



Warrior Redeemed

Cadi Warriors

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WARRIOR REDEEMED

CADI WARRIORS

BOOK 9

STEPHANIE WEST



Character Art by Sam Muraski

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PREFACE

Ava had long ago given up hope of being rescueded from the scaly aliens. She'd have to be her own hero. So, when her captors start evacuating, she sees her chance at freedom. Living in the wilds of a foreign planet is better than the abuse she and her fellow humans suffer. Except, the escape doesn't go exactly as planned.

While fleeing, Ava runs right into the cause of her captors' flight. The aliens infiltrating the base are strange. The exotic man towering over her is built like a tank. Literally, he is covered from head to toe in bony armor. Even more amazing, he is there to rescue her people. Too bad she can't go with them.

Scala didn't plan on finding his mate when he infiltrated the enemy outpost. He never wanted a mate or to settle down. Then he discovered the brave female captive. When she runs, he chases, desperate to save the human female from herself.

Giving in to the growing hunger is out of the question. There is a mission to accomplish, and only a savage beast would pounce on a vulnerable, newly liberated female. Apparently, he is a beast.

Ava cuts to the quick, softening Scala's hardened shell, making it impossible to resist her. She is his weakness and his

redemption.

ONE



ENEMY OUTPOST

Scala

Scala smiled at Payim as the Cadi warrior piloted the stolen vessel toward the enemy outpost. It was a relief his comrade-in-arms survived the crash on the harsh planet.

Not just survived. Payim managed to steal a Jurou Biljana cruiser and found a mate. Scala muffled an incredulous laugh. And I thought I was doing well scouting the nasty reptile outpost.

His gaze shifted to the human female, Elena, Payim's recently acquired mate. It was a miracle she'd survived for so long, living all alone in a cave on the inhospitable world. He looked past her to the string of volcanoes on the horizon, spewing lava.

This planet is as abominable as the Jurou Biljana and their base.

The reptiles truly were a scourge. They were manufacturing rift drives in the outpost, so they could spread their carnage and misery through the cosmos. Except that wasn't their only sin. If it was, they'd simply blast the outpost off the face of the planet. Unfortunately, there were human captives involved.

"Remember to stay behind me, please. You are not invincible in that armor," Payim instructed his human mate.

The Cadi warrior was right. It would've been safer if the female stayed on the frigate. The combat shells they wore would protect against standard disrupter fire when they entered the reptile's not-so-secret facility, but not from larger incendiaries. The biggest benefit was the disguise it provided,

perfectly mimicking the Jurou Biljana from their scaly heads to their thick tails. Between the stolen cruiser and the disguises, hopefully there'd be no firing at all.

Hopefully.

Scala grimaced and shook his head. This was supposed to be a simple reconnaissance mission.

We did confirm there are marooned humans and an enemy outpost on Gienah.

So maybe they were adding a little something extra to this mission, like liberating the human captives. They already landed on the planet, which was tricky considering the turbulent atmosphere, they'd surveilled the outpost, and now possessed an enemy cruiser. It only made sense to attempt a rescue. Though if any of his lieutenants pulled this stunt, he'd put them on notice.

“You must have knocked the sense out of me. I don't know why I agreed to this,” Payim continued mumbling to Elena, frustrated that his mate insisted on joining this foray.

“Because I threatened to unman you, then masturbate with your dick while you're forced to merely watch.” Elena grinned, her expression twice as disturbing with the reptile disguise.

“That would do it,” Scala chuckled, while Faktil coughed to cover a laugh.

The exchange between the newly mated pair went the way he would expect. Cadi warriors were naturally very protective of their mates. In this case it was warranted. Humans were a delicate race. They weren't born with a shell to protect them like the Osivoire. Except it was his experience that human females were as dogged as any Osivoire female. Payim was

lucky Elena was good-natured. There were females on Osi who wouldn't have been joking when they made such bodily threats.

“May the goddess bless you both.” Payim scowled at them before turning his attention back to the cruiser controls.

With an offended smirk, Scala turned to Faktil. “He’s definitely cracked. That’s just plain mean to wish on anybody.”

