. “Or else you’ll kill me?”

“What? No. I’m going to help you relax. Why does everyone think I’m a killer?” Her eyes glitter. “Anyway, I don’t need to kill Ukuri. The review board will do that.”

“That sounds bad.”

“So was what he did to you. We both know you didn’t really consent.”

“But you promised.” I take another step back.

I’m almost even with the grav tube entrance now. Menavi hasn’t moved, but her skinsuit has those superjump assists in them, so she doesn’t have to move until she wants to snatch me.

I suck in a harsh breath. “You said you wouldn’t do anything without our consent.”

“I didn’t.”

I choke, gesture at Ukuri’s lumpy form. “That was without our consent.”

“He’s my science officer. His consent doesn’t matter.” She scratches an eyebrow. “Look, knocking you out is just for convenience, to save us all time. It’s a long flight, I say the wrong things, and you don’t need that stress.”

I pull on my hood. The display slides between us like a shield. Menavi’s distance, heat signature, and heart rate print along the sides. Useful statistics, if I knew how to use them.

“You knocked out the others.”

“No, they’re just resting.”

“So they’ll hear me if I scream?”

“Why would you scream? Let’s go together and see them.”

My guts churn with sticky blackness. “You promised Inga you wouldn’t do anything without our permission.”

“I didn’t.” She crosses her arms, then sighs. “Well, okay, yes, I did have to tranquilize Pyke. That was an accomplishment. Blades are almost impossible to catch by surprise. The others were happy to lie down. They crawled right into their pods.”

“You lied.”

“No! Everything I’ve said is true. Inga will wake up on Arris Central surrounded by her friends. Why are we having this awkward standoff?”

“You tell me.” My heart thunders. My palms sweat in the skinsuit gloves. *Don’t comply.* “You go check on the others. I’ll stay right here.”

“Well...” She takes a deep breath, twists her lips. “The problem is that I can’t have you formulating the antidote.”

“There’s an antidote?”

Menavi freezes.

Then, like an automaton coming back to life, she smiles more broadly. “Okay, Noemi, I can see you’re still traumatized by your early formative memories with Ukuri. He’s not even conscious and you’re fawning all over him, pushing down your own desires to make him happy. We have to break his hold.”

She punches a code into the medical reprocessor, humming.

My heart throttles like a pre-Contact race car.

Stop her. I have to stop her.

She’s going to—

How?

How can I stop her?

I’m the only one conscious on her spaceship. There’s no one to call for help.

She turns around—already!—and eases toward me, palms down, her voice low and soothing. “Just relax, Noemi. The

nightmare will soon be over.”

I stumble backward.

She superjumps across the floor and latches on to my left arm.

I thrash.

She clamps my elbow, traps my gloved hand. Somehow, she retracts my glove against my will. Cool air wafts across the back of my hand. “Just...relax...”

The ship abruptly shudders like it’s run aground.

The force knocks us apart.

“Wha—” Menavi says.

There’s a sickening pop.

Gravity fails.

We fly across the control room and slam into the wall.

Hull breach.

NINETEEN



# NOEMI

A ship without artificial gravity is very uncomfortable.

Objects pummel me, the full impact absorbed by my skinsuit. Warnings flash on my hood display too fast to read. Atmosphere loss, pressure loss, radiation exposure. A siren fades in and out. In the midst of my microcosmic fight with Menavi, I forgot we were still in the middle of a battlefield, and unlike the science office on the dreadnought, insulated by layers upon layers of floors and Arrisans and guns, a single stray laser maybe sliced our hull right in half.

There's a high-pitched whine and then another unsettling pop.

My stomach lurches.

I slam into the floor of the control room. Objects fall on top of me with ragged clatters.

Pain stabs my left hand. I scream.

The object rolls off.

Agony walks up my hand in throbbing waves.

I lie on the floor and pant.

Gravity's back.

Crashing echoes beneath me as equipment in the hold slides and settles. My floor trembles.

And then it's silent.

My hood's atmosphere gauge rises back to normal.

Good. The breach is plugged.

A heavy unit pins me to the floor. My skinsuit compensates so I can still breathe. Oh, it's the stupid food reprocessor. As if I don't already hate it enough, now it's trying to crush me.

I wriggle forward, half out.

Menavi's foot sticks out of the communication console.

She wasn't wearing her hood. She's probably unconscious from the hull breach.

Ukuri was wearing his hood, so, he'll be fine.

He has to be.

Arrisan skinsuits are designed to keep people alive in catastrophic hull breaches.

He has to be fine. Surely.

Fuzig's voice echoes from the wall viewscreen. "Hello? Is anyone still alive? Hmph. If you're all dead, I might as well blast you again."

Another voice trills, and my implant translates. *"If you blast the ship again, it will obliterate the contents and you won't be able to recover your favorite specimens."*

*"The arch chancellor is satisfied with our results, so who cares? All that matters is capturing Ukuri's expression as his empire crumbles to dust."* Fuzig switches to Arrisan Standard. "Ukuri? Will your dead body float past my viewscreen with your last expression frozen in shock?"

The ship is silent.

Menavi's foot is still.

I don't want Fuzig to blast us again.

No one is coming to rescue me. "I'm alive."

"Ukuri?"

"No."

"Show yourself, worthless Arrisan."



I force in a deep breath and heave the food reprocessor off my back. My suit helps me, lightening the weight so it falls backward with a shattering sound.

Nutrient cubes are back on the menu, boys.

Pain needles my throbbing left hand. Broken? I wiggle my fingers. Ow.

My flexing draws the skinsuit down over my swollen skin. It compresses the awful throbs into a dull, persistent ache.

The walls are gray and opaque now. The glass-like images of nearspace are all gone. Fuzig's face appears on one single viewscreen in the middle of the walls.

He sees me, even though my hood is down, and his mouth clacks in recognition. "Ah, Patient 81. Prove yourself useful."

*"Fuzig, sir, the lasers are ready to fire on your command."*

*"Ah, no, Patient 81 survived,"* Fuzig whistles. "Where's that so-called science officer, Ukuri?"

I peer over the wreckage. If Menavi's stuffed in the control console, he's...

Ah, there's a body bobbing inside the grav tube. I slide across the debris, nearly face-planting, and catch my balance on the edge with my injured hand.

Excruciating pain blossoms. I can't breathe. Tears well in my eyes.

Ow.

"Where is he? Don't make me blast you."

Get over it. Hurry.

I suck in a breath, then another. The pain recedes to a tolerable throb. Using my good arm, I ease Ukuri's limp body out of the wonky grav tube and drag him onto the floor tiles.

Fuzig squints. "Is that him? He shouldn't be injured in a skinsuit."

"No, he's just, um, lost control of his, ah, senses."

“He’s stunned?” Fuzig chuckles. “Of course he is! But his despair is only beginning. The arch chancellor has prepared a show.”

“Sure, let me get something to wake him up.”

The medical reprocessor’s gone.

Uh-oh.

It could be lost in the piles, or... I peer over the ledge.

The neat, compartmentalized hold below has gelatinized into a debris pool.

Oh, that’s not good.

Better to search up here and hope for the best.

*“Fuzig? Our research is complete, but we could still use those specimens.”*

*“For?”*

*“Anything. More research. Wall decorations.”*

*“Wall decorations... Yes. Very well. Tow their ship into the dreadnought. I’ll take what I want from them after the show.”*

That’s not creepy or anything.

Fuzig makes an impatient sound. “Lesser, prop him up. He must watch, helpless to save any of his fellow Arrisans.”

I roll Ukuri onto my good arm and lever him upright. My suit assists me, activating extra muscles.

Ooh.

Yes, I’m as gangly as a long-legged crane, but I can get used to this. My skinsuit is designed to interface with an implant, and it feels like I’m finally figuring out the right way to activate it.

I prop Ukuri against the outer wall of the grav tube and orient his hood on Fuzig’s viewscreen. If Fuzig can see into his hood, the black surgical lenses hovering above his nose will obscure his closed eyes.

Ukuri’s lax mouth falls open. A soft snore emerges.

Uh-oh.

“What’s that he’s saying?” Fuzig makes an impatient noise. “Move out of the way, lesser.”

I reluctantly move aside.

“Ah, Ukuri.” Fuzig expands his paddle-like hands to show a hallway near the *Spiderwasp* bridge. The narrow passage is blackened and charred. “Look who’s in your battleship. Who is the conqueror now?”

Ukuri snores deeply.

“Ha-ha, yes! Groan with sorrow as you look upon your inevitable doom.”

Whew.

While Fuzig revels, I poke under debris around the wall where the medical reprocessor used to be. Scientific equipment from the lower hold has been thrown up to our floor. Wouldn’t it be lucky if I came across a portable medical scanner? It’s not impossible, surely...

Menavi’s foot twitches.

I go ice cold.

Did I just imagine that?

Her foot twitches again, and there’s movement in the control console.

Oh, no.

I stumble and fall on my crunched hand—agony—and dig in the debris. The big wall-unit medical reprocessor really isn’t here. It—there! Oh, thank God. I get my suit under it, lift with the assists. The reprocessor clunks onto its side. The viewscreen is cracked but it responds to my touch. Yes! The last drug reprocessed was a human tranquilizer.

Ugh.

I scroll back. Ukuri’s emotion-suppressing draught...there! An Arrisan tranquilizer.

But how can I make an antidote?

I don't know medical formulas or tables that would tell me how to counteract—

A disembodied voice talks to me in Arrisan Standard inside my brain. *This is the medical antidote to the Arrisan tranquilizer.* Words, formulas, and tables appear like magic inside my mind.

What? Seriously?

I type the unfamiliar Arrisan Standard strings into the medical reprocessor, and it dispenses a tiny vial of maroon liquid. Its properties display inside my hood. All I have to do is get it to Ukuri and he'll wake up. My view helpfully zooms in to a minuscule button that pops out a needle when I'm ready to inject it.

Do... Do I have the knowledge of the universe at my synapse tips?

I sit back on my heels and stare at the dull gray wall.

And then I look harder.

Lights twinkle. Ships, planets. Distances, velocities, intersect paths. It's not the beautiful visuals of transparent glass, but a functional navigator's screen superimposed by my hood display and summoned, controlled, manipulated by my implant.

I'm like a god.

The ships are neatly labeled. We've been harpooned by a small Vanadisan drone and are being dragged back to the *Spiderwasp*. Which is where I most wanted to be. But not like this.

A shadow falls over me.

I spin.

Menavi stands an arm's length away.

Horror jolts me.

Ukuri's antidote drops out of my hand and rolls onto the medical reprocessor.

Oh, no.

I scoop it up again, clasp it to my heart.

She tilts her head to read the screen. Her hood is on now, but inside, her eyes are red and bruised, and dried blood crusts under her nostrils and on her chin. Despite her injuries, she still woke up and silently crossed the debris field.

She holds out her hand.

The vial of human tranquilizer rests on her palm.

I slither back until I hit the wall.

“Let’s trade.” Her voice is thick and squeaky. She licks her lips. “Your antidote for my tranquilizer.”

*Do not comply.*

I tighten my fist. “Don’t you have more important things to worry about?”

She looks over her shoulder at the only working viewscreen.

Fuzig’s voice overlays a jerky video of Arrisans screaming and running down fog-darkened hallways.

“See us now, Ukuri, burrowing inside your dreadnought? Hear the screams of your compatriots as they flee from our chaos gas? And when we crack open the bridge, I’ll have a very special surprise for you.”

Menavi returns to me. “There’s nothing we can do.”

“You’re not even going to try?”

“I’ll try by staying out of the way.” A smile colors her voice, but there’s no expression on her face, as if the wire connecting them has been severed. “You should get into a pod for your own safety, Noemi.”

A cold shiver runs through me. “What’s wrong with you?”

“My inaction is perfectly logical. The captain is trained to withstand the chaos gas the Vanadisans used at the Arsenal.”

“This gas is supposed to be more powerful.”

“And?”

Behind her, Vanadisan troops position a big land cannon against the barricaded doors to the *Spiderwasp's* bridge.

Menavi holds out the tranquilizer like a vial of hemlock. “He’s one of the youngest officers to earn the title of captain, and a blade. He’ll give them a real fight.”

---

Zeerah

“Let me out of here!” The deranged, bloodied, nude Arrisan captain bashes his blue-caged forearms against the seamless wall. “Weaklings. Featherheads. Cowards. How dare you knock us out? I’ll give you a real fight!”

Nobody responds.

He beats the wall and screams a battle cry.

My ears ring.

The officers who’ve regained consciousness cluster in the center of the room, backs together and oriented outward, as horrified by the wall viewscreens Fuzig left on.

Viewscreens that show their own ship shooting chunks off the second dreadnought.

They twist their wrists in the electric manacles and mutter violent epithets with every flash of a laser.

The air has a weird nasty pong, like summer in the boys’ locker room, the funk of forgotten shoes mixed with moldy, unwashed jock straps. It’s eye watering, especially for the Arrisans, who alternate between trying to hold their breath and shaking their heads.

Except for the captain.

“Don’t leave me in here like I’m a helpless lesser!”

His crew glances at me. Malevolently. Like this is my fault.

I keep as far away from them as possible.

Falkion screams, and abruptly sinks to the floor with the rest of his crew.

I keep my head down.

The truth is, I’m a coward.

I admit it.

I have big dreams but small hands, and while they may be good for squeezing into the backside of control panels, most of the time they're too small for bailing the buckets of sewage that comes pouring in when my big dreams, invariably, pull the lid off the storm.

That's why I prefer to run away quietly.

I inch worm until my back is against the control console. It's flush with the wall, hidden in the Arrisan style, but I can read the subtle engineering signs.

Our Vanadisan guard trills something.

He's looking at me.

Uh-oh.

I abruptly lower my head and sniffle, pretend to wipe tears on the backs of my hands. My electric manacles buzz.

He switches to Arrisan Standard. "Arrogant? Ha. Now cry." He turns away from the viewscreen, distracted by something happening behind him.

Yes, it probably was my arrogance that led to me getting caught. Arrogance and bad luck.

But the way the Vanadisians have been talking, I'm fifty-percent convinced they've somehow mistaken me for another Arrisan. Even though I'm a tall Black woman, and I'm also the only person in this room who, when my skinsuit was zapped off, had the forethought to be wearing underwear.

Me? An Arrisan?

It would make me laugh if I wasn't so sure I was about to die.

My heart thumps.

I worm my finger back into the panel.

Navigation screens are notorious for coming loose at inappropriate times. Their wires are thick and spread out all over the ship, plus the variable thicknesses mean their casings are always given a lot of empty space.



And nobody ever wants to mess with navigation. Guns, yes, security and maintenance, all the time. Communications, sure. But without navigation, the ship is a floating tomb.

I know. Because off and on during my reckless poop storm leaving Humana, I was flying one.

“Hey.” A crew guy I suddenly hate nudges the captain, rousing him from his morose stupor, and jerks his chin at me. “What’s it doing?”

“Who cares? A human is nothing but a tool of the enemy. She’s of no use to us.”

My blood is normal, actually. Always has been, always will be.

But otherwise, yep, that’s right, boys, I’m just a useless human. A useless human who needs a little more leverage to pop out this corner...

*Pop.*

All silver eyes turn to me.

I freeze.

“Oh, arrogant Arrisans?” A Vanadisan sashays up behind our guard and singsongs. “Want fun? We have fun torture for you.”

The Arrisans all look at the seamless wall where there used to be a door.

The Vanadisans have threatened us with torture several times.

I don’t think it’s an empty threat, and I’m not waiting around to find out.

Oh, the guard is looking away from us, up at his new friend.

Now.

I shove the navigation panel aside and scoot backward inside.

Darkness encloses me.

Without a hood display, it's really hard to see. My electronic manacles catch on the wires as I squirm furiously. I have to be careful I don't get startled by a drop.

Out of habit, I snag the edge of the panel with my toe to close it after me.

The panel bounces off the captain's furious face. "That's how you've been creeping around on my dreadnought!"

My heart rockets into my throat with an acrid burn.

He crowds in.

I fling myself backward, banging my elbows and shoulders and knees and head.

He wriggles into the tube after me. "Get back here, you—"

The wires abruptly fall away.

My stomach clenches.

I fall backward, down a full level. *Wham*. The breath leaves my body. I open my mouth, trying to suck it in. Air. In, air! I take it in with a huge gasp. Oh, H. That was close. I have to be careful without the skinsuit to absorb gravity.

A terrible noise sounds above me.

Oh, no.

I roll over on my stomach and worm down the dark pipe, bumping my forehead and chin. This is suspiciously narrow. It's too hard to see if a dead end lies ahead, so I just have to hope and pray and hope some more. My heart beats a million times a second.

*Crash*. The captain grunts, belly flopping like a water cow. His blue forceshields glow like elbow-length oven mitts. He coughs. "I ordered you to get back here."

I wriggle for all I'm worth through the narrowing aperture. Crud, my hips are too wide. You've got to be kidding me. It's wide enough on the other side. I strain and squeeze.

"Human, stop!"

The aperture releases me, and I slide through, roll over onto my back, and push with my legs to get real speed.

“Curse you, useless...”

*Smash. Bang. Clatter.*

He smashes through the narrow aperture, bursting welds from sheer force of will. He lands on top of me, using his weight to hold down my legs.

No, no, no.

I thrash.

He pins my hips, shoulders, oven-mitting me into place until our bodies are aligned and he’s terrifying gray brutality to what must be my scared-rabbit face.

“Lesser, take me to the bridge.”

“I can’t take you to the bridge,” I hiss, still trying to inch out from under his stupid weight. “We’re a floor down now, and I don’t have a map.”

“You’ve been skulking around on my dreadnought for over a standard year. Use your scheming human mind to get us back onto the bridge.”

“I can’t. And anyway, that’s where the Vanadisans are.”

“Obviously! I have to fight them.”

I hate this man. I hate this man. I hate this man. “Even if I could get you in there, you’re bound head to foot. Did you forget the huge cannon that knocked you out the first time? When you had your skinsuit and your blades free and everything?”

“Get moving, or I’ll drag you there with my own teeth!”

Panic overtakes my fury. “Shush! These walls aren’t soundproofed—”

The wall breaks over us.

I flail.

His weight lifts off me.

I roll over and scramble deeper into the—

Feathery hands close around my ankles and drag me out.

Dust and shattered metal litters the bare floor. I sit against the wall in my underwear, dusty and torn.

The captain snarls and thrashes. His forcesshields brighten and buzz. He stiffens and drops, electronically hogtied. The Vanadisans kick him. He screams like an insane person and tries to bite them.

It goes about how I'd expect.

A whimper tears from my throat. "Stupid, stupid, stupid Arrisans."

A Vanadisan peers at me, then turns and trills. Another Vanadisan comes over, and a third.

My whimpers give way to panic.

Vanadisans in front of me. Vanadisans to the sides. There's nowhere to run.

Is this torture?

Or worse?

One leans down and speaks in halting Arrisan Standard. "You? Burned Arrisan? Or moon human?"

Oh, they've figured me out.

I bite my lip.

He straightens, and the group shares whistles, but it's different now, more knowing and predatory.

I do not like the change of tone.

The crowd leave the captain prone on the ground, groaning, and cluster around me. One leans down in front of me and shakes a cylinder.

Oh, no. "Yes, ha-ha, guys, I too hate the Arrisans. Hate, hate, hate them."

The Vanadisan holds up the cylinder, frowns, and bangs it against the broken wall.

I strain against my manacles. “Let me out and I’ll celebrate their defeat with you.”

The Arrisan captain coughs and spits a wad of blood. “Ungrateful worm.”

“You killed off ninety-eight percent of my planet in one shift, and I’m the ungrateful worm?”

“You are.”

“If I kill off ninety-eight percent of your body, you know what would be left? Your hair. Maybe fingernails. And then I’ll ask you to thank me.”

“We’ll fight for you when the Harsi arrive—”

A Vanadisan kicks him in the gut.

He moans.

“And when will that be?” I inch my feet under me to make an explosive leap over the Vanadisan crowd. “Any time now.”

“Could...be...”

I lunge.

The Vanadisans look like giant feather dusters, but their soldiers push me back like down-covered iron cages. One soldier rests a hand on my shoulder. A not-so-subtle reminder that I’m not going anywhere.

My heart drops from blind panic back to normal thudding fear.

“Weak human,” the captain mutters.

Fury snaps. “Do the H-aliens have extra fragile hearing? Because I don’t see you fighting off any of them with bully words and incoherent screaming.”

The captain seethes, his voice starting low and ending with his favorite scream. “Get. Off. My. Ship!”

“Let me off,” I agree heartily, formulating my next escape plan. “First opportunity, I’m gone. Zip. Out of here.”

The Vanadisan bangs the cylinder against the wall again. Another one hoots and taps a safety switch on the side. He

makes a low “Ohhhh” sound while the feathers on all the others shiver.

Then he aims the can at my face.

*Hiss.*

A stream of stinky warthog urine squirts in my eyes.

I hunch into the wall, coughing and choking.

It stings my eyes, coats my mouth. Uck. Disgusting. I cough and hack, spit and shudder. It’s wet and nasty and dripping off my nose. The worst.

The Vanadisans are unsettlingly quiet, watching me with glittering eyes.

I wriggle out of the cloud. It’s similar to the gas they pumped earlier, but a thousand-percent worse.