“I don’t know. The more spirited the female, the better.” Faktil shrugged, appearing intrigued by the notion.

“Be careful what you wish for,” Elena giggled.

They’re all cracked! Scala shook his head.

The last thing he wanted was to find his weakness, the one female who made his shell go soft along with the brain in his head. He had freedom to travel the cosmos, meet new friends, and have adventures. That was all over the moment he found his weakness.

Good for Payim for finding his mate. Except Scala was Osivoire, not a Cadi warrior like Payim and Faktil. By a twisted trick of evolution and a lack of males, his one true mate would come with a gaggle of other females. One female was tedious enough. He wasn’t about to be subjected to the whims of an entire conclave of females, until his spirit withered, leaving him a walking shell. He’d witnessed it with his patrem, and then there was what happened with his sobrus Adius. The image of Adius in the estuary, slumped beneath the water, his eyes staring blankly back at him stabbed his mind. Scala quickly shook off the sad memory. His sobrus died because of a female. No, he didn’t need to find his weakness. The name said it all.

“I will stay by your side,” Elena promised her mate, bringing him back to the argument.

It really didn't matter if she promised or not at this point. They were within sensor range of the enemy outpost, and there was no turning back now. Scala studied the viewscreen, recalling what he'd seen while scouting the reptile installation.

“I witnessed the cruisers leave from the south side.” He pointed.

“Did you spot any other access or exits?” Payim inquired.

“Not that I saw.” Scala shook his head.

“Our back-up can take cover by those rock formations. Cloaked, they should be fine.” Payim sent the message to the two teams following them at a distance.

There was a ping and everyone stared at the console.

“We've been detected and are being hailed,” Payim reported.

So it begins. They all looked at each other, the mood in the cruiser turning serious.

“The combat shell disguise is good, but what if they recognize we're not the Jurou Biljana assigned to this vessel?” Faktil grimaced.

The Cadi male had a valid point. They'd been betting the Jurou Biljana cruiser and reptile disguises would earn them a free pass into the outpost, but that was probably ambitious. Maybe they should've spent a little longer tossing this plan together.

“We can't ignore the request,” Scala urged, eyeing the blinking light on the console.

“We’ll have to take that risk.” Payim reached for the controls.

“Wait!” Elena grabbed her mate’s hand before he could engage the comm. “What if there’s something to distract them, so they don’t focus on who’s piloting the ship?”

Scala’s gaze narrowed on the female, curious of what she had in mind.

“Like me.” Elena pressed her wrist and her combat shell receded, revealing her human form.

“No. Out of the question. I won’t have you vulnerable like that,” Payim snapped.

He sympathized with the Cadi male. Without the combat shell Elena would be completely vulnerable.

“The shell could be reset to mimic her,” Faktil suggested.

Scala cocked his head. It was actually a decent idea. But Payim’s responding growl instantly rejected the suggestion.

“I didn’t come just for the fun of it. Being myself might be the quickest way to get them to lead us to the others,” Elena insisted.

The console pinged again as Payim glared at his mate. They needed to decide something, and quickly.

“Fine,” Payim huffed, then grumbled something under his breath before switching on the comm.

“You were supposed to…” the Jurou Biljana onscreen began.

“We found something,” Payim rudely interrupted, behaving exactly like a foul reptile, as he made sure the feed was focused on Elena pretending to be unconscious.

“Another human?!” the reptile onscreen scoffed.

“Aye,” Payim replied, sounding annoyed. “I’m starving,” he added, obviously trying to make believable small talk.

“That will have to wait until you deal with the chattel.” The reptile smirked then cut the transmission.

A moment later the bay doors started to open, and Scala repressed the urge to cheer. That worked better than expected. They didn’t wait another moment and swiftly maneuvered into the hangar.

Something isn’t right. Scala frowned as the cruiser set down.

The hangar was practically barren. If the Jurou Biljana were manufacturing rift drives here, there would be more than a handful of vessels. There wasn’t a single freighter to bring in supplies or haul out the finished engines.

“It’s a good sign a squad isn’t already waiting for us.” He tried to look on the bright side, though he had a sinking suspicion they were too late, and the rift drives were already off planet.