“Sexy?” a Vanadisan asks.

“What? No.” I scrape my tongue against my teeth, spit the coating. “That was super nasty. How the heck could that be sexy?”

The Vanadisan whistle-laugh. “Lusteal.”

“Wait, that’s lusteal?”

The others hoot softly.

“Oh, you took a shortcut through the wrong dark alley.” I laugh, hysterical with relief, and try to wipe the weird liquid on my shoulder, soaking it up with my string camisole. “I don’t respond to that stuff. It goes inert in my body, or whatever. You can’t spray it into me. I’m immune.”

The Vanadisan rises, sniggering. “We did not spray for you.”

Huh?

The crowd shuffles to make a direct opening from me to the captain.

Despite his injuries, he’s forced himself upright, onto his knees. He shakes his head, coughs violently, shakes his head again.

And then he looks at me.

My breath sticks in my throat.

His pupils dilate until the black eats all but a thin line of silver.

Cut lips pull back to expose his bloody teeth.

There's something behind his teeth in his mouth. Dangling. Shadowed.

And then he lunges.

TWENTY





# NOEMI

**T**he forty clicks Menavi and I have been in this standoff feels like forty years.

“Trade me.” Menavi’s eyes glitter. Her voice sounds mushy with extra spit. “I’ll set you free.”

Suddenly, the lights flicker and dim on her small, harpooned scientific vessel, but the properties—this dose, how fast and long it will put me to sleep—print on my hood display unwavering.

From the wall viewscreen, Fuzig exclaims with dismay. *“I’ve lost visuals.”*

*“Part of the communication array broke off, but Ukuri can still see you, sir.”*

*“But I must see his face as I destroy everything he cares about.”*

Ukuri’s slumped against the outer casing of the grav tube. The ship shudders again. He slides down and then sprawls, his skinsuit-covered hand falling lax and brushing the edge of the loft flooring.

“The bad Arrisan urges will never take control again,” Menavi coos. “You’ll only want to have a nice human husband and babies and make an ordinary human family.”

My heart thumps. “What about Ukuri?”

“He won’t bother you again.” Her voice goes even colder. “I promise.”

Words bubble up in my throat. *I want him to bother me again. You don't understand anything. Please, just listen to my words. How can I make you believe me?* So many, so fast and so hard. I choke on them.

As with the neurologists, and my aunts, and my shipmate friends, I just have to convince them all that...

No.

No, no.

Wait.

Trying to convince them is how I've gotten into this mess.

And this mess is all of my own making.

Ukuri should never have been tranquilized. From the moment I took his bite until the moment I insisted he remain a science officer, I led him, step by step, into Menavi's trap.

I led him because I was afraid.

Afraid to take what I wanted.

Afraid to insist I deserve it.

Afraid to accept the full responsibility for the consequences.

I want Ukuri.

And if that ruins his life, that's outside my control. What Menavi and the others think is also outside my control. I've tried every argument, and they don't hear my words. My desires aren't right. My experience is invalid. If I don't fit into their mold, there's something wrong with me.

I've never fit into anyone's mold.

And I'm done trying to convince anyone that I'm trying.

"Okay, I'll trade." I hold out my empty, throbbing hand, Ukuri's antidote still clenched tightly to my chest. "But I can't pick anything up with this hand."

"You injured your hand?" She sounds genuinely concerned.

“You did, when you took off my glove right before the crash. So set down the tranquilizer and I’ll make the trade with my good hand.”

“Noemi, if you’re injured... Yes, I can see you are. Forget this game and open your skinsuit so I can scan the extent of your damage.”

“The trade.”

“Noemi, really—”

“Or I’ll hurt myself worse trying to get away from you.”

She blinks rapidly, her brain recalculating. A line of saliva drips from her lips to the inside of her hood.

All my muscles tense.

My skinsuit twitches. Arms, legs. Sensing my impulses, poised to augment them.

I rest the antidote against my injured palm—ow—and think to the skinsuit, *Magnetize*. Without visibly changing, the hood display shows it as attached. I rotate my palm, whimpering. It stays stuck.

Perfect.

“Ow,” I say. “Ugh. It hurts so bad. Can’t you just set yours down already?”

“Okay, whatever makes you most comfortable.” She sets the human tranquilizer on the medical scanner screen with a small clink, then reaches for me. “Now, let me see—”

Go.

I yank my injured hand back, lightning fast, while my good hand launches forward and sweeps the tranquilizer. It catapults at Menavi’s face.

She bats it away.

It bounces across the floor and disappears into the hold below.

Yes!

“What...?” She blinks. “Did you just...?”

Yes.

Yes, I did.

Ukuri's antidote is still stuck to my injured hand.

She's between me and him.

"Aw, now I'll just have to go and make another one." She leans over the medical reprocessor screen.

I run.

She jumps up and feints.

I dive away.

My skinsuit legs fling me across the debris as if I'm dancing across running water. Focusing on what I want to do makes the suit do it. I race onto the scaffolding around the inner walls of the ship, and the suit keeps me in the center, perfectly balanced. At the far side, I look back.

Menavi rises, her shoulders slumped, and cracks her head from side to side. "Don't run, Noemi."

The disheveled hold yawns below.

But through the mess, my implant identifies escape routes. Hidden tunnels. Pockets of cover.

I drop.

My suit squishes me into a tight cylinder.

I slip through a body-sized hole with a whoosh and am swallowed.

Rushing air tips things, and the passage closes behind me.

I hit bottom and slither between shifting equipment, push off the wall, and squirm deeper. Equipment clatters and glass powder shimmers. I roll under a block and come face-to-face with Yumi.

I jump back.

Her frozen terror matches mine.

Menavi paces on the scaffolding. "Noemi?"

I go cold.

In the distance, Fuzig orders his people to repair our communications, then taunts Ukuri based on his assumption of Ukuri's dismay. He's up there, taking over an Arrisan dreadnought, living his best life.

Down here, I am a cockroach, unkillable, in the shadows. I am a cobra, waiting for my moment to slither away.

Menavi steps off the scaffold. *Crunch*. Off to my left, above me. The hood prints coordinates, superimposes a fuzzy guess of her outline based on her footsteps.

"This area isn't safe for humans."

She walks over me. Something falls past, clattering to the ground by my good hand.

I hold my breath.

She stops at my feet.

"Your trauma response is so unhealthy." She continues toward the wall. Whew. "It's making you suffer instead of letting me heal you."

I slide backward into a hollow made between Yumi and another frozen shipmate. My injured palm hits a bump. Hmm? Oh! Ukuri's antidote is still magnetized to my injured palm. Thank goodness. I unstick and tuck it inside my skinsuit, momentarily breaking the seal. The hood shimmers and then the seal returns.

While Menavi's distracted, I can, maybe, circle around the other scaffolding and get to Ukuri...

"I only want to help you."

She's coming back toward me.

My heart jitters. I must have made a noise.

She drops into the gap and crouches at the other end of the permastasis cases. Her eyes meet mine. Caught! "Give your body to me."

Fear strikes me like lightning.

“No!” I shove Yumi’s case with all my might. I don’t even feel my injured hand. My suit activates. Yumi’s case flips over, flinging my other shipmate the opposite way.

Menavi grabs the case. “My specimens!”

I scramble up to the surface, reach for the scaffolding, and abruptly fall through.

No!

I land on my hip and elbow. My skinsuit absorbs the shock, sending a rough tremor through my torso. I wiggle under an overturned science cart, slither against a half-dislocated wall, and then stop.

*Warning, my hood flashes. Narcostasis gas leak.*

Oh?

The overturned cart maybe isn’t a science cart.

Maybe it’s the side view of a pod.

Noises come from the area where my shipmates are. Menavi’s trying to position padding around them or secure them better.

I crawl over to the pod. Who’s inside? Is it locked? I don’t know how to open this kind of—

My hood highlights the invisible controls and overlays the instructions.

Ooh.

A shiver of excitement runs through me. I follow the visual instructions and turn the lid transparent. Even though the pod has toppled, the people inside still rest against the inner padding, secured by their own internal gravity.

Inga lies on top of Pyke, her hair splayed across his chest. They’re both wearing skinsuits, but not hoods.

I disconnect the narcostasis gas—thanks again to the instructions, implant, and hood—and crack the pod.

Inga and Pyke lurch forward, their gravity giving way to mine, and press against the receding pod lid. They tumble out.

Inga whimpers, grimaces, and pushes on Pyke's shoulder, wiggling his crushing weight off her sternum, then lapsing back to sleep. He sprawls face down against her torso, lifeless except for his even breathing.

Pyke was dosed by the same tranquilizer Menavi used on Ukuri.

I open my skinsuit and remove the antidote.

The world goes fuzzy and the air is weirdly heavy. I slump forward, the taste of narcostasis gas funny on the back of my tongue...

...my skinsuit very quietly whirs, the hood reseals, clearing my suit of the gas.

Oh my God. How could I be so stupid? I just opened my hood in a cloud of leaked narcostasis gas. I'm lucky I didn't lose...

My palm is empty.

No!

The antidote has to be right here. I scramble up. My knee hits the pod.

Clunk.

It echoes, unnaturally loud in the quiet.

I freeze.

Menavi's voice lifts. "You're not getting into anything you shouldn't, are you?"

My heart thunders.

The antidote vial rolls beside my foot.

Oh, thank God.

I snatch it, press the button to eject the needle, and empty the antidote into Pyke's lavender-tattooed shoulder where it meets his thick neck.

Nothing happens.

Inga moans.

“Noemi?” Menavi’s coming this way. “If you’ve disturbed the other patients I’m going to be very, very cross.”

My heart spikes.

The others must be nearby. Two others lie beneath a half-fallen wall. One’s so deep, I can just see the edge. I focus on the closer one and change the lid’s transparency.

Siv’s mouth falls open, teeth shiny with glue, while he snores. Unlike Pyke, who flops like he’s dead, Siv shifts his position. He’s being kept unconscious with only narcostasis gas.

Oh. Where’s the narcostasis gas generator? Ah, attached to his pod. Where’s the Off switch? There’s a leaking hose. I yank, but that only makes the leak bigger.

The generator engine makes a grinding noise and lugs.

Uh-oh.

Menavi lands on the side of Inga and Pyke’s overturned pod. “That’s naughty.”

Fear lances into me. “I didn’t mean it.”

“Yes, you did.” She lunges.

I roll under Siv’s pod.

Menavi shoves debris out of her way and lifts Siv’s superheavy pod over her head “Give up, Noemi.”

She throws Siv’s pod into the wall. *Crash!* The noise is tremendous.

I tunnel under Navlon’s pod.

“You can’t get away.” She throws Navlon’s pod the same way. It flies over my head.

I follow the escape route chartered by my implant through a hole in a divider wall. “You’re going to hurt your own people!”

“Who cares? They’re only Arrisans. You’re my precious specimen, Noemi. One of twenty in the empire, and all mine.” Her head pops through right in front of me. “Gotcha.”



I shriek and kick the wall.

The divider rolls forward. Scanners and screens pop and shatter.

She steps back, steadies it. “Why are you still fighting? I’m going to cure you, I promise. Just go to sleep like the others. When you wake up, everything will be resolved.”

“You’re a liar.”

“You know what’s sad?” Menavi flings the wall away. The path clears between us. “I’m the only one who cares about you.”

I try to crawl away.

She hooks my ankle, drags me out.

My skinsuit palms squeak on the floor.

She grabs my neck and lifts me off my feet. The hold rotates around us. “Look at how well protected my other treasures are. I care for them. I’m going to make them perfectly happy, normal, little humans. You’re going to eat and sleep and have sex with strangers according to your natural human instincts.”

I try to work my hands into her grip. My hood keeps her from choking me but her grip is immovable iron. “I don’t want that.”

“I’ll free you.”

“I don’t want to be free.” I thrash. “I want Ukuri!”

She throws me to the ground, sits on my belly, and pins my hands under her knees.

My injured hand flares back to life.

I scream.

She lifts her knee. “Oh. Sorry.”

I whimper. “All you do is cause me pain.”

“No, that was a legitimate accident, but this isn’t. Sorry.”

She taps my swollen fingers together.

I groan.

The skinsuit peels back from my fingers.

Hot blood rushes in with needles of agony.

I cry.

There should be a limit on how many different ways the same injury can hurt. Hot daggers rake my puffy, bare hand.

“I don’t forgive you.” I twist against her immovable thighs. “Let me go.”

“I’m going to fix you.” She pushes my bare finger into my collar. My hood goes limp, the shield collapsing. The air smells like narcostasis gas and ozone, and I feel light-headed and sick. “Fix everything about you.”

I spit in her face.

It hits the invisible shield of her hood.

She ignores it.

But even if it had gone through, it just would have mixed with the spit shining on her chin, like the froth of rabies.

“I’ll make you pristine again. Pure.” She trails her gloved finger down my taut neck, around Ukuri’s red tattoo, to my shoulder and peels back the skinsuit to look. “We could cut it all off. Saw through the bone. You’ll be the first human freed from an Arrisan bite. The first one to have the connection severed, the tattoo erased.”

“No.”

“I’ll do that for you.” She pulls out the mini syringe, focuses on my unmarked shoulder. “You’ll make history.”

“No!” Rage snaps me upright. I headbutt the vial.

It cracks.

My forehead throbs.

She chokes. “What in the... Oh, you have got to be joking.”

The tranquilizer drips out, splattering my loose suit.

But maybe some of it dispensed against my forehead, because the world wavers, foggy and fuzzy at the edges.

“I can go reprocess yet another.” She peers down on me, the angle making her look even more inhuman, and her lips twist to the side. “You aren’t just going to wait nicely while I go do that, though, are you?”

My legs are numb. My fingertips twitch.

I summon all my strength, force my head to shake.

It rocks back and forth.

Was it decisive? I can only do it once, and I’m so, so tired.

“No, I thought not.” She glances over her shoulder as if she heard something, then down at me again. Her mouth flattens.

The rest is fog.

She sighs. “Well, I didn’t want to do this, but I need you compliant. You’ll understand.”

*Hiss.*

Wet dust sprinkles my face.

Oh, no.

Fire burns up my nostrils and injects an entire load of squirming, angry worms directly into my brain.

Lusteal.

TWENTY-ONE



# NOEMI

I arch and gasp.

Menavi's face comes into sharp focus. Every pore on her bloody, wet gray chin. The rest is hidden by the shadow of the hood.

She stays seated on my belly.

I arch again and collapse with a thump.

It hurts to breathe.

My percentage removed is now shot. Again. By her! It's not fair. She promised to cure me.

"How dare you?" I hiss around welling tears. "How dare you?"

She scratches her brow. "I will remove it. I promise. Just as soon as we figure out how."

I choke with fury.

This was so unnecessary. There's still a bit of fog around the edges of my vision, and I can't feel my legs.

But the brain worm pulls my lips into an agreeable smile.

"Will you stay like a good girl while I get yet another dose of your relaxation medicine?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

I hate that I'm going to obey.

But I will. I need Ukuri. On this, my brain worm and I are in agreement.

Appeasing Menavi is the way I'll get to him.

I'm not so sure of that, but my brain worm is driving now. I no longer get a say. "Oh, yes."

"Wow, I can see why the Vanadisans sprayed you." She stands.

A black shadow moves behind her.

Oh.

Maybe the brain worm and I can work together after all. "Menavi?"

She pauses. "What?"

"Nothing."

Her eyes narrow. "Are you trying to distract me from getting the tranquilizer?"

"No, not that."

"Then what?"

"I'm trying to distract you from the fact that I woke up Pyke."

Her mouth drops open.

His black blade slides in front of her hood.

She leans back from the deadly tip. Skinsuits are impenetrable, but I'm guessing he can still cause her trouble—and my implant helpfully gives me some graphic examples. Ick.

"How can you possibly be awake?" Menavi asks with an awkward, incredulous laugh. "I gave you twice the dose I gave Ukuri."

"Field insomnia."

"I can dispense something that will help you with that."

"You first." His black blade points at a narcostasis gas bag at her feet. His gruff voice is colder than before. "Breathe

deep.”

Menavi rotates her wrists in a calming gesture. “This is all a big misunderstanding.”

“Yes.” Inga steps forward with a slender, crackling, white-tipped stick. “Yours.”

“I was only trying to help. Noemi’s a special case to me.” Menavi sighs, picks up the bag at her feet, and pulls off her hood. “I wasn’t going to do anything to you.”

“Breathe.” Inga’s chin trembles, but her aim is firm.

“But if you’ll only—”

“Pyke?”

Menavi puts the bag to her mouth and goes down on one knee, then the other.

“I’m only trying...to help...”

She pitches forward. Her face smooshes against the floor.

Pyke turns visible as he heaves her body over his shoulder. She groans, already coming out of the narcostasis. He looks up at Inga.

“Put her in our pod,” Inga says.

He hauls her away.

Inga kneels beside me and offers me her hand, then helps me sit up. “You okay?”

The world rotates and then snaps into place. I feel woozy, but my brain worm promises I can walk. “She sprayed me with lusteal.”

“I know.” Inga wrinkles her nose. “At least it’s the pure stuff, not whatever the Vanadisans created. Where’s Ukuri?”

“Upstairs.”

“We’ve got to dig out Siv and Navlon.” She helps me to my feet. “Go fix yourself.”

The brain worm crawls me across the debris field to the grav tube, flings me comically up to the next floor, and drags

me out. My bare, injured hand finally doesn't hurt. Well, it does, but the brain worm helpfully dulls my pain to the point that I barely notice it.

It also tunes out Fuzig's maniacal monologue. The rival scientist has some stamina. My brain worm expertly reprocesses another dose of antidote, rolls Ukuri onto his back, and straddles him. Mimicking Menavi, I tap his lax fingers together to make his gloves recede, then hook his own finger in his collar. His hood falls back, revealing his sleeping face.

I press the antidote to his shoulder just above my bite marks.

He twitches.

I pull off his opaque lenses.

His lashes flutter, then crack open to reveal pained black pupils and white-silver irises. "Noemi? You're ill."

I descend on him. "Cure me."

He lifts his hands to accept me.

It's the brain worm, but we're in agreement for once, and so it's also somehow me. Our actions overlay each other, finally syncing, like another implant learning to work with my alien brain. Our boundaries blend like a heat map. I am more than just me.

My mouth presses kisses to his face, his gray skin, his lips. My greedy fingers work under his parting skinsuit, baring his chest and curling abdomen, his outie belly button, his dark and growing shaft.

"Mine." I nip his chin. "Mine." I graze my teeth over his jaw. "Mine." I tug his ear.

He groans, laces his hands around my waist. "Yours."

My pelvis aligns to his, and his thick cock head dips into my wet entrance.

Yes.

I slide down, taking him to the hilt.



And then I clasp his face, our lips almost touching.  
“Mine.”

His nostrils flare.

He thrusts into me, rocking his hips up, bucking me hard.

Wild.

Uncontrolled.

Highly unscientific.

And we are exactly what we're supposed to be. Me, selfish and possessive and human. And him, arrogant and dedicated and so very Arrisan. He doesn't need my teeth or moans or wildness, but he has them anyway. And because it's him, no matter what I do, he always, always performs.

I grind his lower lip between my teeth, rake my fingernails across his perfect pectoral so hard, it raises red welts. This is how I love him. Not the way I want it for myself, the way I know he wants it. I do that for him because he does the same for me. My nails are sharp and his are soft as a feather. My teeth emboss his shoulders and his teeth clench on a tormented moan. I pin him down and he lifts me up, over and over, until his essence foams up in me and launches me into the champagne-fizzy sky. Bubbles pop in my blood. It's not one of the superorgasms of the past. It's functional and a perfectly adequate release, a healing injection that makes every panting breath clear a few more of the insidious brain spores.

And then it's over.

My elbows tremble. I collapse on his chest. His heart thunders against my palm.

“Yours,” he murmurs, into the quiet.

And then, as my satiation drains to normal baseline, my hand starts to hurt.

---

Ukuri

Noemi lies on my chest.

Everything, in this exact moment, is right.

Except one thing.

“You’re so arrogant, Arrisan!” Fuzig squawks from the distant gray wall. “You think you’re invulnerable? Now you will see. You are a fool of unending magnificence.”

But I’m not even irritated.

I *am* a fool of unending magnificence.

The only annoyance is that it’s taken a man like him to point it out.

And how strange to be locked, once again, into a dream state of being endlessly mocked by one miserable Vanadisan. Will my voice of self-criticism now always come with a nasal twinge?

Only a few clicks have passed since Menavi put me down, but our situation has flipped from safe domination to something precarious.

The ship is a disaster. Gravity failed, which is worse than a simple hull breach. We’re lucky to be alive. Since all our viewscreens are down except the one Fuzig’s using to mock me, I assume the Vanadisans are behind it.

They also must be the ones who dosed Noemi with lusteal.

“You are so stupid,” Fuzig crows. “So blithely idiotic.”

Noemi shifts, then makes a pained whimper.

Hmm?

I rise to a sitting position. “What’s wrong?”

Noemi favors her hand. The bones are crushed.

How did we just have sex without her crying? Without me noticing?

I was coming out of a coma, but that's no excuse. I cage her wrist gently, touching her healthy skin and not the hot red mess.

The Vanadisans are dead.

Dead.

A sort of roaring sound builds in my ears.

I don't recognize the voice that pours out of my throat with a subaudible growl. "Who did this to you?"

Noemi sniffs. "Menavi."

My perfect theory shatters like the unsecured sample glass littering the ground. "She broke your hand?"

"And drugged me." She flicks her fingers at her face, miming the lusteal spray.

The floor tilts.

I don't... I can't...

It's not really possible... "Where is she?"

"Pyke stuffed her in a pod."

Then she is a problem for later. My brain slots it away. I have to—

Volcanic heat breathes at the edges of my consciousness. My blades move in my arms.

Oh, I am more than ready to let them out, and I will.

I will.

But now is not the time for blades.

Menthol invades my veins. The world becomes very small and very cold. I reseal my skinsuit and rotate Noemi's hand at the wrist, completing my visual examination with as little contact as possible. Then I rise. "Explain."

Noemi recites the events since I passed out while I toe through the wreckage, my impervious boots crunching metal shards. How convenient, a portable medical scanner lying atop

a mini bone knitter. I return to her side, put her good hand on the scanner, and ease her injured one in the bone-knitter box.

The box displays what I already knew. Humans have so many bones in their hands, and they really are so very fragile.

Menavi should have known this, if not when she first exposed Noemi's hand to danger, then certainly when she manipulated and exposed it after it was already so badly broken.

Thin needles appear on the screen hovering over Noemi's joints.

She interrupts her retelling. "Is it going to hurt?"

"I've never broken a bone."

The needles plunge in, pinning her joints into place. Her shoulders tense. Smaller needles move the bone fragments, tidying and reconstructing in a long, complex concert. Her shoulders relax in waves. "Oh. I don't feel anything."

"Good."

"Yes. Anyway, Inga and Pyke are digging the others out now." She frowns. "You're quiet. What are you thinking?"

"I don't rightly know." My thoughts are compartmentalized. The science officer has stepped forward, but only to clear the way for the blade, who's now fully awakened. "Perhaps the overriding thought is disbelief."

Her mouth opens, closes. Tiny muscles around her eyes tense. "I'm not going to beg. Whether you believe me or not, it's still true."

"Yes, that's always the case, isn't it?" My amusement returns, burning up the menthol and flowing into my dry throat, energizing my smirk. "The truth doesn't care about feelings. My shock, horror, and disgust have no bearing on the fact that I must now recognize, once and for all, that you and I dwell in a universe filled to the brim with idiots."

Her brows lift.

“It’s really been a process more than a single epiphany. Sure, the average Arrisan can’t think outside his role’s conscription. But the Vanadisans were scientists. How could they disvalue you? They must have gotten too cocky. Surely my clear-eyed Arrisan colleague, my own supposed intellectual superior, a former arena scientist who held the very genetic future of Arris in her clawed hands, would not make this mistake. Surely!”

Noemi pats my shoulder with her good hand. “She betrayed us both.”

The machine beeps. The reconstruction is finished.

I pull out Noemi’s lumpy, swollen hand and spray on an inflammation-calming sticky gel. Stray bits splatter my hand, and the skin warms, then cools.

“If even she cannot see your value, I really do feel, deep down in the marrow of my bones, that there is no one left in this entire universe to look up to. We are alone. An intellectual island of two in a slavering, ego-driven ocean of idiocy.”

She examines her hand, turning it over, inspecting it as carefully as I would. The joints align, her fingers relatively straight. Her lips curve. “I always wanted to live on an island.”

“Good.” I stand, then help her to her feet. “Because I’m not entrusting your welfare to anyone else ever again.”

Pyke steps neatly from the grav tube. Inga’s curled against him. “Don’t move to an island yet. We’ve got a problem.”

And like that, my brain checks off healing Noemi and ticks down to the next item on the list: annihilating everyone who threatens her safety.

Navlon and Siv exit after, yawning and stretching. Their suits reek with narcostasis gas.

Inga checks on Noemi.

Pyke clears an area in front of the one working viewscreen and taps it.

The viewscreen goes black.

Pyke steps back, fingers out in surprise. He didn't expect the transmission to cut.

A new Vanadisan, puffy and somber, delivers a message in Vanadisan.

*“Arrisans of the empire, hear me and despair. I am the Arch Chancellor of the Egg, the first...”*

The titles, as usual for Vanadisan nobility, take up several sentences. I hear them coldly, Noemi so close, I can almost feel her body heat through our suits.

Finally the arch chancellor continues with his message. *“We have harnessed the unstoppable technology of your greatest foe to once more deliver your greatest defeat.”*

The arch chancellor's face disappears. The battle zone, probably as seen from his flagship, shows the two dreadnoughts. Vanadisan ships have attached themselves to the middle sections of both. Our guns point at nothing, and our engines sit, immobile.

Dread pools in my belly.

“Why aren't your dreadnoughts moving?” Inga asks her Arrisans.

“The Vanadisans shot the backups,” Siv says.

“What does that mean?”

“Engineers can override the captain to save the ship, yeah? When engineering overrides the bridge, we shunt power to the backup systems distributed around the ship. The backup systems are shot out. There's only one place to control the ship.”

“The bridge,” Inga says.

“So whoever controls the bridge controls the ship. Right now, it's not us.” Siv crosses his arms and shakes his head. “Engineers'll be going crazy trying to retake the controls.”

“Unless they're flooded with chaos gas,” Inga says. “Then they could just be going crazy.”

“It’s grim. Smart of the Vanadisans, though. We’re paralyzed. But we have time. It’ll take more than a few shots by the flagship to crack us up very bad, and that’s time we can... Wait.” His voice drops. “What’s that?”

A ship emerges from inside the moon. It’s not Vanadisan, but in the shadows, I can’t quite make out...

...

No, I can make it out.

It’s a nightmare leaked into reality.

Acid burns in my throat as my last meal rises and I lose all feeling below my waist.

The arch chancellor gloats. “*Witness the rise of the Vanadisans.*”

TWENTY-TWO





# NOEMI

Ukuri stiffens.

Fear squiggles in me.

The Arrisans are eerily silent, alert as their two dreadnoughts hang motionless in space.

As far as ship shapes go, dreadnoughts are a strange-looking type of jellyfish. They have a rounded dome, like Menavi's ship, and then a cylindrical body. Massive, planet-moving guns and communication wires dangle off the bottom like stinging tentacles.

But now those tentacles float motionless.

Vanadisan ships hang off the middle of the *Spiderwasp* like ticks.

The ticks on the second dreadnought break away and float back. Where they touched, the *DragonMantis* appears to smoke, but it's probably a trail of shattered metal. The Vanadisan ships rejoin their fleet.

Off to one side, a small drone tows a bent teardrop ship toward the *Spiderwasp*. Oh, that's us.

Fuzig's inside the bridge of the *Spiderwasp*. He shot us with their lasers. He's the brain worm. The *Spiderwasp* is his body now.

Ukuri's blades move silently against my suit, flat side toward me, sharp out. His blades extend to the first bend, just enough to hook around my waist like an X-shaped belt.

A new ship floats out of the shadow of the moon.

It's a flattened round like a blood platelet, but with long spines around the edge. The spines point inward to the center like teeth leading into a maw. It drifts to the *DragonMantis*. The blood ship looks small until the spines move outward and point like a sea urchin that's sensed its prey. With the spines, it's much, much larger.

I tilt my head back to whisper, "What is that?"

"The monster who hunts us," Ukuri murmurs in my ear. "A throat that stretches for a thousand actungs and never reaches a stomach. Inescapable death."

"What?"

His hiss lifts all the hair on the back of my neck. "The Harsi."

Oh.

No.

Everyone else watches, silent.

I hold my breath. The gravity inside my body shifts. My stomach drops with terrible anticipation.

Spines touch the outer skin of the *DragonMantis*.

And smash right through.

Siv groans. The feral hopelessness of the noise makes an unholy shiver run up my back.

The H-alien spines sink deep into the *DragonMantis*. Bits shatter off and float away. Lights flicker out.

And the urchin ship inches inward.

The spines flex, crushing the helpless dreadnought against its unmoving walls like it's mashing an entire loaf of bread into its mouth, eating even as it chokes. Shattered metal crumbs dust the smooth walls.

Except nothing can obscure the H-ship tunneling inside the dreadnought, eating out the innards. The *DragonMantis* crumples into a crescent moon.

The H-alien ship floats back, rounder. Its mouth is filled with debris, a bloody tick, gorged on devastation. It floats toward the *Spiderwasp*.

My stomach lurches.

The view returns to the smug arch chancellor. “*Emperor and Empress of Arris, we will eat our way across your planets just like your enemies once did. You have one cleg to surrender.*”

The viewscreen goes off.

Our ship shudders.

Oh, no. Shrapnel from the doomed *DragonMantis*?

The lights go dark.

I reach reflexively for my hood. I should have been wearing it this whole time. How dumb.

Nobody else reaches for theirs, though.

Emergency lights wink on, but the viewscreen stays dark.

I squint at the gray walls, but no outlined battleships appear. The implant can't display anything if the sensors on Menavi's ship are down, and I'm too far away to access any others.

We're blind.

The silence is suffocating.

I never thought Fuzig's maniacal trills would be soothing, but here we are.

Siv breaks the silence with an explosive mutter. “I surrender.” He lifts the backs of his hands to the ceiling. “I surrender!”

The other Arrisans shatter.

Navlon doubles over and heaves.

Inga makes a noise of surprise. Pyke's black blades extend, fully caging her, their tips reaching all the way to the floor.

Ukuri doesn't move. He's uncharacteristically silent. His white-silver eyes aim at the blank wall screen, but they're unfocused. He's reliving the battle, or imagining our doom.

"I surrender!" Siv screams.

My ears ring.

Siv takes a deep breath, filling his lungs to max capacity.

I cover my ears. "They can't hear you."

He chokes. "Bu...wha...?"

"And even if they could, Fuzig's already dragging us into the *Spiderwasp*. You can surrender to him, but I doubt it will change how he treats you."

Siv stares at me like I've started speaking in tongues. Like he doesn't recognize me. "Fuzig?"

Since no one else seems worried about shrapnel-related hull cracks, I remove my hood, making sure he can really see me. "Fuzig's reclaiming us, his escaped specimens, for wall art. He wanted to see Ukuri's face after the arch chancellor's show. And," I take a deep breath, then let it out with a shudder. "I'm very sorry for your loss. How many people were on the other dreadnought?"

"Forty... Huh? People? Where?"

"On the dreadnought the Vanadisans destroyed."

"Forty thousand, plus or minus. You'd have to ask their ship's officer. But you said..." Siv blinks at me. Then he repeats, as if he still hasn't understood my foreign word. "Fuzig?"

"Fuzig took over the *Spiderwasp*."

"So?"

"So you're screaming that you want to surrender. Our communications array got damaged. The arch chancellor definitely can't hear you. Who else are you surrendering to?"

"What?"

Inga leans over Pyke's blades and taps Siv on the shoulder, making him jump. "Siv. Look. *Look*. Look at me."

He orients on her.

She enunciates. "Who are you surrendering to?"

Siv abruptly sits down.

"Oh, dear." Inga pushes against the flat side of Pyke's blades. His arms cage her like iron. She shakes him. "Pyke. Look at me. Navlon?"

The Arrisans emotionally uncoil like a released spring. Inga tries to shake her trio out of their shock.

I turn in Ukuri's arms and touch his jaw. "Ukuri. Are you paying attention?"

"Of course, Noemi. Why would you ask?" His jaw muscles twitch under my fingers. "It will be so delightful to get my hands on a live Harsi and discover how intriguingly different it may be from the models of the dead bodies on which we were trained."

Pyke growls low and vicious.

The hairs on my arms stand up.

Navlon throws up harder.

I'm glad Ukuri's responding, but his words are weird. "Why do you think there's a live body? Wouldn't any H-aliens have been dead for centuries?"

"The Harsi ship is even more effective than our stories. Living Harsi have returned to the empire for the first time in centuries and I..." His blades flex, tightening me against his hard hip. "I will be the science officer who faces them."

"Ukuri. There are no H..." I force myself to say the name, although it sticks like a gob of mucus in my throat, but I get it out. "No Harsi on that ship."

He blinks.

Then his eyes move to mine before orienting on me with the rest of his face. "Of course there are. Thousands of them."

He unfocuses again. “They’ll come pouring off like an infectious disease, stabbing and screaming—”

“How?” I dig in my nails into his trembling jaw. “They’re not flying that ship right now. The Vanadisans are.”

“They fly their ships. Over the horizon, with the sun behind them, they fly.”

“On the arch chancellor’s command? How did he manage that?”

“Well, he...” A wrinkle finally crosses Ukuri’s forehead. “...released them?”

“From captivity?”

“From the moon...”

“Do you really think the arch chancellor was holding a crew of Harsi captive this whole time? While the Vanadisans were experimenting on Inga and developing the chaos gas? They were just holding these unstoppable monsters in their third secret lab, chilling for our second dreadnought to arrive, and then released them? Can the Vanadisans do that? Can anyone capture and hold captive a crew of Harsi?”

His frown deepens. Trying to work through a problem logically when it’s clear that every fiber of his being wants to go to stone, like Pyke, or heave like Navlon.

“Say the arch chancellor did hold them captive. How did he command them to attack the *DragonMantis*? Did the arch chancellor make a treaty with them? Can you make a treaty with the Harsi? Do they even have a language?”

He blinks. “There’re no Harsi on that ship.”

“Yes.”

Ukuri’s shoulders descend. His blades slide firmly and decisively back into his forearms. He pulls me against his chest and hugs me hard. Tremors shake his body, the aftereffects of a paralyzing stress response.

I glide my hand down his straight spine. *I love you. I hold you. I’m here.*

“Noemi.” His voice is reassuringly dry. “You recently vowed not to expend extraordinary effort convincing idiots of the truth when they are determined to argue; however, I appreciate that you’ve relaxed your vow for my benefit, and I hope you won’t mind too much doing so for the others.”

“I don’t mind.”

“Yes, well, it seems that the Vanadisans aren’t content with chaos gas. They must also engage in psychological warfare.”

He releases me, steps forward, and claps his hands.

“Listen, everyone. Noemi has deduced that there are no Harsi on that ship, and we’re about to become unwilling guests on Fuzig’s newest acquisition. I propose we regroup and formulate a plan.”

The Arrisan trio stare at him dumbly.

Inga gestures impatiently at Pyke’s swords crossed over her. “I can’t reason with them.”

“Yes, well, their minds have been poisoned beyond reason. Chant Noemi’s antidote words with me: There are *no* Harsi on that ship. There are no *Harsi* on that ship. There are no Harsi on *that* ship.”

Navlon sits back on his heels and looks up at Ukuri. His eyes are bloodshot. He wipes his mouth.

“There are no Harsi on that ship?” Siv splutters. “Tell me another one.”

Inga reaches through Pyke’s swords and grasps Siv’s forearm. “The entire time we were stuck in that secret lab, did we see anyone but the Vanadisans?”

“No, but so what? What are you saying?”

“I’m saying what Ukuri’s saying. What Noemi said.”

“The Vanadisan arch chancellor told us too,” I say. “He said he harnessed ancient technology, not the ancients themselves.”

Inga frowns. She doesn’t have an implant, so she probably also didn’t hear any of the message.

I really like this implant.

The silence stretches. No arguments, just stunned confusion.

*Clink. Clatter. Tink.*

Small things drag and scrape the outside of our ship, almost as if the drone is navigating through an unfamiliar field of wires.

Like between limp, nonfunctional dreadnought guns...

Our time is running out.

Ukuri steps in front of Pyke. As if finishing a conversation that only the two of them can hear, Ukuri says, "What if it's not?"

Pyke tightens his elbows in, caging Inga. "It's the Harsi."

Inga rests her hands on Pyke's forearm sheath. "Please."

"But what if..." Ukuri lifts one brow. "...it's *not*?"

Pyke stares him down.

Ukuri simply smiles. Amused, judgmental, smug.

And completely right.

The black swords slide into Pyke's sheaths with a decisive snap. He releases Inga, then balls his hands into fists. His gruff tone darkens to nuclear fury. "How dare they?"

"Yes, quite."

"The stupidity. The audacity. Don't they know this could summon the Harsi?"

"I can't imagine they're worried about it."

"Hold on. There're no Harsi?" Siv repeats, like it's finally penetrated. He gestures at the blank wall. "Then who's driving their ship?"

"The Vanadisans," I say.

"How? It's built for Harsi body shapes. How could they turn it on? How could they steer, or turn, or destroy?"



“They found it on? Maybe they can’t pilot it very well. That’s why they stopped the dreadnoughts with chaos gas. They can’t catch us if we run away.”

“Or if we fight back,” Pyke growls.

“They’re yanking the steering column with pulleys and flex tape?” Siv purses his lips. “Well, I’ll be puffed. Could they really do that? Those wily feather dusters. I’d like to see their work.”

“You could get a chance,” I say. “If the emperor and empress don’t surrender in a cleg, I think the *Spiderwasp* will star in the arch chancellor’s next demonstration.”

The Arrisans finally process what Inga and I have understood since the beginning.

We have one cleg before Allie and her husband either surrender the entire empire to the Vanadisans, or the arch chancellor turns the *Spiderwasp* into a crescent husk.

Which outcome is more likely?

To Inga and I, the Harsi are taboo, but the Arrisan experience is visceral and uncontrollable. Like the spray that triggers the mating bite, using the Harsi shortcuts their intellect and goes straight to instinct.

Allie’s palace on Arris Central is probably in chaos.

Ukuri wades across the debris field to the medical reprocessor and hunches over the screen. “Noemi, find me an aerosolizer.”

He has a plan.

Oh, thank goodness.

I scan the debris. My implant whispers whether a thing is useful.

The others watch us, confused.

Then they look to Pyke.

“We’re going to take back the dreadnought,” Pyke says.

Their shoulders relax. Happy for a plan, no matter how insane.

“I knew it.” Siv rubs his palms together. “I was just saying we’d be great at taking over a dreadnought. We got everyone we need right here.”

Pyke points at Navlon. “You can fly one?”

Navlon nods.

He points at Siv. “You can restore the engine?”

“The engine’s fine. We’ve got to splice the wiring, or Nav can control it from the bridge. The problem is getting him there.”

“I can get him there.”

“How quiet? If the feather dusters see you coming, they’ll rip out the bridge controls.”

“Could they have destroyed the bridge controls already?” Inga asks.

“They could. Kind of stupid, though. If the emperor and empress surrender, Fuzig gets a free warship.”

“Hm. Pyke, how quietly can you get Navlon through the halls?”

“Depends on your definition of ‘quietly.’”

“Cutting your way through will take too long,” Siv muses. “We’ve got to make people drop. Flood the halls with narcostasis gas, you know. Get everybody to sit down.”

“That would be noticed too,” Nav murmurs.

“Yeah, but if everybody collapsed at once, the Vanadisans might not know why. They might think we’ve succumbed to terror, you know. What do they call it? Died of fright.”

Fuzig never realized Ukuri was unconscious, so Siv might be right.

My implant highlights the corner of a buried aerosolizer. I crouch down, use my suit assists to free it. My repaired hand

doesn't want to grip, but I can support it without pain. The muscles stretch with an overtired, strained ache.

I bring the mini aerosolizer to Ukuri.

“Perfect.”

The medical reprocessor extrudes thick, white bricks.

“Feed one brick into the aerosolizer and stack the additional bricks on the tray so they'll be easy to transport.” He sits back on his heels, then looks up. “I'll find the perfect location for maximum distribution.”

*Clunk.*

Our ship's attaching to something.

The floor trembles.

*Clatter.*

*Pop.*

We're out of time.

The other group realizes it at the same moment.

“There's not enough narcostasis gas in this sector to flood the halls.” Siv shrugs. “You'll have to cut your way through. Sorry for the loss of life.”

Pyke grimaces. “I accept the cost.”

“I don't.” Ukuri stands. “Pyke, secure Noemi's aerosolizer to the top of the grav tube column. Navlon and Siv, secure Inga.”

They stare at him.

He smirks. “We're about to be boarded, gentlemen. I suggest you move.”

Pyke scoops up the aerosolizer and superjumps, sticking to the ceiling like a gecko. He turns invisible.

Do I have that capability too?

Navlon and Siv turn Inga toward the central column.

“Aerosolizer?” Inga asks. “What?”

“We made a product that dulls the scent of lusteal.” My hands turn ghostly over the bricks, a shimmery outline that my hood sees. Neat. “It’s like a cross between deodorant, sunscreen, and an odor neutralizer. The spray version needs testing, but we didn’t get approval.”

The Arrisans pull Inga inside the grav tube.

Ukuri lifts the medical reprocessor and crashes it next to the grav tube. “Brace yourself.”

“For?”

A white laser carves down the side of the ship like a knife slicing through connective tissue. Another crosses it, and a third, tracing a wild, uncontrolled path across the hull.

The end of the reprocessor falls off, and the screen goes dead.

Ukuri pushes me against the tube wall.

The loft floor by our feet separates.

Lasers scorch the grav tube, but don’t penetrate.

Menavi’s ship creaks at the assault.

His lips curve. “Our first clinical trial.”

TWENTY-THREE



# UKURI

**E**ngineers really are unpredictable creatures. Their violent hull cutters carve the bent metal, opening up so many holes that the walls look like metal lace fragments. I feel an uncharacteristic swell of gratitude. Addled or well, I can always trust them to burst in on me when I'm in the middle of critical research.