Ava

“You forgot Yitu’s things?!” Vicarius Kur hissed as he paused stride in the hangar and spun toward her. Anger sparked in the outpost commander’s beady yellow eyes, his scaly tail thumping the floor threateningly.

Leaving the bag behind had been a last minute but calculated move. Kur literally just sprang this trip on her, not that he ever told her any of his plans ahead of time. The scaly asshole was all demands and swift reprisals if she didn’t act fast enough. Still, when Kur told her to pack, she assumed he meant just his travel gear, but he meant Yitu’s as well. It was completely unexpected. Kur never took his son anywhere. It was an even bigger surprise that she and Lucas were coming, too. In the two years since she’d awoken on this godforsaken planet and been made the Vicarius’ slave, she’d never been taken anywhere outside of Fuzyre.

It only confirmed what she suspected; something was going on. For the last few days, the mood in the outpost was more tense than usual and Kur was twice as surly. Now the Vicarius and his top lieutenants were loading into the massive ship in the seaside hangar.

I knew it. This is what we were waiting for.

She was accustomed to her enslavement and even the abuse, but that didn’t mean she accepted any of it. There was no disputing, she along with dozens of men and women were abducted from Earth. She’d seen the wrecked spaceship at the bottom of the canyon, when the alien lizards pulled her out of the freaky pod. She’d witnessed firsthand the volcanoes, green clouds, and the planet reminiscent of Saturn hanging in the

sky. It all screamed this was not Earth. She clearly remembered the debilitating terror and clutching Lucas tight as the overgrown iguanas herded them into a cruiser. Anyone who resisted died. Anyone who refused to get the language implant died. Anyone who didn't work died. This was her reality. She'd lived it. Except there was no way in hell she was living the rest of her life like this.

I don't fucking accept any of it!

The thoughts and memories swiftly shifted through her mind like a pep talk. Her hand tightened on Lucas's and Ava focused on the yellow-eyed scaly bastard.

"Apologies, Vicarius. I will run with Lucas to fetch it right now. I'm sorry for my stupidity," she swiftly bowed her head.

Kur tugged Lucas away and shoved him toward the loading ship.

"We will be quick." She again reached for Lucas, her panic rising.

"Go get it!" Vicarius Kur hissed, slapping her across the face.

Ava staggered backward. Her cheek stung and stars flickered before her eyes. At least the Jurou Biljana's claws hadn't connected with her cheek, but his next blow would flay skin.

Pain that had nothing to do with her cheek ripped through Ava as she looked at Lucas being led onto the lizard's ship. The plan was falling to shit. He was supposed to be by her side. She really had no intention of going to fetch the bag. They were supposed to be escaping the outpost.

"Yes, Vicarius," Ava quickly cupped her rear, mimicking tucking the tail she didn't have, as she bowed her head, then

rushed out of the hangar.

What am I going to do?! Tears threatened to blind her as she hustled down the corridor.

She already knew the answer. She'd follow the plan. Except, instead of escaping with the others she'd return to the ship. It was a bitter pill to swallow but she'd never leave Lucas. She'd sooner die.

Ava shoved down the pain and walked faster, careful to dodge the lizards heading toward the hangar. Most of them were high ranking assholes who'd have no problem shoving her to the ground. But at least no one stopped her as she made her way down the corridor. The Jurou Biljana were used to seeing her moving freely around the common areas to do the Vicarius' bidding. It was one benefit of being the personal slave of the commander. She reached the entrance to the maintenance passages, swiped in the code she'd witnessed Vicarius Kur use, rather than the one assigned to her, then ducked in.

Move! She broke into a run, now that she had the hallways to herself. *The day shift should be cleaning up in the supply hold. I'll go there first, then circle around to Shanty town where everyone else is, before heading to Kur's apartment in the same section.*

Before long she was panting with a persistent cramp in her side. Her thin sandals did little to cushion her from the hard metal floor and her feet hurt, the pounding pain going all the way up her legs. She was never in great shape, and her time among the lizards certainly hadn't helped. Running around the giant base was testing the bounds of her endurance, and if the Kur discovered what she was doing, he'd kill her.