Menavi's hull eventually yields, an entire wall falling outward. The lower hold pukes its contents onto the engineering bay floor. Cutters slice the rubble, their grinding punctured by distant, incoherent screams.

The laser fire briefly stops.

Twenty-odd engineers scramble into the hold. Bloody, dirt caked, nude, and absolutely feral.

One picks up a tranquilizer gun and, instead of using it as intended, clobbers his neighbor in the head. The victim leaps on top of him, then gets pulled into a different tussle. Debris shifts and opponents disappear. Another engineer yanks off a piece of scaffolding with her dirty hands, then shakes it with a battle scream.

What's Pyke waiting for? An invitation?

I raise my voice. "Now."

The aerosolizer in the ceiling belches big white clouds into the hold.

It mists me, the medical reprocessor, and Noemi, who's stacking the final bricks with perfect efficiency, like it's any

ordinary day in the science office.

Our formula falls on the feral Arrisans, spattering them like white spittle.

It will work. Of course it will. The only question is how long it will take to reach useful effectiveness.

The engineer lowers her scaffolding chunk, then drops it with a clatter. She rubs the white mist on her skin, smearing it, looks around.

Then she sits down.

Twelve point eight instants? Not bad.

“Faster than the cream,” Noemi murmurs.

Her cool competency makes my chest swell. She truly is an irreplaceable treasure, both to science and to the empire.

We clock the time until the last Arrisan stops, scratches his bruised head, and peers out of the hold.

Laser fire slices across the entry, hitting him in the hand. He dives. The others drag him out of the line of fire and lift him into an empty pod.

Lasers cut through the wall and score the pod.

“Pyke,” I say.

A white shadow flies out the top of the ship. Instants later, all laser fire stops.

In the quiet, the man groans.

Olasí’s voice emerges from below. “Do not close your eyes. That’s an order. Hold out until help arrives.”

I drop behind her and land silently. “Lucky for you, help has arrived.”

Olasí shrieks and swings a nail gun at me.

My blades eject.

I slice through her barrel.

The front falls off.

She clicks the trigger, still shrieking.

Oh, dear.

I push the halved barrel out from between us. “Of all the possible side effects, I see my antidote hasn’t affected your lung capacity.”

Her scream fades. “Ukuri? What are you doing here?”

“Saving you, of course.”

“Can you fix him?”

“This is me we’re talking about.” Her injured engineer is not bad. Just a little hand trauma and permanent scarring. “Noemi? Drop down the bone knitter, would you?”

Noemi does.

I fit what’s left of the damaged hand into the box. “Of course I can fix him. I can fix every problem you let in while I was gone from your ship.”

She eyes her severed nail gun barrel. “And suddenly, I want to shoot you again.”

“You’ll get over it.” Pyke lands close. “I did.”

“You brought another blade?”

Pyke’s trio move cautiously out of the grav tube to join him.

Olasí’s surprised, happy tone flattens. “And another human. Great.”

“Oi, these humans saved us,” Siv says. “They watched the same broadcast we did and saw what we couldn’t: the feather dusters are flying that Harsi ship.”

Olasí’s face goes through a series of peaks and valleys. She settles on a plateau of confusion. “But the Harsi are the only ones who *can* fly those ships.”

“Yeah, it’s a big hoax. Pulleys and flex tape.”

“No.”



“It wasn’t easy for us either. I wasn’t in my right head, Nav lost his lunch, and the blades, well.” Siv shakes his head. “But the humans brought us back.”

“How?”

Siv rests a hand on Olasi’s shoulder. “I’ll tell you all about it while this good science officer detoxifies your HVAC.”

Siv’s as good as his word. As we feed in Noemi’s neat stacks of bricks, the attitude toward her and Inga shifts. I wish I could devote more time to observing how he communicates the same information in a way his fellow engineers can hear it. For perhaps the first time, they look at Noemi not as an inanimate prize to steal away from me and hoard, but as a useful person.

And as we finish, something in the middle of the bay bangs. A hull cutter whirs to life.

Pyke disappears.

But the engineers—still nude and smeared with grime as they dump in bricks—look unconcerned.

I never realized how eerily silent the engineering bay became after the laser fire faded out. Now, the startup noises are grating and yet comforting with familiarity. Engineering is never silent. And now it’s coming to life again.

“Boss?” An engineer runs up to Olasi with a battered data tablet. “We got contact with the targeting repair team. Guns’ll be ours in twenty clicks.”

Olasi pulls on her skinsuit, steps into her coveralls. “Engines?”

“Longer.”

“Right. Keep it quiet. These guys are going to retake the bridge.” She bites an electric screwdriver to hold it as she secures her tool bandolier, then holds it in her hand again and jerks her chin at me and Noemi. “See you on the other side, science guy.”

She takes off with her team.

I hand Noemi a mesh bag filled with extra bricks.

Pyke reappears beside me. “You bringing her?”

Inga’s disappeared with Siv, undoubtedly to wherever they consider to be the safest location.

But there’s only one safe location for Noemi. “Noemi is my necessary assistant, without whom my strategy will undoubtedly fail.”

“We have ten clicks before the deadline. So...” Pyke fades out of existence again. His voice floats back. “Run.”



Noemi

It takes longer than ten clicks to cross from engineering to the bridge, even running full tilt with the suit assisting my muscles.

But it's close.

Ukuri checks me as I take my first leaps out of the engineering bay. The implant works seamlessly. It feels like jumping on the moon, only under ordinary gravity. Every stride down the slippery, white-misted halls shoots me like I've bounced off the empire's most powerful trampoline, yet every gigantic step is sure. Easy to control. Fun.

He catches my smile as I hurtle effortlessly over the chaos of the halls and gives an approving nod, as though he fully expected me to master running like an Arrisan on my very first try, and he's not remotely surprised.

I seriously love this man.

We race after Navlon. Pyke's still invisible, although my hood display hints that he's in my field of vision. The bricks bounce on my shoulder leaving a trail of dust.

Plunging into the grav tubes is a new experience.

I've flown with Ukuri many times, but never solo, and never with such clear-eyed control. My implant and hood work together identifying all the different regions as we pass, and answering questions before I fully formulate them. Knowledge surges into my brain. What an amazing feeling, even more amazing than flying! I have to stop myself from cackling.

As we pass by the floor that contains the science office, I drift closer. My implant's picked up my unconscious wish to check on Tom.

But I just as easily float back to Ukuri.

Because I am *a god*.

The ship is divided by quartiles. Ukuri's work takes him mostly over the lower ranges of the ship, so this is my first time in the top quartile. He draws me toward our exit. We slow from terminal velocity to a skid that still seems way too fast. Navlon flings himself out of the grav tube and into a narrow corridor. Ukuri and I reach for the same handle.

I hook it easily with my good hand and swing into the passageway behind Navlon, landing with a thump.

My suit absorbs the impact, so it feels like landing solidly on the ground. The bricks bang together and puff.

Ukuri lands beside me. He and Navlon take off running without missing a step.

I jog behind them more slowly, taking in the sights.

Unlike the mildly damaged quartiles below, this one shows the violent breach by enemy soldiers. Doors have been blown off, walls staved in. Corridors branching off from this one are badly damaged and blackened with laser marks.

Fuzig's ship must have attached and blasted its way toward the bridge.

I approach a junction.

*Go left. The bridge is just a few strides more.*

Cool. Ukuri and Navlon have already gone ahead—

A communicator squawks and heavy boots clatter.

The two men return swiftly and Ukuri backs me into a side room. My implant tells me it's a supply closet. The closet portion is still intact, although skinsuits are piled on the ground.

Navlon angles out to see down the hall.

"What is it?" I whisper.

Ukuri angles his hand down. *Wait.*

Navlon jerks his head inside, rests his back against the wall, breathes.

I strain.

My implant and hood interface with the ship, picking up footsteps loping down the bridge corridor, passing ours. Five Vanadisan soldiers, maybe a fuzzy sixth.

A trill of their communicator hits the limit of my hearing, but I think it's Fuzig. *"Everyone is clamoring to surrender. How could you lose the captain? The arch chancellor wants him alive. Where is he?"*

*"What about the emperor and empress?"* the nearby leader asks. *"Did they surrender?"*

*"Who cares? This is our moment. We must execute the entire bridge crew to show how badly they're defeated. This is all your team's fault. If you hadn't been playing around, he never would have—"*

*"Ah, there! We've found him. He'll be in your collection in five clicks."*

*"Don't say clicks. That's Arrisan. We must revert to the historical Vanadisan measure of time."*

The soldiers hustle down the corridor and around a corner.

It's silent.

I look up at Ukuri.

He mouths, *Pyke*.

Right, of course. Pyke must have led them away.

Navlon makes eye contact.

Ukuri nods.

Navlon eases out of the storage room and disappears silently once more in the direction of the bridge.

Ukuri stays with me. The clicks count down.

So, everyone's surrendered except the emperor and empress?

That makes sense. If the nobles and the High Commanders together surrender, then Fuzig's probably right and it doesn't matter what Allie and her husband do. They'll rule over an empty palace.

I wonder—

Ukuri pulls me against him, pivots, and flings his free hand at the open closet door.

My heart thuds against my rib cage. The mesh bag thumps my shoulder. Dust rises.

“There’s nowhere to run,” Ukuri growls. “Come out slowly before my blade slips and you end up as a microthin slide on my specimen wall.”

An Arrisan pushes reluctantly out of the closet.

He’s taller than usual, and his dark face is an unusual brown tone—wait. “Zeerah!”

“Noemi?” Her voice is rough. She coughs. “You look good. It’s been a long time. How’s it going?”

I tug on Ukuri’s arm. Zeerah’s not a threat. In fact, quite possibly, she’s our savior. “Kind of bad. The Vanadisans ate a dreadnought and are trying to take over the empire.”

He holds position a moment longer, then sucks in his blade.

I straighten the collar of his science robe in silent thanks.

“Yeah, I heard something like that.” Zeerah watches Ukuri’s forearm distend and then return to normal, transfixed with horror. She shakes herself, then edges toward the corridor. “Well, if you two have everything under control, it’s a little hot up here, what with the takeover and all. I’m going to mosey on down to safer ground.”

“I’m sorry, but you can’t. We need you.”

“Me?”

“If the Vanadisans destroy the bridge controls. You’re the only one who can repair them.”

“Oh, no. I can’t be the only one.”

“There’s only you.”

She hops from foot to foot. “You’ve got to be joking.”

“Noemi is quite serious. And if we fail to control our weapons and engines in time, every floor will become hot, exceeding the melting temperature of Arrisan steel, in fact, quickly and quite violently.”

“Ah. Well, I really want to help you, it’s just, I really can’t stick around.”

“We’ll see the bridge soon, and if the controls aren’t damaged, you can go. Right, Ukuri?”

He tilts his head like he’s listening.

I don’t hear anything.

“It might be fine.” I step forward to take Zeerah’s hand. “We’re sneaking in. Hush-hush, very quiet.”

“Zeerah!” An insane scream rends the hallway, and then the sound of someone bashing against a wall. It’s coming from the direction of the bridge.

Uh-oh.

Zeerah freezes, eyes wide. “Oh, no.”

Another blood-curdling yell, another smack.

So much for quiet.

Ukuri advances on the corridor. “Noemi, brick.”

I place one from the mesh bag onto his palm.

“Zeerah, don’t go anywhere,” Ukuri says. “If I have to chase you down, I’m going to be very cross. Understood?”

She nods jerkily.

He glances both ways out the door and disappears in the direction of the screaming.

I wait in the doorway.

He’s gone.

“Ooh. H, H, H.” She clamps her hood and scuttles in a panicked circle. “No, no, no. I’ve got to get out of here. I’ve got to go.”

“Five clicks. We’re almost in.”

“You don’t understand.” She runs at me, stops short, waves her hand. “Get out of my way!”

I brace myself so I become a wall.

She’s taller and could easily run me over. With the suit assists, though, I think I’ll hold my ground.

Zeerah breaks into a panic. “I sacrificed myself for you, Noemi. Why are you stabbing me in the back? This is going to ruin my life! I thought we were friends. I thought you liked me. You have to get out of my way and let me go!”

The words stab like little needles.

Her words echo back into my past, sobbing voice messages and fiery confrontations that made me dream of being shipwrecked on a desert island. Anywhere to escape the burden of my out-of-control actions affecting others.

But Ukuri says we’re already living on an intellectual island. Really, the way we both think so differently, this feels metaphorically true.

And my actions will always affect others.

They’ll affect others in good and terrible ways. Sadness, tragedy, tears. These are the many consequences of living in this brutal, strange, dark, and yet beautiful universe.

I take responsibility.

I accept these consequences.

“I’m sorry, Zeerah. The empire needs you. The ship needs you. And I need you.”

Her shoulders slump. “Ah, sorry, Noemi. I didn’t mean it. I’m just freaking out. This has been a very bad shift. I know you’re right, and there’s no safe ground, but it’s just, something happened and...” She sighs heavily. “I’ll help you. Of course I’ll help you. Forefathers give me strength.”

Ukuri’s voice calls down the hall. “Noemi, we’re in!”

I hold out my hand.



Zeerah takes it with an awkward chuckle. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“I know. I just want to hang out on the bridge one more time with my only friend.”

“Only friend?” She laughs under her breath. “You’re as sad as I am.”

“Yeah.”

Hand in hand, we enter the empty corridor to the bridge.

The bridge doors are in shreds, needle sharp and pointed inward from the Vanadisan land cannon. A temporary sheet of metal lies off to one side. Inside, Vanadisan bodies are contorted in ways that are incompatible with life.

And the consoles?

Oh, man. They’re popped open, wires torn out, screens battered. Also incompatible with life.

That didn’t happen in the last few clicks.

Maybe they never intended to have a free warship. Maybe they were always planning to destroy it in a demonstration, even if we surrendered.

How very Arrisan of them.

Arrisan bridges have little open space. They hate exposing their backs. So all command consoles are arranged around a central column, and their see-through screens face outward.

Usually, they’re see-through anyway.

Right now, they dangle by half-severed cables.

Navlon sits in a console that has the least amount of obvious damage. He’s plugged a data tablet into the armrest and is trying to bring up any kind of control mechanism.

“Can you help Navlon?” I ask Zeerah.

She starts forward.

“Zeerah!”

Huh?

She jumps back, then starts running.

I hold her like an anchor.

Around the other side of Navlon's console, Captain Falkion lies flat on his back in the narrow walkway. Oven-mitt forceshields cage his forearms, and they seem to be magnetized to the floor.

Ukuri kneels beside his head and crumbles the white brick over the captain's pale face. "Please remember yourself. You're the youngest captain of the newest dreadnought in the fleet. No one gets here by losing control."

Captain Falkion thrashes and strains until the vein on his forehead pops up. "Zeerah!"

He can't possibly blame this on her, can he? How unfair. She's the only one who's not affected by lusteal.

His right forceshield flickers. He yanks it off the ground and swings.

Ukuri ducks.

The forceshield flickers on again and slams the captain's arm to the ground again.

Ukuri crumbles more powder.

The captain coughs, sneezes, then growls and makes a choking noise.

"Stop eating it, Captain. The aerosolizing brick is not for internal consumption."

Okay.

I lead a trembling Zeerah to Navlon, keeping my body between her and the furious captain.

On his data tablet, Navlon has projected a pincushion. The pin heads are Vanadisan ships. Their lasers are aimed at the center like the long bodies of the pins. I'm guessing the white dot in the center is us.

Yikes. "Um, here. Zeerah can repair things."

"Some," she says.

The captain emits another insane scream.

She flinches.

“What would be most helpful?” I ask.

He motions toward the control panel that’s popped out below his seat. “Power.”

“Oh?” Zeerah pokes the tangle of burned wires. “Yeah, capacitor’s toasted. But if we can route around...eh...maybe... Noemi, hand me those pliers.”

I do, and she digs in.

A screen under Navlon’s hand lights up in a reboot sequence.

He taps it experimentally. The number says One Charge. “You’re an engineer, Zeerah?”

“Not like you guys, but I did rebuild a cruiser with salvaged parts, so...” She grips the screwdriver in her teeth, forgetting that I have my palm open to hold it for her. A spark under her fingers makes her jump and swear. “I know a few things about making do with damaged crap.”

A second screen comes to life.

Navlon starts to smile.

The pincushion battlefield shifts to the second screen. He rotates it, zooming in on the Harsi ship, the Vanadisan capital ship, and other potential targets. Their details fill in, and they suddenly look like themselves in open space.

Navlon’s data tablet hisses, and Pyke’s voice emerges, gruff. “You have the bridge?”

“Destroyed,” Navlon replies. “Mostly.”

“Any guns? Ammo?”

“We’ve got one charge.”

“One?” Pyke sounds incredulous. “We can only hit one ship once?”

Navlon looks down at the sparks around Zeerah’s hands, muffled with swears. “We’re working on it.”

“Work faster. Fuzig wants the captain, but the silence is making him nervous.”

“Distract him.”

“With what? The rest of the bridge crew is already on his ship, and...oh. Give me five clicks. Then, fire on your best target.”

The connection terminates.

We count down the clicks.

Five.

Four.

Three.

Two.

One.

TWENTY-FOUR



# UKURI

Captain Falkion finally collapses in exhaustion.

He's at the highest level of tranquilizer drip from the bridge's battered portable medkit. Any more and his heart could stop.

But even forced into a half-conscious rest, sweat pours from him and washes away my powder. He's fighting it, and me, on the molecular level.

This level of rage is unexpected.

I must analyze the Vanadisan's chemical. Fuzig had plans for him, clearly, but I can't fathom what they were.

On the other side of the column, the humans work in silence to restore functionality of the ship so Navlon can fire on our enemies. But one comment sticks in my mind like a little sliver. I just can't get it out.

"Did I overhear you say you have one charge?" I ask from the other side of the column. "What are you going to use it on?"

"The obvious," Navlon replies.

Yes, of course. Except... "Harsi metal is invulnerable, though."

"Yeah. But what choice do we have?"

Truly, an unanswerable question.

Captain Falkion grimaces. "Take out the ca...sh..."

“Hmm?” I lean close. “I’m sorry, Captain. Did you say something?”

“One shot...” His lashes flutter. He struggles for consciousness. “Always hit the...”

I shut off the tranquilizer drip.

He licks his bloodied, cracked lips, his eyeballs moving back and forth against his closed lids like he’s raking back and forth over the scenarios he studied in officer school. “Always...the biggest and heaviest ship, the one whose loss will give the most...psychological damage...”

“I suppose that’s their flex-taped showpiece, then. Perhaps we’ll get lucky and it won’t bounce off.”

He frowns, eyes still closed. “No, no. Shoot the—”

*Clatter, clatter.*

A black disk bounces across the floor.

I leap to my feet. “Gas!”

Too slow.

*Boom.*

Black powder erupts, filling the room with choking smoke.

My hood’s on, but the spicy scent of tainted luster is sucked right inside. It burns my nostrils and hardens my jack, then twists deeper. My vision doubles, and a ringing fills my ears. I wipe the white blocker powder residue still on my hands across my face, and the bad effects fade. I can move, breathe, think.

Plan.

Lasers flash over the erupting cloud.

I dive to the side and hug the wall.

In the control column, Navlon hunches behind the destroyed screens. Zeerah’s stopped working and gathers herself to bolt. But Noemi sits in front of Zeerah, her arms out to catch her.

We all wear skinsuits, hoods on. The powder is sucked in along with air. Fuzig really found an obvious exploit. Narcostasis gas would cause it to seal off, but lusteal is so rare and harmless.

The captain arches and screams. He slams his partially functional forceshield against the ground, nearly rips the other free. Gagging and screaming, he emits as much noise as an entire crazed unit.

He escaped before. I'm no longer surprised by that.

*"They're addled!"* Fuzig's voice carries down the outer hall. He's approaching with a team. *"Go in."*

I motion for Noemi and the others to abandon the console. It will do us no good if the Vanadisans start a firefight over it.

Noemi instantly obeys, leading an eager Zeerah and a reluctant Navlon around the column, out of direct visual sight.

The first Vanadisan steps into the bridge, looking toward Noemi.

I step into his line of sight.

He shoots wildly and runs back out into the hallway. *"One Arrisan's awake! It's not affected."*

*"A soldier?"* Fuzig asks outside the door. He's barely audible over the captain's screams. *"Did it attack? Blade?"*

*"I don't know. No. He wore the robe with the collar."*

*"Science officer?"* Fuzig raises his voice. *"Ukuri? Could it be you? A rational man would accept his defeat. Come out, and I promise I'll mount your actual body, organs filleted and brain exposed, in my museum of triumph."*

It takes all my will not to reply.

*"Pah, it's another one. He probably has a second mask to help him overcome the gas. Go in again. He won't fight."*

Fuzig isn't wrong. Up until Noemi entered my domain, I buried myself in the work of the science office and forgot my origin as a blade. I let my blades go dull and sheaths atrophy.



But now I face the truth.

I am both a science officer and a blade.

There's more than one role for me.

And although I can't kill these invaders by sneaking through the hallway like a ghost because I can't dodge, roll, or evade like Pyke, I can use my mind to save us.

I toggle my suit to invisible and leap to the high ceiling, creep slowly and deliberately until I'm perched over Captain Falkion.