These assholes better appreciate this!

The pain of having her dream of freedom smashed shifted to anger. A scowl twisted her face as she pushed onward. The way her fellow humans treated her, they were damn lucky she was helping them at all, now. Their sneers and cruel accusations circled in her mind.

I'm not a traitor!

Yes, she had her own room, slightly better clothes, and more food than the rest of them, but she also received the brunt of Kur's anger. They scoffed at her scratches and bruises. Many of them claimed they'd trade places with her in an instant. Except they didn't see the scars raking down her back, or feel the bone-deep ache in her arm from the fracture that hadn't healed quite right. But sure as shit, they were all her friends when she snuck food into the shanty town. It hurt being ostracized, but the fickle friendships pained her more. She told herself they were afraid, but she was, too.

I don't have to help them. They weren't her priority, Lucas was.

Yet still she ran. She'd made a promise to herself that everything she'd suffered wouldn't be for nothing, that when the opportunity came, she'd use her advantage and they'd all be free. Now was her chance to honor that promise and she would. It didn't matter if this redeemed her in the other captives' eyes, it assuaged her guilt. If she hadn't insisted she and Lucas go to the park that dreadful day, they never would've been abducted by fucking aliens.

Ava reached the supply hold, entered the code and eased in through the access meant for garbage carts. She panned the room and spotted Ricardo nearby pushing a palette of ore.

"Psst," she hissed.

Ricardo's gaze swiveled toward her. Interest replaced his tired expression and he instantly dropped the loader controller then hustled to meet her.

"Where's the overseer?" she asked, taking another look around the large warehouse.

Ricardo shook his head. "Probably off gambling."

The lizards rarely bothered to supervise them as they worked, simply barked orders, then locked them in. As hostile as the planet was, the Jurou Biljana never expected them to escape, except anything was better than being their slaves.

"Good." She nodded. "It's time to go."

"Go?" Ricardo cocked his head.

Clearly no one had believed her when she said something was going on and their chance might be coming.

"Oh, go!" His eyes widened then he quickly turned and whistled. "Move out!"

Now you're getting the idea. Ava rolled her eyes to the ceiling in exasperation.

"You remember where the exit is?" She stood out of the way as the ragged group of men and women started to hustle into the corridor.

"I do." Ricardo nodded as he helped his wife.

"Here's the Vicarius' access code for the door." She handed Ricardo a scrap of material with the symbols scrawled on it. "Be quick and be safe. I have to go help the others."

"Thank you!" Ricardo hollered as she started sprinting down the corridor.

Ava smiled wistfully. She was doing the right thing, even though she wouldn't be able to join them.

Scala

A pair of Jurou Biljana approached the cruiser. Payim worriedly looked from Elena to him. Scala nodded, understanding the silent request, then Payim and Faktil headed to intercept the reptiles before they attempted to board the cruiser.

“Let’s calibrate this combat shell to resemble you, so you’re not entirely vulnerable.” He made sure they were out of view of the entrance and swiftly got to work, tapping on the controls of Elena’s combat shell.

“That would be ideal.” Elena grimaced, worry flickering in her eyes.

With her mate out of sight, she let some of her bravado drop, but he didn’t think any less of her. Elena’s resilience was shocking. It was hard to believe she’d survived alone in the wilds of this hostile planet for two whole rotations.

“It’s going to be all right. We’re going to get your people out of here one way or another,” he promised the dark-haired female.

“Thank you.” She nodded.

“Where’s Crassa and Shilv?” they heard the Jurou Biljana demand, and quieted.

Break me. Scala stiffened. *This is where everything goes soft.*

“Crassa and Shilv?” Faktil repeated, sounding confused.

“We’re obviously not them,” Payim snapped.

The Cadi male was on edge with Elena present, but his surly attitude fit right in with the vile reptiles' usual demeanor.

"I told you Kahf spends half his time sleeping in the station," one of the Jurou Biljana said, laying the blame on their hangar master.

Scala let out a relieved breath. It sounded like Payim and Faktil were doing a good job bluffing. He turned his attention back to Elena.