The captain performs the work of an entire unit smashing and banging and screaming. I did turn off the tranquilizer drip. I hope this effort doesn't overtax his heart.

The Vanadisans argue about who will go in.

I see them just outside the needle-thin spikes of the blown-in doorway.

*"Fine."* Fuzig stomps his boots. *"Follow me in. I'm going to shoot anything that moves."*

Another Vanadisan interjects. *"The arch chancellor wants to kill the captain in front of—"*

*"Taking him alive has already cost us too much. We're getting out of here. Just keep the camera focused on his face as I shoot him in the head."*

Fuzig storms through the blasted-in door.

My blades extend to my fingertips.

Four Vanadisans flank him, their laser guns out.

Fuzig leans over the frothing captain. *"Focus the video on him."*

One Vanadisan positions a data tablet to record.

*"Ah, wait. Let me shut him up."*

Fuzig zaps Captain Falkion with a nonlethal paralyzing jolt. His scream cuts off. His muscles quiver and his skin steams. He collapses.

I grow my blades longer and fuller, positioned so my two bent blades cross like the halves of scissors. I hover over their heads.

*“This is why the Arrisan empire has died.”* Fuzig presses his laser gun to the captain’s sweaty temple. *“You broke your mate bond so you would no longer be vulnerable to the Harsi. But that only made you vulnerable to our chemical spray. You were so distracted by your victory, you didn’t pay attention to the real threat. And for that, you will die.”*

I drop my blades to the back of Fuzig’s neck.

*Snick.*

My blades slice effortlessly through Vanadisan skinsuit, blood, bone.

Fuzig’s arm, hand, fingers go limp.

The laser gun falls away from the captain’s temple and clatters to the ground.

Fuzig’s head rolls forward, off his neck, bounces off Captain Falkion’s chest, and rolls across the bridge.

His headless body slumps backward.

The four Vanadisans jump and shriek. *“Blade! Blade! Blade!”* They shoot blindly and run out screaming.

Unfortunate, but necessary.

I suck my blades back in, my sheaths squeezing off every foreign molecule. The Vanadisans’ dropped data tablet squawks with questions and demands. I step over it, then meet Noemi and the other two at the targeting console.

Hot blood pulses in my jack.

But my own mark on her shoulder calms the urgency. She’s mine. There’s time for us. I promise her arresting green eyes that we will cure ourselves soon.

But first...

Navlon’s last target, the Harsi ship, is still lit.

A new hole smokes in the corner of the viewscreen.

He taps the control. “Dead.”

“You can fire from the wiring.” Zeerah drops beneath and splices. “Give me one click.”

Pyke strides in, his recently used blades retracting into his wrists. The bedraggled bridge officers moan in the hall. He inspects the headless body, nods to me in approval, then frowns at the squawking data tablet.

Any instant now the Vanadisans will figure out Fuzig is dead, detach, and order the Harsi ship to blast us.

Pyke knows it too. “Ready to fire?”

“Wait.” I’m missing something. “According to Captain Falkion, we must hit the biggest and most psychologically damaging ship first.”

“The Harsi ship.”

“Yes, but he rejected that, which means there’s another we should choose instead.”

“Which one?”

“Sorry. This is not in my field of study.”

Pyke looks at Navlon.

Navlon shrugs. He’s a navigator, not a targeting officer.

Pyke kneels and pokes the captain.

Captain Falkion snores.

Wait. Wait, wait. I am a blade, but I am also a science officer, which means I can study this question by narrowing in. “We have to hit the biggest, most psychologically damaging ship. The Harsi ship is the most psychologically damaging to us. But what’s the most psychologically damaging to the Vanadisans?”

Noemi smiles. She already gets it. Of course she does.

Pyke shakes his head. “The Harsi?”

“Again, no. The Vanadisans don’t fear the Harsi clearly. But they will be damaged by the loss of their capital ship.”

A beat passes while the others consider my reason.

But it's flawless as usual.

"All right." Zeerah holds up two stripped wires. "I cross these, and the gun goes boom. Ready?"

Navlon types. "Ready to fire on the capital ship."

"Wait," Pyke says.

"Fire," I say.

Zeerah crosses the wires.

Our ship shudders with a hollow boom. Uh-oh. Something's definitely wrong if we're hearing sounds.

On Navlon's targeting screen, the capital ship whitens and disintegrates.

Navlon smiles faintly.

Pyke stands beside me at the control console. "You better be right, science guy."

"I have an uncanny record for being so."

"So what's your plan for when they get their act together and return fire?"

"Rely on the competence of my shipmates to restore our critical functions first."

And now we wait. Noemi leans against me, and I rest my arm around her.

Clicks pass.

No fire returns.

My tension slowly releases.

Perhaps they'll just leave and—

*Pop.*

The floor lurches. Bodies slide, and the walls rattle.

I shelter Noemi.

Zeerah screams and covers her head. “They’re returning fire!”

Navlon braces in the console. “No.”

Pyke glances in at his controls, then confirms it. “They detached Fuzig’s ship.”

Oh, no. There’s one obvious reason to detach. “The Harsi ship?”

“It’s moving.”

We stand together watching the inevitable. The Vanadisan fleet moves back. The Harsi ship turns, their spines pointing at us.

My stomach lurches. Acid burns up my throat.

The others grunt and moan.

I clamp Noemi’s shoulders too tight. This is a nightmare beyond nightmares. I don’t care if Vanadisans are piloting the ship. Our skinsuits are only so strong, and humans are too fragile. There must be somewhere to secure her, hide her, keep her away from this.

Captain Falkion groans. “Zeerah...”

Zeerah tsks, then waves her hands. “Oh, we’re all going to die anyway. Noemi, give me one of those bricks.”

Noemi hands her the mesh bag.

“Thank you.” Zeerah walks around the column.

The captain thrashes. I can’t fully see her from my peripheral vision—and I’m not looking away from the screen of my impending doom—but the bag moves. Thunk. Powder puffs up. I think she’s smacked him across the face with the whole bag. “Calm down. I’m releasing you. You deserve to see this. Don’t make me regret it.”

Apparently, her method works where mine failed, because Captain Falkion joins us, rubbing his wrists where the forcesshields pinched, battered but almost normal. He avoids looking in Zeerah’s direction, and she avoids looking at him. “Where’s the capital ship?”

“You advised us to hit it, so we did.”

He looks surprised.

“That is what you advised, isn’t it?”

He grunts, but it’s not affirmative.

“Isn’t it?”

He doesn’t answer.

The Harsi ship floats into our orbit, inevitable as death.

Pyke bristles.

I brace.

If I’ve doomed Noemi because of my own misunderstanding, again... No. I refuse. This can’t be. It cannot be.

“What’s that light?” Noemi, the only one who’s not riveted by the bigger screen, points at the unusable targeting screen on the armrest.

Navlon doesn’t look. “Small guns.”

“Why’s it blinking?”

Now he looks. His tone changes. “Target acquired.”

Zeerah coughs. “But we’re not doing it.”

My chest lifts. “It’s the engineers.”

Our ship shudders. Small lasers scatter uselessly across the Harsi ship.

Nothing breaks off. Nothing stops it.

The captain touches his ear. “Olasi?” He waits a moment, then growls in frustration.

Navlon hands him our data tablet.

He contacts engineering. “Olasi, hit it with everything.”

“What in the seven suns do you think we’re doing, Captain?” She turns away to shout at her people. “Go! Fire! Every gun that comes online. Yes, I don’t care if they interfere, fire!”

Every gun on the dreadnought fires near simultaneously at maximum power. The biggest, heaviest weapons in the empire.

The Harsi ship doesn't even slow down.

“Olasi. Olasi!” Captain Falkion shouts to get her attention.  
“Olasi, forget the Harsi.”

“What?” she gasps.

“Hit every other ship you can reach.”

“I can override you.”

“But not the Harsi.” He holds her gaze, commanding and true. “We hit it with everything. The Vanadisans win today, but we're taking as many of them as we can with us.”

She grits her teeth, then turns to her people. “Fire on the fleet. Spread it out. Full power! We're taking the feather dusters down.”

I suppose that's all we have left.

TWENTY-FIVE





# NOEMI

**M**enavi once said that the humans have many different responses to stress, but the Arrisans have only one.

At this moment, that's okay with me.

My veins bubble with lusteal from the chaos gas Fuzig released, my brain squirming with hunger for relief, but I can't have it now. My brain worm understands. Ever since Ukuri bit me, I've had more active control over my urges, and right now, we have a tentative agreement.

I wanted my death to matter.

And while I would much rather live, if this is how it ends, I guess that's okay.

The dreadnought fires on the unsuspecting Vanadisan ships. They react slowly. Smaller ships disappear. Larger ships fracture. They drifted too close, lulled by our inevitable doom, and now they scramble, too late, to get out of our way.

Fitting.

Meanwhile, the Harsi ship floats slightly off-kilter.

Is this how it kills us?

The spines scrape our hull.

Screams echo through the metal.

Ukuri holds me tight.

The bridge is the most shielded area of the entire ship or it was, until Fuzig blasted through the walls. But it's still the

deepest space.

The spines glide through the walls like blades.

And then they stop.

We wait.

But nothing happens.

Navlon leans forward, staring at the battlefield screen. “It grazed us.”

Captain Falkion joins him, nude and smeared with white and black substances. “It’s not coming around?”

“No, sir.”

Someone—I think it might be Siv—crows from the data tablet. “Ha-ha! We burned the pulleys! Scorched off the flex tape!”

The engineers scream, but this time, the tone is exultant.

Pyke rests a hand on Navlon’s shoulder. Navlon nods with relief.

Ukuri’s fingers flex on my shoulder. He feels it too. We’re in tune.

We made it.

Zeerah sits abruptly in one of the other consoles and attacks the wiring. She’s really dedicated. Even in our moment of triumph—of survival—she’s trying to fix the ship.

The captain studies the emptying battlefield as the Vanadisans limp away.

“Engines are restored,” Olasi shouts over the jubilant screaming. “You want us to pull back, boss?”

“Not yet. Seal off the areas around the spines so we don’t cause more harm.”

“You got it!”

Captain Falkion’s sharp gaze lifts over me to Ukuri. “You know what comes next.”

“I’m prepared, Captain.” Ukuri’s confident tone sends delicious anticipation shivering through my veins. “But I doubt very much we’ll find anything of the long-dead Harsi on their ship.”

“There could still be Vanadisans. Their surprises are unwelcome.” He rubs his forehead, smearing the white powder with the black. “Disturbing.”

“Ah, well, good news, Captain. There are, as of now, four Arrisans on this very dreadnought who are immune to lusteal-based weapons, specifically those developed by the Vanadisans for controlling our behavior and causing chaos.”

“Four?” he says nervously.

“Yes. Myself, Pyke, Navlon, and an engineer.”

“Ah.” He lets out a breath. “Oh. An engineer. Huh.”

“With your permission, we’ll assemble a team to explore the Harsi ship, although, of course, as the science officer, I will enter first.”

“Yes, of course.”

The walls and ceiling suddenly go black.

“Oops.” Zeerah pops up, screwdriver sizzling. “I, uh, restored communications.”

The emperor’s symbol shines white against the black field.

Once, this symbol inspired terror in me and probably every other human. More recently, it’s inspired frustration.

Ukuri’s fingers squeeze me again.

Yes, that’s right.

I take a deep breath, let the feelings of rightness and safety wash over me, lean against him. He’ll always be here for me at exactly the right distance. Not smothering, not sobbing, but here, solid, incisive, and perfect.

The screens resolve on Allie trying to force a door shut. Chunks of furniture and bits of metal, hands, legs jam into the gap, keeping her from closing it.

“Where the heck did you go? Stupid—Is somebody, anybody in the region, still taking calls?”

The viewscreen doesn't quite pick up what's being shouted on the other side of the door. It just sounds confused and horrible. A riot.

The emperor stands behind her in a ready stance. He lifts his fingers and ejects his solid lance blades. They punch through the gap, annihilating the furniture in sprays of metal. He moves beside her to help force it shut.

“The arch chancellor disappeared. We're trying to surrender! Anyone?”

Ukuri moves forward. “Very well, I accept.”

“What?” Allie releases the door to her husband and turns to face us. Her voice sours. “Oh, it's you. Where's the arch chancellor?”

“He, along with the bulk of the Vanadisan fleet and most upper level officers, has been incinerated. I, as the architect of their destruction, will take responsibility and accept your surrender.”

“You destroyed the Vanadisan fleet?” Allie puts her hands on her hips. “And what about the Harsi?”

“Fully investigating their ship is next on my busy to-do list, but they're immobilized at this time.”

“You serious?” She glances over her shoulder as the door inches wider. “Got any proof? Something I could blast across the whole palace network, maybe the whole empire?”

The captain gestures at the targeting screen. Navlon silently types.

“Certainly. One moment.” Ukuri gives Allie a confident smile. “In exchange—”

“In exchange!”

“There're a few things I'd like from you. First—”

“First,” I interrupt, stepping forward. “Can you reinstate Ukuri's genetic line?”

“No, I can’t. I mean, I don’t think I can. If I can, I’ll do it for him. Where’s Menavi?”

“We left her narced in a pod.”

“Narced?”

“Like how she drugged us to make us compliant. At least I didn’t spray her with lusteal.”

Allie blinks rapidly. “I think I’m having a misunderstanding. She was supposed to cure you.”

“She forced my glove off right before hull crack and broke my hand. Ukuri fixed me, but I still can’t fully close my fingers.”

“I definitely misunderstood something.” Allie frowns deeply. The riot behind the closing door seems to be calming. She glances at her husband, who steps back and nods, then faces us more serenely. “Is there something else I can do for you?”

“Yes, a few things.” Ukuri smiles. “Assure the Arrisans bonded with your shipmate Inga that there’s a place for them in your empire. They helped us retake the *Spiderwasp* and restore our weapons in time. Being allowed to stay together without penalty or hardship is, on balance, the least you could do.”

“Sounds good so far...”

“That’s all for now.”

“For now?”

“My other request is something trifling for you, not even worth discussing in this public forum.”

Allie squints.

From the data tablet, Olasi announces, “Captain, my guys found the entrance the Vanadisans must have used to get into the Harsi ship. It’s got a regular atmosphere shield, normal technology we can bust open.”

“Tell them to wait. I’m sending a team.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I don’t know.” Allie crosses her arms. “*Trifling* and you don’t sound right together in a sentence.”

“Unfortunately, we lack the time to discuss it now as my fellow shipmates are awaiting my services.” Ukuri smiles pleasantly. “But you’re welcome to follow along as I become the first Arrisan of this era to enter an activated Harsi ship. If you’ll excuse me.”

He offers his hand to me.

I take it.

“Ah, Noemi.” Allie twists her lips to the side. “Are you sure you’re doing this of your own free will? We discussed you coming to Arris Central and you seemed amenable. Are you sure you’re not just appeasing him?”

“I’m sorry, Empress Allie.”

Her brows lift. I rarely use her title, but I do it now, on purpose, to distance myself from her.

“But I was actually trying to appease you.”

“Me?” She suddenly frowns. “Wait. Is that Captain Zeerah?”

“Uh, hey.” Zeerah coughs, waves. “So. Long time no see.”

While Allie’s speaking with Zeerah, Ukuri and I leave. We pass the bridge crew taking turns with the medkit. Pyke and Navlon follow us to the grav tubes. They’re heading down to engineering, of course. We split off to the science office to gather Ukuri’s materials and check on Tom.

He’s sleeping on my bed, an orange tiger in need of endless beauty sleep.

Thank goodness.

I snuggle him close and stroke him. He lifts his head with a big-cat yawn.

Now that I’m assured he’s safe, my brain worm tightens around my spine.

Our truce is ending.

I go into our exam room and sit on the slab.

Ukuri finishes his packing, checks with engineering, and rests a hand in the doorway. His gaze rakes my form. He lifts a brow. “Feeling the effects from the gas?”

“Do we have time? Can you do it fast? I don’t want to pressure you.”

“Of course, Noemi, don’t worry.”

I spread my thighs.

He walks between them, nests his pelvis against mine. “I will always perform when you are my partner.”

I slide my fingers down my skinsuit, parting the fabric, and drop my smooth wrists on his shoulders as he bares himself. His ready cock glides into my wet passage and fills me, one thrust. Oh, yes. This is the man I need. We pause, savoring the delicious union. He glances over at my chart on the wall screen. Preparing himself to count, to control, to document.

But I have things to do today.

I flip his loose collar and bury my teeth in my old marks.

He moans.

Hot release fills me with fizzy bubbles, neutralizing the peppery worms, lifting me with a white glow.

This is exactly what I wanted.

And I am allowed to have exactly what I want.

He shudders, breathes. His hair is adorably disheveled. “Despite what happened between us on the moon, I am capable of resuming our research.”

“I know.” I smooth his hair, combing my fingers to reduce the lumps. “But maybe we should start a new research project. Like, which coupling is most efficient.”

“Or which position gives you the most pleasure.”

Ha. Every position with him gives me pleasure.

We separate and clean up, then continue on to engineering. I push the cart. Siv and Inga greet us in the busy engineering bay. Despite the noise and movement, everyone takes a moment to greet us or wave approval. It's not a ticker tape parade. But after their past treatment, it might as well be deafening cheers.

Our trip outside is very well documented.

Engineers buzz around us with small mobile sleds. The Harsi ship sticks its long black urchin spines into us like a nasty burr. We send drones through the atmosphere curtain. Even though the Harsi ship buzzes with alien energy, the ship's in hard vacuum. There's no life detected on it anywhere.

And so, in we go.

Ukuri takes samples from every surface, passing the swabs back to me to document and store properly in his science sled.

The first dead body we encounter is just inside the opening. A Vanadisan guard, perhaps. He's a charred husk. When Ukuri takes a sample, the body crumbles in half and floats in separate directions.

"Ooh, bad luck, that." Siv points out a shiny metal rim lining the atmosphere veil. "Died by electroshock ray. Bet that's how they all died. The Harsi metal wouldn't conduct it, but the modifications they added for communications would zap them all to ashy powder."

We float deeper into the vessel, transmitting our discoveries back to the *Spiderwasp* and the empire.

All the Vanadisans are char. Most are still strapped into the strange controls with wires and, happily for Siv, actual flex tape. Long holes puncture the walls.

"It's chilling in its own way." Ukuri documents the final position of the presumed Vanadisan captain, preserved beak open, charred. "Had the Vanadisans figured out a way to pilot this ship without introducing materials from our empire, they might be floating in the dead carcass of our dreadnought right now."

"So if you ever do meet the Harsi...?"



“They will be invulnerable to us, precisely.” He studies the dust of unknown ages on the edge of his sample swab. “We’ve developed new weapons, new defenses, new tactics in the last millennia, and our most formidable ship can’t even scratch their paint. Have they also used this time? I hope we will never need to know.”

He passes me the sample.

I catalog it for analysis.

We complete our tour of the ship. The mechanism by which it ate the second dreadnought is gruesome, compacting matter into a small ball with a density that Ukuri informs me is approaching the event horizon of a black hole. There are no survivors.

But while we’re investigating the Harsi ship, Captain Falkion dispatches an exploratory crew to the wreck of the *DragonMantis* and there, floating in space, they find survivors.

Survivors are also found in the Vanadisan fleet.

In the shifts and goras that follow, it becomes clear their military is destroyed. They’re a broken, crumbled enemy hunching for the final blow. Normally, the Arrisan way is to punch anyone who dares attack until there’s nothing left to hit. But Allie intervenes, and on her orders and terms, we repatriate survivors and even casualties.

And we have someone who needs to be repatriated too.

Inga volunteers to escort Menavi’s pod back to Arris Central.

“We’ll keep Menavi in narcostasis so she can be nice and rested.” Siv grins at me, then elbows stoic Navlon and gruff Pyke. “More convenient for us that way. Eh?”

Inga hugs Zeerah, then me. “I’ll miss you.”

I hug her back. We’ve been through so much together. I felt alone on Humana, and even on the cruiser, but now I have a small group of people I would call friends.

“Don’t invest too much time in sorrow,” Ukuri advises her. “It’s inevitable you’ll see us soon.”

Inga bites her lip, worried for us. “You think so?”

“Oh, yes. As soon as they crack Menavi’s pod.” He chuckles. “Inevitable.”

Well, if he’s not worried...

Their exit coincides with an arriving flood of science officers and engineers. Ukuri assumes charge of the science officer side of the investigation, and Olasi delegates an underling to manage the engineering investigation so she can focus on restoring the *Spiderwasp*. The task is two-fold: Understand how the Vanadisans modified the Harsi ship to operate it, and shut it off before the Harsi notice its existence and come for it—and us.

Despite the shared goal, the teams fly in at war with each other. On the Harsi ship, they stumble into each other’s way, risking real injury. Ukuri has to spend so much time mediating, he almost loses his temper.

Almost.

But with the goodwill of the *Spiderwasp* engineers, and the occasional call to Siv for advice on how to communicate, Ukuri manages reasonably well.

Zeerah, for some reason, does not take the opportunity to leave the ship with Inga and her trio. Freeing Captain Falkion during the Harsi ship attack seems to have earned her some begrudging good will from him. He’s quieter, even introspective around her, and starts teaching her how to pilot official Arrisan ships.

She still spends a lot of time in my science office. It’s one area the captain avoids. She’s there when we get the inevitable summons from the Science Center.

“Are you guys going to be okay?” Zeerah sits on my bunk, ankles crossed, teasing a cluster of Vanadisan feathers on a string along the floor for Tom. “You need me to water your jungle or anything?”

“Everything’s set to be self-sustaining for forty-four standard years.”

“I could pet sit. I’d get good at it.”

“Thanks.” I pack the last blush into my makeup bag. We’ve been so incredibly busy processing samples from the Harsi ship, but I insisted Ukuri carve time to remake my makeup.

He has his secret plans to deal with Menavi.

Well, I do too.

We made quite a bit of progress after Lia returned to Humana and scanned my favorite brands. Ukuri’s insistence on removing toxins caused most of the delay. But, with a whole universe of ingredients with which to refine my pigments and finesse my palette, we created the essentials. My grandmother would be proud.

“But Tom’s coming with us.”

“To Arris Central? Will he be the first cat in the center of the empire?”

“I believe so.” I open his travel pod. It’s prefilled with his food, water, and cat bed shaped like a shark’s mouth.

“Catarine doesn’t mind?”

“He’s no longer her cat.”

Tom notices the freshly grown cat grass. He drops the feather teaser and jumps in.

I close the pod. “She’s given me her official word.”

Technically, I told Catarine that she was welcome to visit whenever she wanted, but that I was assuming full and permanent custody of the cat. She fully admitted that her alien-diplomat lifestyle didn’t lend itself to stable pet ownership.

“You’re right, Noemi.” Catarine tucked her brown hair behind her ear and frowned. “Can you promise me he’ll never end up on a scientific slide?”

“Can you promise that your Arrisan will never destroy something you love?”

She sighed. “Yeah. Okay. I appreciate everything you’ve done. And I hope that the next time we meet, Tom will still let me have a little snuggle.”

“I’m sure he will.” I waved Tom’s paw at her, making my voice high-pitched and squeaky. “Thank you, First Mommy! I’ll always have a snuggle in my heart for you.”

Catarine smiled with a tinge of sadness, but she overall looked relieved, like she knew it was the best choice.

So, yep, he’s fully and officially mine.

“He’s going to be a well-traveled cat.” Zeerah looks in.

In the case of any hull breach, he’ll float in comfort with his cage’s own gravity, also with all supplies necessary for up to forty-four standard years. He’ll be safer and more comfortable than any human travelers.

Then she sighs.

I enfold her in a warm hug. “I’ll be back before you know it.”

She returns my hug, all angular in her skinsuit. “You act like you’re going off on a fancy vacation. Like, your honeymoon.”

I guess I am.

“Noemi?” Ukuri calls me from the door to the science office. “It’s time.”

I release Zeerah. “See you.”

“You better.” Her chin wrinkles and then she forces her mouth into a grin. “I’ve still got your stocked medical kit.”

“You have that?”

“Somewhere.” She waves in the direction of the wall, follows us out of Ukuri’s office.

I’m about the same size as an Arrisan, but Captain Zeerah is taller, especially when she stands straight. My last view of Zeerah is of her standing alone in the hallway being passed, largely unnoticed, by other Arrisans.

I suppose this does feel like a honeymoon trip.

For one, it's delightfully restful. Without being interrupted to mediate fights between scientists or engineers, we actually get some work done. Every shift we sit together silently analyzing samples and cataloging results. I bring him tools. He brings me nutrient cubes. Our pilot transports excess materials and reassigned Arrisans, so we can pass clegs upon clegs with only our own company. It's bliss.

Ukuri is unfailingly upbeat as we arrive at Arris Central.

He loves his plan.

But he's not the only one.

During the last quiet clegs, our ship navigates heavy traffic to dock on the outer rim of the Arris Central atmosphere shield. I spend it not working on our samples, as Ukuri does, but sitting at my reflective wall screen with my makeup. Tom sits and watches me with wide cat eyes.

When we meet at the gangplank, Ukuri studies me. "You changed your coloration."

I link our hands. "You noticed."

"It's very slight, but you've emphasized certain regions with highlights."

I get the sense that it doesn't make much of a difference to him, which is good. It means, as always, I can do what I like and he'll fully support me.

And I really love that about him.

On our way through the artificial planet, which is organized by importance as we approach the inner spheres, he points out interesting landmarks. Vendors, nightclubs, embassies. Noble houses.

And the palace.

Wow.

The main entrance is the top of an Arrisan's head, with knives jutting out like a crown of thorns. His eyes point upward, and the walkway goes through his open mouth. Our

comfortable ship looks like a speck of lettuce caught in his teeth.

Palace staff lead us inside. The narrow gray walls glow with imperial gold and are carved in a repeating pattern of crossed blades.

Allie introduces us to her husband, Emperor Ranse. He has an unusually muscular build and iridescent white skin. His hair is longer and a bluish shade, and the same tint matches his lips. His eyes, though, are warm and silver. His hands are large as he enfolds mine and welcomes us.

He and Allie host us in what she calls their intimate conference room. It's huge. Also, since this is an Arrisan structure, there are teeth and knives carved into the floor, the walls, and the furniture. And, here and there, the immortal ninety-six. It matches the dramatic swirl on her dark neck and proud shoulder.

Just like the swirl on my bronze skin.

As we sit down, a message urgently pings on Allie's armrest.

She and Ranse trade glances, but they both ignore it.

The chairs cup us fully so that our backs are never exposed. There's no food, no snacks or tea.

I channel my great-grandmother's grace and poise.

Allie is absolutely a queen. "Noemi, you look even better than I remember. Whatever you're doing to your hair and your skin, it's working."

"Thank you." I offer her a small, atmosphere-controlled transparent box holding a single plant. "We grew this for you."

She tilts the box. The plant inside stays in place. Small red berries hide beneath green leaves and delicate white flowers. "Is that...strawberries?"

"We're refining our growth habitats and should soon have pineapples, coconuts, mangoes, and bananas."

She opens the box, hovers her fingers over a red fruit. “May I?”

“It’s yours.”

She plucks the ripe fruit, takes it on her tongue, closes her eyes and smiles. “You might know that my family had an apple orchard, but we also had strawberries growing along the back fence. This tastes like my childhood.” She opens her eyes and sighs. “A simpler time.”

I nod graciously.

She offers Emperor Ranse a strawberry with the caveat that he probably won’t like it. Our food is not popular in the rest of the empire. He pulls off a hard green fruit with half the stem still attached and politely eats the whole thing. Allie presses her lips together. He admits it tastes like most food on Humana—too soft, mushy, and with a weird mineral aftertaste.

Her armrest urgently pings again.

Ranse grimaces.

“Go,” she says. “I won’t be long.”

He kisses her hand, bids us farewell, and exits into a clamor of advisers who push past him, calling desperately for Allie. He sweeps them out, tosses her a careless grin, and shuts the door for our privacy.

“Now, Noemi.” She studies me. “You are happy on the *Spiderwasp*? Assisting Ukuri? Because we can get him another assistant if you feel trapped and overly responsible.”

I start to decline, but Ukuri intervenes.

“In fact, you cannot ‘get me another assistant.’ Noemi is irreplaceable. It’s because of her that we’re able to progress on so many different projects while simultaneously analyzing the Harsi ship for the benefit and edification of the empire. Excuse me for saying this, but in comparison to Noemi everyone else, no matter how apparently smart or well qualified, barely has the intellectual capacity of a nutrient cube.”

Allie’s brows lift.

I should be used to his passionate and articulate approval, but honestly, it's still nice to hear that I have value, real value, more than just who my great-grandmother was or what's weird in my biology. It makes my heart ache with sweet tenderness.

I think this is love. It's not the overpowering self-destructive chaos of my great-grandmother's movies or my own family history. It's his unshakable faith in me, his small touches when no one's looking, and how there's always a space reserved for me at his side. The ache is my heart gripping on to a treasure so precious, it's painful to hold, so brilliant it's hard to look at directly. And now that I understand what it is, I have no desire to numb the ache away. I'm perfectly okay with carrying it. It's my secret treasure.

For Allie, however, I once more channel my great-grandmother's regal certainty. "This work is the most fulfilling of my life."

She nods slowly, focusing on my smooth temples and flawlessly contoured forehead. "You haven't had any problems with the implant? No negative side effects, something we should be afraid of?"

"The only side effects are godlike knowledge and mastery over all Arrisan-based technology. Occasionally, I get overwhelmed by knowing too much about my surroundings. When that happens, I simply take a deep breath and clear my mind." I demonstrate, sucking in the air with my diaphragm like a professional singer, and touch my thumbs to my middle fingertips.

Allie watches me, transfixed.

I let out the air and smile at her. "Perfect serenity."

"I'm glad to hear that. Esme is clamoring for one. As good as it sounds, science stuff just squicks me out. Um...Update on the genetics question." Her gaze shifts to Ukuri. "I can't control how your arena scientists select your race's genes. I can put in a good word, but that's it. I checked."

"Yes, thank you. Although I do hope someday to be reinstated, there's something much more valuable you can gift



me right now.”

“Which is?”

“A medal.”

“I’m sorry. A what?”

“Medal. Big, shiny, printed with ostentatious phrases like ‘Ukuri, hero of the empire’ with your and the emperor’s names on it. But still wearable, perhaps on a neck chain or pinned to my science officer robe.”

Allie’s mouth opens and closes. “A medal?”

“Isn’t that a human custom?”

“Ah, yes, and that’s why I’m surprised.” She types into a screen embedded in her armrest. “You want a big...”

“The bigger the better.”

“...shiny...”

“Very shiny.”

“...wearable...”

“Yes, correct, designed to be worn.”

“...medal...” She looks up. “Any shape or color?”

“Whatever is most common on Humana is fine. But your names should be able to be read from a distance. And it has to say something like, ‘Our greatest hero’ ‘unpayable debts of gratitude,’ ‘unending showers of thanks,’ that sort of thing.”

She finishes typing and sends it off. We spend a few more clicks catching up before an insistent pinging at her armrest tells us that she can’t snooze the empire’s problems any longer. She walks us through the tunnel of pointy inward-facing teeth to prolong our conversation. At the grand main entrance, an Arrisan palace staff member brings us the medal.

“Oof, it’s heavy.” Allie passes it to Ukuri. “Can you wear that without hurting yourself?”

“Yes, the weight isn’t a problem. And it does seem to be legible from a distance.” He tilts the thin gold dinner plate

thoughtfully. “Can we have a smaller chain? Preferably something that lies flat, unnoticed under clothing.”

“Yes, I’m sure we can.” Allie looks at the staff member.

The staff person touches her ear, leaves, then returns quickly with a flat gold band that disappears beneath Ukuri’s collar.

Allie watches him put it on. “I didn’t realize you cared about something like this.”

“Oh, I don’t.” He smiles at her as I fasten his science officer robe, hiding it completely. “It’s not for me. You have my eternal gratitude, Empress Allie. Long live our human queen.”

Her eyes narrow, and her lower teeth worry her upper lip. She’s obviously asking herself if she’s going to regret this trifling request in a few kortans. Her gaze slides to me.

I smile serenely.

Like a god.

She sucks in a breath, shrugs, and clasps my hands. “It’s lovely to see you both. Good luck with the Science Center. Take care.”

“Thank you.” I bid her goodbye and link my arm with Ukuri’s.

We stroll to the chauffeured palace ship that Allie’s lent us to fly around Arris Central. “We don’t need luck. I have a plan.”

Yes.

That’s why I’m not worried at all as we soar up, through the levels, and land in front of the ominous Science Center.

TWENTY-SIX



# UKURI

**M**y first time entering the Science Center is pinned in my memory like a helpless, fluttering creature stuck with agony and inevitability. Over time, I dulled the pain and froze myself into place.

Today, I break free.

Noemi stands beside me, looking up at the monumental outward-facing spires, curved over us like claws about to rake us in. “You went here for school?”

I link hands with her. This is a human custom, but it’s so convenient for keeping her comfortably within my grasp. “Every other shift for my entire training.”

“Creepy.”

Yes, I can see why she would think so.

We cross the busy yet silent halls, the only noise the mutterings under breaths of students and researchers alike, and the swish of robes as they race between labs, lectures, and classes.

I turn toward a familiar wing. At the end lies the office of head of the Science Center.

Noemi looks at me, silently asking if we’re sure everything’s fine.

Of course we are.

As I approach, the door scans us and opens.

Inside, the lower-level members of the tribunal are already seated against the wall. The middle seat, where Menavi will sit, is empty.

My seat is a small backless bench in the middle of the room.

I take it.

Noemi thoughtfully stands behind me and rests her hands on my shoulders, a tactile reminder that I'm not alone.

Once, this summons would have been my greatest nightmare. Reliving the shame of my father. Dooming my genetic line even more.

But now?

I almost can't suppress my amusement. But I do. The other members of the tribunal won't appreciate it.

Yet.

Menavi bustles in behind us with a science cart. "Ah, Noemi. Let me just inspect you."

I stand smoothly to face her as Noemi dives behind me.

Menavi stops, shifting her weight. Her smile is fixed, a little hurt, awkward. "Don't run. I'm not going to hurt you."

"This time?"

"I'll check you've healed properly."

"Ukuri's already done that."

"Right, but I can do it better, so come here."

She doesn't budge.

And neither do I. "Please don't disrupt the tribunal proceedings any more than is necessary. There will be plenty of time to inspect us afterward, when it doesn't waste the other members' time."

She blinks. Her smile widens. "You're right." She leaves her cart at the side of the room and assumes her spot.

I resume mine.

The most junior member, a highly focused researcher who's had his name honored three times, intones the rules of the proceedings. As tribunal chair he reads Menavi's charges. I'll rebut them, then the tribunal will consider my answers and decide my fate.

And, in rare cases, they also flip and consider the fate of my accuser.

That won't happen this time.

Sad to say it, but I am a mere science officer and Noemi is one of many humans. Menavi took a demotion to become head of the Science Center.

But I've learned.

She will never touch Noemi.

The chair reads Menavi's extensive and damning list of charges. Lack of scientific distance, failure to share results, specimen hoarding, needless damage.

She's rescinded her accusation that my research has produced nothing worth sharing. Saving a dreadnought with Noemi's aerosolized lusteal blocker must have struck at least one person as worthy.

The tribunal chair finishes reading Menavi's list, sets it down, and folds his hands over it. He studies me through his lenses. His eyes are hidden. His mouth flat. "Ukuri, you've been brought before this tribunal under serious allegations. How do you plead?"

I stand.

There is only one response for Arrisans.

Fight.

"I do not deny the seriousness of these allegations." I treat each of them to my personal smile. "But unfortunately, they're as empty as the Harsi ship I've spent these past goras researching."

There's a rustle through the tribunal.

“Some might say, how can I keep Noemi with me when I’m researching the Harsi ship? Surely they’re unrelated fields; therefore, that’s specimen hoarding.” I pace before the panel. “And from that perspective, they would be right. But her presence was instrumental in stopping that ship, as is well documented in our military and scientific reports. In that case, I am simply making use of her as an invaluable resource.”

More rustling.

“You will find the other allegations follow a similar path. From one perspective, there is verisimilitude. From another? The truth is revealed.”

“And what truth is that?” a highly decorated researcher demands.

“This is a petty disagreement between a science officer who’s obsessed with specimens, and another science officer who happens to be doing adjacent research. The only difference is that the obsessed researcher is a former arena scientist and current head of the Science Center. You can see how it can cause enormous conflict.”

The hall stills.

But I’m only slyly extending my intellectual blades right now. In the stillness, I hide and watch.

Menavi’s smile remains fixed. “Will you respond to the actual allegations? You accuse me of specimen obsession, but you’re the one who’s tormented and damaged specimens. You tried to kill Catarine and Noemi, and you’re responsible for spreading fear and hatred through our empire. You’re just like your father.”

Tension zings through the silence.

Noemi looks at me.

Well, this is not unexpected.

“Ah, yes.” I chuckle without mirth and resume pacing. “My father. Considering your reign of terror when you drugged me to have unrestricted private access to Noemi, it’s

ironic that you think I'm the perpetrator, when in fact, I'm your victim."

"Again avoiding the allegations. How do you justify intending to kill multiple precious human specimens?"

"I can't."

She nods.

"I only ask that if you've updated the review board requirements around ethics, that all the members of my tribunal kindly submit to the same scrutiny over their past experiments."

There's an awkward pause.

"We're discussing you right now." One member harrumphs. "And your accuser is right. You have a clever turn for everything, but no argument of substance."

"More substance," another member agrees.

"Hear! Hear!"

"Address the allegations."

Hmm.

Apart from Menavi, I doubt any of them care about me, my father, or my research. But siding with Menavi gives them potential goodwill.

We are supposed to be logical and emotionless in the Science Center.

But beneath the crust of dry intellectualism bubbles a cauldron of viscous prideful lava.

I couldn't see it before.

But now?

I know.

After the tribunal finishes tearing down my rebuttal, the chair stands to read Menavi's predetermined verdict. "From the evidence presented in your words and tattooed on your specimen's skin, you've violated multiple core tenets. We cannot tolerate this abhorrent behavior in our ranks. By



unanimous consent, the tribunal hereby strips you of the role of science officer.”

My stomach lurches. I prepared for this contingency but it surprises me how deeply I’m affected. “You’re making a mistake. One you will seriously regret.”

“I don’t think so.”

“I wasn’t talking to you.”

The tribunal chair indicates my chair. “Remove your science officer robe and leave it here.”

Behind him, Menavi beams.

Irritation sizzles through me.

My arguments were sound. My results excellent. My methods, as problematic as they were, are not the worst in our hallowed halls.

And again I’m cast aside for another person’s hubris.

“Wait, please.” Noemi presses her palms together. “Isn’t there anything we can say or do to reverse your decision?”

“No,” Menavi says with glee. “Remove the false robe of my office.”

Ah, yes.

This time, I’m not alone.

All that irritation pokes the lava, and I let the steam out in a long sigh. No more pushing it down. Let my anger spatter, let it sizzle.

I fold my robe.

The empress’s medal bounces gently against my chest.

I walk to the backless chair to commit the final act of losing my status.

“Wait,” the tribunal chair says.

I pause and turn on my heel, careful not to smile with too much smugness. “Yes?”

The tribunal chair squints at my medal. “What is that?”

“What? This?” I rotate to face him fully, and then take a few steps closer, passing by the other gawking tribunal judges. “It’s just a small token of the empress’s gratitude for stopping the Vanadisan fleet, saving a dreadnought including curing its entire crew, and investigating the first activated Harsi ship found in generations. Perhaps you know of the human custom to bestow honors in the form of these medals...?”

The tribunal members exchange worried glances. The palace is not an insignificant source of their funding.

“You can use it to reflect cooking rays on your future asteroid prison.” Menavi indicates the chair coldly. “Return my robe.”

I clench it. “You demanded this. Your future regret is on you.”

“Robe. Chair. Now.”

“Very well.” I drop the robe on my chair.

Decades of work finished.

My final hope to reinstate my genetic line dies.

But I am not unhappy.

Although to this very last moment, I thought I would win, losing is a rare and bitter feeling.

I savor its uniqueness.

With losing comes an unusual hit of freedom.

My life here is over.

But my life? It’s just beginning.

Noemi watches, hands clasped, silently supportive.

Yes. Together, we will be just fine.

Menavi hustles down the steps with a smile sharp enough to cut glass. “Noemi, as you are now without a viable researcher in the Science Center, you will come with me.”

TWENTY-SEVEN



# NOEMI

I turn away from Ukuri's loss and heartbreak and look at the woman responsible for crushing all his dreams.

Even though I feel confident in my skinsuit and this situation, a zip of fear runs through me, and I automatically lower my head.

That's the trauma, though.

I lift my eyes immediately. "No, thank you." I pivot back to Ukuri and hold my hand out to him

He takes it.

Menavi makes an impatient noise. "Ukuri can no longer watch over you. He's going into exile. We're sending for a ship now."

"No need." Ukuri leads me swiftly to the exit. "I can arrange my own transport to the Arsenal."

Menavi stops. "The Arsenal?"

Ukuri's mouth twitches. He looks at me.

Part of me wants to bolt. I'm so close to escaping her forever.

But he's lost everything else. He wants to have the final word against Menavi? Of course I can give him this.

I nod.

He releases my hand, taps his fingertips together, and faces Menavi. "In the science office, obsessive pursuit of a single

result cages your mind, bends your thoughts, and closes off every alternate theory. I didn't necessarily see this as a danger until quite recently. You miss the bigger picture."

She laughs breathily, then wipes her mouth. "I'm not really obsessed. I'm just the most qualified to fix Noemi's asexuality. She needs to be human."

"Yes, well, unlike the lusteal calming spray that saved the entire empire, I was unable to develop an antidote to this type of research blindness. Perhaps at the Arsenal."

"Yes, but she can't go with you. I ejected you."

"And in so doing, you eliminated any loyalty to you, to the Science Center, and to the core tenets of science. I am unbound."

"No."

"What you've failed to realize in your narrow, blind, obsessive focus is that I was on loan. Zai reminded me kortans ago when he silenced my publications. I may have been trained in the ways of science, but I am, first and foremost, a blade."

"Noemi's not."

"Noemi is what the engineers and most others would call my Amante. My sacred life partner, my mate. If you wish to attempt to split us apart, we who are bonded with a mating bite, you'll need to submit your request to Esme and Zai. Because I no longer take orders from you."

"But...but Noemi, you have to stay. Only I can change you, fix you to be normal."

I turn to Ukuri. "Do I have to listen to this?"

"Absolutely not." He pushes open the doors. They fly wide, exposing the busy halls.

"You have to stay with me!" Menavi lunges forward.

I spring out of her reach.

Ukuri pivots to face Menavi and opens his arms in a deadly embrace. His forearms bulge as his blades emerge,

sharp and terrible and gorgeous.

“Have you forgotten who and what I am?” He slices his blades through the air. Whistles and crackles sever electrons from atoms. “Allow me to reeducate you.”

Menavi pulls up short. “But I need her data.”

“No,” I say.

“Um, maybe we can work something out. I’ll take back my complaint. You can stay a science officer.”

“It’s too late, Menavi.” And the richness in his smile and his dark velvet tone makes everything else worth it. “We are, by your own tribunal, completely and utterly severed from you. You receive nothing from us, forever. And anything you do ever receive again will only come via a formal request to Zai.”

She blinks slowly.

“Congratulations on winning.” Ukuri sucks his blades back into his arms and turns. There’s no robe to flare, but the heroic medal he commissioned gleams as it catches the light. “May you truly enjoy the taste of today’s victory.”

Once more, he takes my hand.

“Congratulations,” I tell Menavi over my shoulder, and I quickstep to keep up with Ukuri’s distance-eating strides.

My heart thumps in my chest.

I feel great and terrified and exultant.

Maybe I could never tell the neurologists no, but I’ve left the Science Center with a real zinger. I couldn’t be more pleased.

The Arsenal-bound ship is barely large enough for us, the other empty-handed Arrisans it’s transferring, and my hold-filling luggage. There are no private rooms.

Ukuri makes a note on his data tablet and begins calculations, muttering under his breath. “How long until we reach the Arsenal? Ah, yes... Carry the... Hmm...”

He carefully sets a timer on his data tablet. “Should...do it...”

“What are you timing?”

“I’m calculating when the next science team is due at the *Spiderwasp* to investigate the Harsi ship, and how soon Zai can receive the Science Center’s desperate plea begging me to come back.”

It makes me ache. “Oh, yeah? How long?”

“Not long.” He finishes his calculations, then hits Start. The timer begins counting down. He nods at me confidently. “Not long at all.”

I want to comfort him, but I’ll be sleeping upright or sprawled over Tom’s pod, so it’s not the time. They can force him away from science, but they can’t take the science away from him. It’s who he is. Who they made him to be. And once again, it’s ripped away from him.

The blades’ home, the Arsenal, floats in space. It’s much larger than a dreadnought, but the engineering bay dock where Esme meets us looks the same. Engineers, halls, and grav tubes are the same everywhere. The biggest difference is how many blades we pass who all look and act gruff and dangerous like Sithe and Pyke.

Ukuri is so very different from them.

But in the same gray skinsuit, striding quickly behind a swiftly moving Esme, perhaps he does look the same. “When will we meet with Zai?”

“Zai’s not here.” Esme smiles back at us apologetically as she weaves effortlessly through the crowded halls. Her long black hair flies free, no longer constrained by the safety helmet. “I hope he can come back to us soon.”

“He left you?” I ask.

I guess Ukuri will go on a lot of dangerous blade assignments now. Being left here is better than being left in Menavi’s care, but it’s still not ideal.

“I often travel with Zai, but the others are more comfortable if one of us is available here.” She returns the nods and murmured greetings of everyone we pass.

I finally figure out what they’re saying. “Esmante?”

“Ha, yeah. It’s a combination of my name plus Amante. Kind of a, sort of, title.” She rocks her head side to side and rolls her eyes, like it’s so silly. “Little quirk here at the Arsenal. Well, there you go.”

Our small private room holds a sleeping pod.

“Food’s down the hall.” She points over her shoulder. “There’s a public gel bath. This is our only private room right now so it’s keyed to your two bio signatures. Next shift, we’ll head to the training grounds and see how rusty you are, so get your rest.”

She leaves.

Ukuri settles us in. Tom bounces around chin-marking his territory and then returns to his travel pod for crunchy food and serious grooming.

I remove my daytime makeup with a cleaning cloth and put on my nighttime fresheners and moisturizers. My skin feels tight. It’s been a long time since I wore a full face, and I know exactly how to make it feel much better.

Ukuri frowns at his data tablet. He’s studying his chronometer.

I remove my skinsuit and enter the double-sized sleeping pod beside him. My knees press into the padding. It’s like a pillow filled with sand, firm but moldable. “Adding time?”

“No, no.” He rests the data tablet on a shelf outside the pod and settles back. “Just...calculating.”

I remove his black lenses carefully, set them on the data tablet, then curl my hand around his neck and straddle his bent thighs.

One brow lifts. “Did you want to continue our research?”



Honestly, I want to comfort him for all the things he's lost because of me, and I also want to enjoy the skin-glowing wellness of a good, proper workout with him. Sex is one way to get both.

Sometimes, I still wonder if this is what sexual attraction is. Do people make a mental pros and cons list to decide whether they're in the mood to have sex? I always have to think about it, but I like that. I like slowly deciding whether I want Ukuri's hands on me, and more.

I definitely don't want uncontrolled emotions, obsessiveness and sobbing or urgency.

Maybe I am missing a piece.

But I don't miss that piece.

I snug my pelvis to Ukuri's and tug at his skinsuit. "I thought you'd never ask."

---

Ukuri

I've spent so much time trying not to think about the research I've lost—Noemi's hydroponics project, our lusteal-blocker refinements, the outcome of thousands of unprocessed Harsi samples—that I haven't spent much time thinking about research I can still control.

Research that involves only her and myself. Unlimited testing material, no biometric locks or special permissions required.

She snuggles up to me and helps me peel back my skinsuit.

Of course, my jack surges hot and hard for her.

She smiles and curls her hand around the shaft.

The embrace feels good. Hard. Just the way I like it. Small tremors radiate from her grip, stimulating my balls to tenseness.

“You know, some humans enjoy having their sexual organs sucked on.” She kneads my trembling jack. “Did you want to try?”

I'm intrigued. “What's the point of that? Reproductively speaking.”

“There isn't one. It's just fun. Pleasure.” Her warning-sign eyes gleam. “Want to try?”

“If you're determined to show me, I'm interested to experience it.”

Her lips curve. She bends down. Her lips engulf my hard flesh.

Warm, wet heat slides across my jack.

Soft pleasure dances from my nerve endings. Gentle, sweet as the fragrance of the earthy coconut fruit rubbed into her skin.

Her long hair slides forward, obscuring her face.

I tuck the locks behind her ears.

Watching her work me, trying to give me something like a gift, makes a strange scratching sensation in my chest.

A sensation to analyze another day, perhaps.

Her saliva trails down, tingling, wet against my nether regions.

This is nice. Relaxing. Perhaps that's why humans enjoy it. A pleasant massage, nothing more.

She eyes me, and then, with her mouth around my tip, she wraps her hand around my shaft and strokes once, hard.

The string connecting my jack to my balls plucks hard. White heat explodes in my brain, and my release shoots into her mouth, frothing with my groan.

She pulls back with a satisfied smirk.

I guess there is a reproductive purpose to using the mouth after all.

Then she looks around.

I stand, stepping out of my lax skinsuit, and find an empty sample cup. She spits the sample in and wipes her mouth on the back of her hand. "You're saving it?"

"To compare the potency of this extraction method versus the usual, and to run other analyses." I recap it and set it aside. Blood pumps through my body, energized and vital. I set her tablet to face us. We should collect data. I set it to record, and it displays our image in the room.

She gives a soft laugh.

I hook my arm around her waist, drawing her to her feet as well. "You have a prediction?"

"No." She allows me to take her hand and draw her finger from her collar to her navel, her skinsuit parting beneath her index finger that I control. "I love to watch you work."

"That's why you wish to continue our experiments?" I turn her away, grip her hips, and press her bare, soft bottom against

my still-hard jack. She's wet and hot already, just as I was for her. "Very well. We shall research which sexual position produces the peak amount of pleasure for you."

She leans against the wall, closing her eyes as I glide my jack over her outer sex, moaning. "It's most efficient when I bite you."

"We'll measure efficiency later." I reach around and cup her breast, teasing the small tan bud. "For now, pleasure."

She whimpers, pressing her chest into my palms, and her eyes center on the recording, watching us.

"Do you like this?" I nibble on the shell of her ear, and she sucks in a breath, gives a little heated sound that makes my jack taut. "Or this?" I glide my other hand down to cup her mound, explore the folds as she cries. "Don't be shy, Noemi, tell me what you like the most."

"I like it, but..." She reaches back and centers my jack head against her entrance. Her lips curve. "I want the spa experience now."

Spa experience?

She digs in her nails, pulling my jack inside her, tunneling to her core. Her socket grips me tight. She moans, low and deep, and shudders.

I tense, holding her still to recapture my breath. "Naughty, naughty. Now how will we get results?"

She bumps against me and cries out, shudders. "It's... fine...we'll do it...again..."

Have it your way, Noemi.

I grip her hips. Her buttocks pillows my thighs. This is something so uniquely human, this part of her body. Her tan skin, the brown color of her long hair. Rocking against me, taking every thrust, her strong thighs hold her steady. She's fascinating and terrifying and brightly alive.

She bucks, writhes, cries for my jack.

I wind my hand around her hair, gently pulling her upright so her back rests against my chest. My jack bobs in and out of her tightly twisted socket.

She clenches me so hard, I can barely see.

And yet, I have to make it good for her.

As good for her as she makes it for me.

She reaches back, claws me across the face.

The sensation tingles.

Like the rough bite prints on my shoulder.

Marks that tell me I'm hers.

And it pulls my strings. I'm her marionette. I let go of her hair, steady as I release in her over and over again, binding her to me. Inescapable. She can't get away. I have her trapped now in the cage of my body forever.

Afterward, we don't have sample cloths, so I sponge our fluids with an ordinary old cleaning cloth until her body is dry and comfortable. Recycling the cloth requires a battle against my instinct to preserve every single drop of her and me together so it can be studied, understood. But when I've overcome it, I stop the recording, catalog it, and sit on the pod as she tidies her face and hair. I don't understand why she pulls and prods, shades and decorates as she does. But I like the look she gives herself. Satisfaction. Whatever gaps remain in our understanding of each other, her satisfaction is our bridge.

I check to ensure her skinsuit is sealed tight and then tuck her into the resting pod. "Which position was more pleasurable? Facing toward me or away?"

"I'm not sure."

"Oh?" I tuck her hair around her ears, slide the top of the pod closed with her in my arms.

"I guess we'll have to conduct more tests."

Yes, such a reasonable response. There's always more to learn about each other's bodies.

And ourselves.

When I met Noemi, I never dreamed I could desire a small, anonymous life.

But here we are. I'm just another blade, and I actually feel very satisfied right now.

With that thought, I put myself into a rest state for the precise amount of time I can remain in Noemi's arms before I must rise again and prepare to prove my fitness.

Esme collects us at the start of the next shift. Noemi's putting Tom away, but Esme's eyes go wide and her voice rises in pitch. "Oh, a kitty!"

Noemi smiles. "Did you want to meet him?"

"Yes."

Noemi lets Tom out of his pod, and Esme scoops him up and hugs him to her chest. "Look at that handsome boy. What a soft, glossy coat. What a sleek, healthy kitty you are."

Esme's in no hurry to get us to the training ground. She buries her face in Tom's fur.

"You like cats."

"I love cats! I was always more of a rabbit person, but they need so much space for exercise and enrichment."

"We don't really intend to keep Tom in a pod. We wanted to check first your policy on pets."

"Oh, you can bring him to the training ground. We'll keep him away from novices. He could really stretch out."

Noemi looks at me.

I shrug. The novices are the only real concern in terms of control and safety.

"Great." Esme carries Tom into the hall. "This way."

Surely Esme's not guiding us for my benefit. No matter how long it's been since I've practiced on the main training field, it's not the kind of thing I'd ever forget.

She walks companionably with Noemi, who pushes Tom's pod on its hovers in case he gets tired and wants a familiar bed amid all the strangeness. Tom's alert and rotates his head, but he's calm as Esme carts him into the field.

Members from each class, from novice to advanced, spar on the wide open ground.

"Everyone?" Esme's voice rings out across the field.

Training instantly stops.

She lifts Tom. "This is our guest. His name is Tom. He's a cat. He goes in that pod with Noemi and Ukuri. Any questions?"

Tom's wide eyes take in the field. It's so vast, it's almost impossible to see to the other side. In the center, a hollowed-out, dead Harsi ship hangs. It looks unnaturally small.

Esme settles Noemi on the side of the chalk-marked sparring circle with Tom, then brings me to the center of the ring. I strip nude. She hands me chalk and water. "You know how this goes."

I do.

Starting with the first class, I move through the ranks, testing my reactions and observations against current students. I'm glad I got a little practice at the Vanadisan lab. Even so, my sheaths and limbs ache. At the midpoint, not even into the upper grades, the teacher-observers go to Esme, and she calls a halt. "We'll try again another day."

It's embarrassing, but it's the correct action.

I mop my brow while Noemi applies healing cream to my nicks and cuts. She's already done so multiple times.

"I'll train harder."

"Great. Well, can I convince you to come see our Harsi ship? Of course, you might be bored with ours now that you've seen a working one."

"Is it different?" Noemi asks.

I shrug.

“I think it’s interesting.”

Esme calls for a cart to drive us across the vast distance, which, considering I can barely step back into my own skinsuit and fasten it, is very kind. Then she blithely lets Noemi drive so she can snuggle with Tom. The cart bounces us across the field. I didn’t realize Noemi could drive a standard-issue hover cart, but considering her other skills and qualities, I really shouldn’t be surprised.

The dead Harsi ship floats like a moon in the exact center of the Arsenal, which happens to be this endless training field. Noemi parks beneath, and we follow Esme to what’s essentially a grav tube without any tube. It shoots Esme, Tom clinging to her for dear life, up into the interior.

“You had experience with Harsi ships all along?” Noemi asks.

“It’s different, as you’ll see, but every year after graduation, all the blades of the school sit together in the interior, meditating for a whole shift, to remember our purpose.”

Noemi nods, steps into the grav area, and flies up. I ascend after her. She picks her way through the familiar grand passages and keeps her hands close to her body.

“You can touch anything,” Esme calls as she leads us into a main room. “It’s a dead husk, like a washed-up sea star.”

There’s one big difference from when I was last here.

Red and brown birds chirp and fly through the ship, twittering and landing, taking off again. Red cardinals. A Humana bird. Their nests fit in the empty holes, the struts of the abandoned ship, and their colony is doing well.

Tom watches them avidly.

Esme sits with a tight hold on him. “Predators and prey coexist everywhere in our empire. We can enjoy both, we just have to take precautions.”

I watch as well.



It is strange to see so much life thriving in the bones of ones who have gone long before. It feels unsettling, somehow. Like the Humana taboo not to say their name, as if releasing our hope into their dead ship will alert the Harsi.

Magical thinking.

Their comforting red and unusual brown against the unsettling greenish-gray of the metal transposes life on death.

Esme finally clears her throat. “So Zai’s on the *Spiderwasp*. You might be interested to know you’re sorely missed.”

Ah, that warms the sore cockles of my heart. I sit up straight, a picture of a blade, and let out my grin. “Am I? Tell me.”

“Although you led the investigation a short time, you communicated with the engineers in a way that your successors, um, aren’t. Zai went to investigate on behalf of the blades, but he’s spending more time mediating than exploring.”

I laugh. Sweet, sweet schadenfreude. “Delightful.”

“We’ve also been contacted by the Science Center.” She turns to Noemi. “Mostly about you.”

Noemi crosses her arms.

“But also trying to invalidate the judgment that caused your relationship with them, Ukuri, to be terminated.”

I clench my hands to avoid checking my data tablet chronometer. I told Noemi the timer was just a bit of fun, that I was teasing myself, and if I reach for it now she’ll think it’s a lie, even though I’m perfectly convinced of the truth.

“Oh, really? How fun.”

“We’ve explained to them in no uncertain terms that they blew it and they can’t have you back.”

My heart stutters.

What’s this? Of course the outcome couldn’t be changed. And yet, the finality in Esme’s voice still affects me.

I put on my brave face. “I understand.”

“And that means we can’t have you working as our science officer either. We already have one. You’ll do my implant, of course. But the question is how to make use of your training and research so it doesn’t go to waste.”

Wastefulness isn’t the Arrisan way.

I stretch out my sore fingers, shake my pinging legs. Perhaps I worked my body too hard. I can’t think of anything. “What do you propose?”

“Well...” Esme strokes Tom’s coat pensively. “If you’re willing, Zai would very much like to give up his role as unintentional expedition mediator to another blade. One who could perhaps use the science equipment already there to make useful discoveries.”

My breath stops in my throat. “You want me to return as the *Spiderwasp* science officer?”

“No.”

Ah, I’ve jumped to the wrong conclusion because I want it so much. “I see.”

Noemi asks, “Can we continue our hydroponics research?”

“Sure, we can negotiate it.” Esme focuses on me. “But remember, you are no longer a science officer. You report directly to Zai. No one else has any control over either of you. Official science officers may be present, even those of higher rank, but they are outside your chain of command, and thus they have nothing to say to you at all.”

Wait.

That means...

Noemi’s wide eyes fix on mine.

Is this really it? Everything we hoped for? In one neat package?

“Oh, and Zai kind of insisted that the Science Center remove their warning and reinstate your genetic code.”

Esme scratches Tom's chin, even though his attention is fully riveted by the cheery red birds overhead.

"I hope that's okay. But they can't say your work is so important they're going to flip their own justice system upside down and also claim you haven't done enough to merit a genetics review. It's one or the other. And anyway, you literally saved the empire, and you earned a medal from the empress. So." She looks up, finally, with a hesitant smile. "I hope that's okay? With you guys?"

The birds chirp in the ship bones of the dead.

Noemi and Tom and I are bound for the living.

I reach out to her.

Noemi scoots close, resting our linked hands on my knee.

"Do you accept?" Esme asks. "I mean, you could stay in the spare room and be an ordinary blade, I guess. The Science Center's going to call us a lot to complain either way."

My lips twist with my irrepressible amusement. "Did they beg?"

"Oh, they tried. Zai doesn't have patience for that."

"Fabulous."

The alarm on my data tablet beeps.

Esme frowns. "What's that?"

I unstick it from my skinsuit and turn it off with a flourish. "A timer. Nothing of importance, just a reminder of my uncanny ability to be right. Noemi?"

Noemi beams. She's the most beautiful creature in the empire. Without me having to say anything more, she nods.

Yes.

I turn to Esme, midsnuggle with our cat. "We accept."



# ZEERAH

A light tap sounds on my door, yanking me from my sleep.

I jump up, dumping the data tablet off my lap, and bounce off the repurposed storage room's wall.

Oh. Right.

I don't have to run anymore.

I just really kind of want to.

A familiar male voice growls at my intercom. "Zeerah?"

"Uh, just a minute."

The tapping subsides.

I pull open my drawer and slather Noemi's lusteal blocker over every single atom of my body, including my hair and underneath my fingernails.

The tapping sound comes again.

"Yeah, yeah," I mutter, sealing up my newly altered, correctly sized skinsuit. "I'm coming. I'm coming."

I grab the electric screwdriver next to the door and hold it behind my back.

Then I open the door.

Falkion stands on the other side. Thumbs hooked in a fold of his skinsuit, leaning against his upper arm, he rests the top of his fuzzy Arrisan head against the doorframe. He's the very picture of relaxation.

Nerves jangle in me, followed by an emotion I'd rather not think too hard about. "What?"

He trails his gaze from my feet up my shapeless body to my eyes. "You missed our date."

"Date? What date?"

"To review the navigation panels on the bridge."

"That's not a—" I choke. "That's studying for a test. And I don't like to meet at the bridge. The others treat me weird when I'm up there."

"So?"

"So, they're going to..." I bite my lip and shake it off. Who cares? This is a pointless conversation. "I've got to study. Get out of here before somebody notices."

He straightens and points a thumb over his shoulder. "Want to practice?"

Ah. No. This is how he gets me. But... "Flying? One of the big shuttles? Or...?"

His lips twist into one of those arrogant Arrisan smirks. Scars from the last battle stitch across his brutish face. He steps back like a fisherman reeling in a big one. "Your choice."

Gah. No. I hate myself.

I tuck the electric screwdriver into a calf pocket. He doesn't comment. I lock the door, wishing my triple locks worked from the outside, and follow him, hugging my elbows at my exposure. "You better not be teasing."

"When have I ever teased you?"

I don't answer.

My heart thunders.

I really want to run, and the hard looks from the literal sea of Arrisans we wade through don't help the feeling. Now that I have a different skinsuit, they notice when I go by. They know I'm walking with the captain. And, if this keeps up, it's going

to get reported to someone who's going to do something about me.

The electric screwdriver bumps lightly against my calf.

We push through the busy rush in engineering.

A ship like the cruiser rests against one of the docks.

Sometimes, I think I'm crazy for not going home. I proved what I set out to do. I left Humana. I piloted a ship with actual passengers into deadly space, and some of them even made it back. We survived.

No one will ever sneer at my name again.

Other different ships of the empire float against their docks in massive sets of hangars that go in all directions.

This is incredible.

More wealth lies in each ship than exists in the whole of the cloud city, the most expensive and rich city of Nigeria, and capital, now, of Humana. These are the ships I've read about. Some are familiar from scrap heaps and junkyards. Most, I've only seen in my dreams.

And I just...

I can't go home.

Falkion stands beside me, nodding as every single Arrisan we pass salutes or otherwise recognizes him. "Pick your ship."

The big ones call to me like the roar of a majestic waterfall.

Mm. Not too big, Zeerah. Not today.

I select a small passenger shuttle. Falkion walks me up to the dock. No one stops us. No one asks what he's doing letting me, a human, climb right inside. It's one of the fancy new ones too, with an invisible column coating and transparent viewscreen. I take a few clicks to familiarize myself with the layout, the controls. He sits at the communications console, knits his fingers behind his head, and watches me.

And when I'm ready, he orders an engineer to tow our ship out of the atmosphere veil, beyond the tangled guns and repair crews and communication arrays, and into clear space.

Well, as clear as it can be.

I ease along the outside of the dreadnought, triple-checking paths and trajectories. The Harsi ship is stuck in the dreadnought. They're expelling it slowly, repairing it bit by bit, like working out a splinter.

The Harsi ship is not one I've studied. It's alien, and terrible, and very busy. The ship seethes with science officers, engineers, and blades, like ants exploring the crumbs left behind from long-gone picnickers.

At least, I hope they're long gone.

"Any questions?" Falkion asks, a little too close to my ear.

An unsteady shiver goes down my spine.

And then awareness pulses somewhere much lower.

Which I absolutely *do not feel*.

I lean away from him. "Uh...yeah, what's this unlit indicator? It's not labeled on the panel."

"It's the Harsi."

"Huh?"

"When they're sighted." He leans back in his seat again, his own solemn gaze resting on the ship of his ancestral nightmares. "The emperor will sound the alarm. Every warrior in the empire will go to our assigned area of space and prepare to fight."

"So it's never been used." I glide my fingertip over the flat indicator. "Maybe it doesn't work."

He looks away from me, his voice distant. "Someday it will light. And I will go to my assigned place, and save your planet, and every other one, from annihilation."

Except I've heard from Noemi and the others. The Harsi make their own metal biologically, and it's something



nobody's able to duplicate, or defend against, or cut through. If they do ever return, the best thing is probably to run away.

Because there are some forces in this universe you can't ever defeat. I know what happens when you stand and fight.

“What about the dreadnought? Can you even take it to its assigned place with a big old Harsi ship still impaled on it?”

A muscle in Falkion's jaw tightens. He sucks in a breath, lets it go. No reply.

Last stands are noble. Sad.

And seriously misguided.

Yet I can't be angry at him. He was so much easier to ignore when he was an oafish, growling braggart. Now...

Now, in gray profile, he could almost be handsome.

He cocks his head. “How are you enjoying this date?”

Nerves jolt through me.

I smoothly U-turn toward the engineering bay. “I told you. It's not a date. We are not dating. You're an Arrisan. You don't even know what dating means.”

“But you're the human who explained it to me.”

He waits until we're towed back into the dock before he steps into my path, stopping me from leaving. “I want to grow your desire for me. Tell me what else I should do.”

My heart thuds. “You don't like me.”

He steps forward, capturing my slim hand in his larger ones. “I do.”

“No, it's the spray. The Vanadisan drugs. They went inside you.”

He shakes his head.

“You wouldn't even talk to me if it weren't for their nasty, debilitating, toxic chemicals. Trust me. I spent kortans and kortans with women who suffered under the same uncontrollable impulses.”

“I don’t suffer.”

“You do.” I push his hand back to his own chest. “But I can’t take any more showers. I’ve shaved my head, scrubbed off raw skin. I’d rip out my own fingernails if there were some way I could help you. Because this isn’t you. And I’m sorry, Falkion. I don’t know how else to help you.”

He sucks in another breath, moves his jaw back and forth in his closed mouth, silently debating. Then he focuses on me again. “Do this again tomorrow?”

And there’s the squeezing feeling in my ribs.

I should run.

I know.

He doesn’t like me. The real him hates me. And if this ever wears off, he’ll hate me even more for taking advantage. It isn’t fair this has happened to him.

But this is a gorgeous new ship.

And this hangar is full of ships he could open for me.

One time, he said that he was going to shove me out an airlock with no skinsuit to get me off his ship. I wish I could go back to my fury from that time. Then I wouldn’t care what my presence was doing to him. I’d use him and feel perfectly free.

“Maybe,” I mutter.

He smiles.

My chest squeezes. Hard.

Something strange is happening inside me.

I rub my hand over my chest, give one glance back at the controls. Just one last glance. Just to make sure I shut everything off properly.

The Harsi indicator light on the dash flickers green.

Huh.

Wait, no.

My stomach drops.

The green warning light that the Harsi have been sighted turns on.

*Read the final book in the series, the [Blades of Arris: Falkion](#)*

*My newsletter subscribers receive a small sexy bonus scene featuring Noemi + Ukuri. Get “Noemi’s Ring” when you subscribe here: <https://www.starlanight.com/boa-newsletter>*



BONUS EPILOGUE “NOEMI’S  
RING” EXCLUSIVE FOR  
NEWSLETTER SUBSCRIBERS

I awaken in the sleeping pod to silence, without Ukuri.

And I'm a little disappointed. Today, of all days, I didn't want to be left alone.

I sit up as the top of the pod folds back, and I clamber out into the empty room. Aw. Ukuri's really not here.

Tom bats at me from a ledge up above. This room, which is supposedly fancier than our science office, has the usual gray walls and yet is more vertical than horizontal. With the many ledges the Arrisans use for their various exercises, Tom's in cat heaven.

I start some quiet music in my head—thanks, implant that connects to my new, massive, and very vibrant playlist—dispense a bowl of nutrient cubes, and peel off the night's sweat in a sludgy ooze bath. Then I squeeze into the communications console to put on my full face.

Just recently in this very console when I called my family, they were so happy to remind me that I once owned a spacious apartment with total freedom, delicious fresh food, and access to endless baths.

I do miss the baths.

“You can't possibly be happy there,” one aunt declared, and the others chimed in with their vigorous agreement. “Why are you staying with some Arrisan? He can't give you a baby. You're wasting your great-grandmother's legacy. Your mother would be ashamed.”

The urge to argue pressed against my fiery chest.

And I almost fell for it. I almost did.

Except then I remembered.

My role isn't to convince anyone. I can't, and I won't. It just wastes our time. I refuse.

“Send me the molecular analysis of my great-grandmother's jewelry, as I've requested,” I ordered them. “I've already given you a week to gather her collection, and I'm not even asking for you to send the actual pieces, I'm only asking for their scans. Now, you have one cleg to provide them.”

“Aw, we don't have all the gems...It's very difficult to operate the analyzing machine...We can't get back all the pieces you've requested...”

“Or I will contact my lawyer and cut you off. All of you.”

Above the gnashing and wailing, my closest aunt narrowed her eyes. “You've changed, Noemi.”

“Thank you.”

“I don't like it. This girl, she doesn't have respect. Think about it.” My aunt cut the transmission.

And her judgment landed on me like a weight.

But I shook it off.

Because she doesn't like that they can't push me around any more. I actually have more respect now. It's just that it's respect for myself.

In one cleg, magically, the molecular blueprint of the jewelry arrived in a large data file, and I snuck into the science office and repurposed the reprocessor to print it out.

That's a cool thing about reproprocessors. I've mostly encountered the ones used for food, but there are lots of different types, and they output identical jewelry to the ones my great-grandmother wore, minus the hand-crafting.

I didn't have to be sneaky. But there was one piece I kept hidden, to myself.

And now, clean and prepared, I stand and swing the skinsuit around my neck. It suctions to my body. I tuck the small velvet box into an inner pocket and fold the hood over my hair. The display crackles into place, laying out the hallway beyond my door, the status of the ship, and anything else I could possibly want to know, all at my fingertips.

“Did you want to come with me in the cat backpack?” I ask Tom.

He rolls on his ledge, his gaze captured by a small data tablet an engineer mounted displaying a video of sandworms.

“Don't watch TV all day,” I advise him, and stride out into the hall. The door closes behind me and seals in a secure lock.

This private room is in the third quartile of the *Spiderwasp*, which is far enough from the damaged sections near the bridge that I'm not inconvenienced by the ongoing reconstruction. I leap into the grav tubes, fall several floors, and swing out to my exit. My skinsuit contorts me effortlessly, and I feel like I could dance right out into the stars.

The small training room is almost empty at this time of the shift. Only one man trains inside.

And he is beautiful.

I rest my back against the door watching. Nude, Ukuri throws his massive blades out while sweeping his leg back, swings in a half-circle, twists, and slams the blunt side against the wall. A tiny sliver of metal flakes away where the sharp edge of his blades made contact. He stands, resets his position, then dives backward and rolls. His blades arc, the dirty metal is an extension of him, thick and wide and unstoppable. Other blades might be swifter or more silent, but he, surely, is the most artful.

He finishes his form, sucks his blades back into his forearms, turns to face me. Without his black surgical lenses, his white-silver eyes meet mine. “Noemi. You're up early.”

“How's your training going?”



“I’ve completed all basic sets.” He wipes his brow, checks on the wall where his blade scraped it. He grimaces, touches the line. “Now to finesse them.”

He confessed to me that his fitness test in the Arsenal was a wake-up call, and so when we arrived back on the *Spiderwasp* exactly one kortan ago, he began training in earnest. At first, he could only finish half the forms he used to do regularly, which shocked him because he hadn’t realized he’d become so weak. He’s practiced every day since, taking his redesignation as a blade very seriously.

I think he’s not weak. His blades really are larger and more unwieldy than the others I saw at the Arsenal.

But I admire his acceptance of his differences and his dedication to regaining his strength. Even if things are harder for us because we were formed differently, we just have to work harder to do the things that come easily to everyone else.

I hold out my hand. “There’s something I want to show you.”

He swings on his skinsuit, and as the fabric seals around him, he puts on his surgical glasses and links his fingers in mine. I lead him out, down several floors, to our old science office.

The current science officer assigned to the *Spiderwasp* is so paranoid that we’re going to swoop in and make a big discovery before him that he’s taken to sleeping in the Harsi ship. I don’t particularly mind. It makes it easier to repurpose the room for my own designs.

Ukuri strides in, as comfortable as I am. This was his office before it was my home. He checks the metallurgical reprocessor like he’s guessed what I’ve done. I think I’ve been sneaky, but he’s just so smart. It’s hard to take him by surprise.

“Can you come into the exam room?” I take off my hood, ask him from the doorway. “I want to scan your reaction to something.”

He lifts one brow.

Perhaps that sounds like a come-on.

If so, well...

Although I didn't mean for him to disrobe, he strips off his skinsuit, enters the small exam room, and rests a palm on the operating table. By now his suit has dried all his sweat. I close the door and click the lock.

He tilts his head. His lips curve in a smile. "We have the privacy of our own room now, you know."

"I feel like this place is more appropriate to commemorate how much we've changed."

One thing that hasn't changed is his hard cock standing at attention for me, reacting to my tainted lust. It's reassuring in its own way. Even though to this day I do not feel sexual desire, I appreciate that I'm attractive to him, and I have good and pleasant associations with the spa experience his cock can give me.

"And..." I pull a small box out of my suit and open it. Inside is a small palladium ring lined with diamonds. "This was my grandfather's wedding band. A replica. Are you familiar with marriage?"

"Human pair-bonding." He picks up the ring, probably analyzing it with his lenses. The diamonds catch the light. "Preceded by a wedding ceremony, succeeded by an intense reproductive period called a 'honeymoon,' if I'm not mistaken."

"Yeah, basically, the tradition starts with a proposal and offering a ring, often made with diamonds." I suck in a breath, open the velvet box, and get down on one knee. "Will you marry me?"

He studies me, the black of his lenses impenetrable, then looks away. "Well, this is a little awkward."

Is that because his hard cock is jutting out so at this angle it obscures my face? Or is it about my proposal? I suppose no reaction of his should surprise me. "A simple yes or no is fine."

"That's not..." He sucks in a breath, lets it out, takes off his lenses and sets them on the table. His white-silver eyes fix

on mine, and his expression as he threads his fingers in my hair and lifts me toward him is so intense it steals my breath. “Do you understand you’re the only one who anticipates me? You’re the only one who knows my thoughts, sometimes, even before I do.”

So he was thinking about marriage, then.

“We’re already married in the Arrisan way.” I slip my finger down the front of my skinsuit, part it to reveal his intricate mating mark. “I just thought you might be interested in the human one. An anthropological study. Kind of.”

He offers me his left hand.

Although we’re not married in the church, I slip it onto his left ring finger. The size is true, snug, and it looks unusually ornate on him. “You’ll have to take it off when you use your blades.”

“I’ll remember.” He clasps my hand. The hard metal is warm on my fingers. “Yes.”

A bubble of sweet emotion wells in my chest and pops, filling me with a tingling sensation. Tears prickle at my eyes.

He wipes one away with his thumb. “You’re sad.”

“No, the opposite, but it’s more...” I have to clear the lump in my throat several times before it goes down. “I’m more affected than I thought I would be.”

“I understand.”

He does. Out of all the stars and all the men in this entire gigantic universe, he’s the one who understands.

I push forward and press my lips to his.

He stills. Even after all this time, I think, he doesn’t expect our kiss. I’m not very demonstrative, I guess, and he simply allows me to be myself all the time without pushing any expectations on me. I deepen the kiss, swiping his lips with my tongue, and he opens, returning my push-pull with sweet, tender heat.

As I push forward, he leans back onto the operating slab, and I crawl up on top, straddling him. His hand slides into my suit and around the back to palm my buttocks. Arousal twists in my center, pulsing to ready me for the hardness he presses against my belly. He lowers his other hand and palms both cheeks, squeezing and massaging.

It feels good. “You like that part.”

“I like all your parts.” He proves it by running his hands up to my breasts, to my palms, to my hair and then he flicks off my loose suit and draws my knees up higher to rest my cleft against his taut cock. Then he grips my buttocks again. “But this is the first part I noticed. It entranced me. I couldn’t stop thinking about testing its firmness.”

“And? Did it pass the test?”

His lips curve. “It redefined the field of study.”

My bottom, ladies and gentlemen.

I’m so happy I have to suppress my giggle. “You know just the right things to say.”

His lips flatten, gaze distant, then he returns to me, so serious again. “You are the only one who thinks so.”

And it strikes me that even though he shrugs off frequent insults and angry barbs with a little laugh, because dry sarcasm is a natural and inescapable facet of his personality, he might wish that he communicated differently so the others didn’t always react to him so harshly. He might still feel the stings.

When I think that, my heart swells uncomfortably in my chest. I grip his cheeks, kiss him tenderly while sliding my breasts across his chest. His cock throbs against my cleft, and he holds me tight. I realign and guide his hard shaft into my wet center until he presses all the way home.

The orgasm sprinkles pixie dust through me, popping and sparkling with pretty lights.

He clenches my hips to hold me still. His forearms tremble, voice is rough. “You are *celestial*.”

I wipe a bead of sweat from his taut brow. “I love you, too.”

His chin wrinkles, flattens again. Like he was reaching for a casual smile but hit a deeper vein and realized how dangerously close we both are to breaking something fragile in ourselves.

And we are both so fiercely protective of each other.

I rock against him and summon another delicious orgasm. He laughs shortly in surprise as I undulate, getting my way, and then he drags me down and thrusts his cock into me hard and fast and absolutely gorgeous. The orgasms build and splash, musical notes hitting higher and bigger crescendoes, the very roof of the world blowing off with the two of us coalescing into a new biological form underneath. One that is, in fact, an entirely new being, Arrisan and human. Celestial.

And then he expels his release into me with a shuddering groan. The swirling form in my center ignites. Pleasure shoots out of my fingertips and my toes and my eyes. I can’t catch my breath. This is the best orgasm of my life, and I’ve just had an increasing number of the best O’s ever to set a new standard. Redefine the field of study, like he said.

I collapse on top of Ukuri with sweet shudder, and he holds me. We tremble together in the aftereffects. Our superheated warmth fades to an ordinary coziness, my muscles pinging. I feel deeply, profoundly well, like I really have been touched by the hand of God.

He eventually lets out a heavy gust of air with a stutter. “The reproductive honeymoon immediately follows the proposal. I see.”

“Ah, not usually. There’s supposed to be an official ceremony in the church, an all-night celebration with family, and then we register our marriage with the government office to make it official.” I trace the lines of muscle on his wide pectorals leading past his armpit and then up his neck to his ear and the cute little black-tipped spikes there. “I was over-eager.”

“The official ceremony must be in a church on Humana? It will be difficult to schedule.”

“Oh, I don’t need any of that.” I pop up, rest my forearms across his chest. “I just wanted to share my traditions and give you a ring. You give me so many things.”

“Do I? From my perspective, Noemi, it seems that you are always the one giving things to me.”

My chest swells again. I know what it looks like on the scanner. I’ve seen these pretty rainbow colors swirling often enough with him.

“That said...” He shifts me onto my side and separates us, unlocks the exam room door and leaves me nude on the operating slab. He returns a moment later with a black cube. “I was unaware of the tradition of diamonds, so, mine are somewhat out of fashion.”

I take the box. “Are you proposing?”

“I intended to do so directly after you scanned me. I thought it would make for an interesting before-and-after, not realizing the synchronicity our plans.”

The box glows, reading my biometric signs, and folds open like a sleeping pod. Inside is not a traditional wedding solitaire, but a thicker ring with four colored bands stuck together.

“It’s called an ‘ace’ ring. I made it from black tourmaline, gray chalcedony, white euclase, and purple spinel. These were the colors worn by asexual humans of your past.”

I can’t speak. My voice squeaks. “They were?”

“Before you were added to our empire, asexuals existed on your planet. This must prove beyond any argument that asexuality can therefore be a natural state for some individuals in your race. You aren’t ‘being Arrisan’ when you affirm your asexuality. You are, in fact, being you.”

A lump blocks my throat.

I slide the smooth ring onto my finger. It glimmers, subtle facets catching the light. I suck in a shaky breath. He always

makes everything right for me. I'm going to cry.

“Noemi.” He covers my hands with his, large and warm and gray like its own gemstone. “Since you've come into my life, I've learned to accept, even embrace the different aspects of my past and character that I previously hated. I feel a sort of wholeness, a peace that wasn't possible before. I accept all the quirks that previously irritated me. And that is due, wholly and completely, to my relationship with you.”

My throat works. Tears spring to my eyes. He's seriously not helping me regain control of myself.

He goes down on one knee in front of my nude body, lifts my hand with his ring already on my finger. “Will you marry me?”

“How...” I sniff, struggle to control my composure. “How can you even ask me?”

His lips curve, a soft smirk touching his earnest, adorable face. “I believe I was told that a simple yes or no is supposed to suffice.”

I cough, helpless laugh breaking through my tears. “Who said that?”

“Someone who knows me even better than I know myself.” He kisses my ace ring, which is also our promise and engagement and wedding ring. Every type of ring, it's ours, in his gift to me. “Will you?”

“Yes.” I draw him up and into my arms. We are simply two beings in this vast universe who are so different on the outside but whose interior body chemistries for once match on the scanner screen. My answer comes out in a broken whisper that means everything. “Of course, I'm yours, forever.”

## NOTE TO READERS

While I was researching this book, I learned so many things about asexuality, the most important things being that it's a spectrum and I'm on it.

Which launched a bit of an identity crisis within me because how can a romance author be on the asexuality spectrum?

Oh, I've learned so much in these past months!

I deliberately did not define Noemi's asexuality because I believe it's open to interpretation.

Asexuality shows up differently for different people.

But if you are well-versed in asexual terminology and microlabels, I discovered I am alloromantic, demisexual, and aegosexual.

The "aegosexual" one is the most interesting to me. It means that I just love reading spicy books, but I never insert myself into any spicy fantasies. I didn't realize that was unique! I thought everyone played paper dolls when they fantasized, but a casual survey suggests that it's only me.

My alloromantic drive to seek out partners and have relationships masked my demisexuality until, oh, 2023. In absence of a real-life love potion or Noemi's brain worm, I require a deep emotional connection before the bedroom portion of my brain even clicks on. I will never become accidentally pregnant with the billionaire's baby after a one-night stand. It's just physically impossible for me.



But I love reading about other people's accidental one-night stands. Mm, spice is the delicious part of life...

If you are interested in learning more about asexuality and finding out if one of your quirks actually places you on the spectrum as well, I recommend checking out *The Asexuality Handbook*. There are tons of microlabels and you may find just the one that fits!

I have never suffered any ill effects from my flavor of asexuality, but my heart goes out to my aromantic or asexual brethren who may face harsh judgement from family, friends, or cultures for daring to live according to how they were born.

May we all understand ourselves better, glow with love, and shower kindness on the world!

Sincerely,

STARLA

ALSO BY STARLA NIGHT

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today bestselling author Starla Night was born on a hot July at midnight. She hikes, scuba dives, and swims naked in the ocean. She writes about smokin' hot dragons and tattooed mermen at [StarlaNight.com](http://StarlaNight.com).