"It's almost there," he whispered as the combat shell finished scanning Elena while it morphed into her human form. The complex features of the face always took the longest.

"My clothes are too nice. They'll never believe you found me wandering." Elena grimaced as she glanced down at herself.

He nodded in agreement and tapped on the shell's controller, then swiped his hand on her calf, thigh, and arm, adding holes to the replicated clothing, then repeated the process adding stains.

"Where's the human?" one of the reptiles said, capturing their attention.

Elena's eyes widened with worry.

Come on. Hurry up. He glared at the combat shell as the additions flickered while they were assimilated. The tech was ingenious, but not instantaneous.

"Unconscious. I'll go get it." Payim marched back inside, just as Elena's combat shell finished processing.

"I was listening. We're ready," Scala whispered in relief.

Payim surveyed his mate's shell and the male's shoulders eased from their tense position.

"I'll carry you. Go limp," Payim quietly instructed.

"Won't you need a free hand?" Elena asked as the Cadi warrior picked her up.

"Yes. Sorry. This won't be comfortable." Payim draped her over his shoulder, leaving one hand free if he needed to grab the weapon on his hip.

Scala made sure he also grabbed a Jurou Biljana disrupter from the cruiser weapons locker, then followed them to the exit.

"I'm starving." Faktil was casually making small talk with the reptiles.

"I'll take the human since you haven't eaten in a while." The pale-skinned reptile waiting outside reached for Elena.

Payim paused. There was no way the male was going to simply hand his mate over to the Jurou Biljana. Elena's eyes flicked open and anxiously looked back at Scala.

This could be a problem. Scala kept his expression stoic as his hand drifted to his weapon.

Payim pulled back. "And let you get all the credit?" he snapped at the reptile.

"You *are* new. You think you are going to get credit for finding this?" The reptile jabbed a clawed hand toward Elena. "They're hardly worth the food they eat," the pale male derisively laughed.

"You will still have to complete your rotation," the other hissed in amusement.

“Lead the way and we’ll share this lack of credit,” Payim insisted.

The pale reptile huffed, then spun and started across the hangar.

Scala nodded when Payim glanced at him, equally relieved that worked, though they were hardly free and clear.

As they walked, Scala took a good look around the hangar.

There should be more vessels if they are actively producing rift drives here. Obviously, the reptiles weren’t retro fitting their fleet on the planet, yet still, there should be more than a handful of cruisers in the hangar.

“You crashed, hmm?” one of the Jurou Biljana hissed while leading them out of the hangar.

“Yes,” Faktil grunted.

“Found the human sniffing around the crash,” Scala added.

“That’s why you’re so eager to deal with the human first. You don’t want to report in,” the darker reptile chuckled.

“And I’m starving,” Faktil readily agreed.

“Don’t lose your tail, I heard the Vicarius is heading off world,” the paler reptile informed them.

Scala’s brow furrowed. Exactly why was the outpost commander leaving?

“Such a privilege to get off this baked rock on a whim,” he grumbled, goading the reptiles for more information.

“When you are the Vicarius you can make unscheduled voyages,” the darker reptile huffed in agreement. “Kahf said they didn’t even have a full shipment.”

Break me!

His suspicions were correct. The Jurou Biljana were cutting their losses and abandoning the outpost. He should've known Payim's crash would kick off an evacuation. Why else did the reptiles send out the cruiser that Payim ended up stealing?

The Osi fleet won't make it in time. Scala fumed.

They couldn't lose track of the Jurou Biljana Vicarius. From the sounds of it the foul reptiles had already moved several shipments of rift drives off planet. If the Jurou Biljana fleet gained the ability to pass through wormholes there'd be no containing them. They'd spread their terror across the cosmos to vulnerable worlds like Earth.

Vasta! he swore. *We need to rescue these humans fast and go after the Vicarius.*

Scala cast a frustrated glance at his companions. From their expressions they'd surmised the same thing he did.

They turned the corner, entering an intersecting passage and Scala's steps faltered. Up ahead there were a handful of Jurou Biljana waiting.

It's an ambush!

He reached for his disrupter as their scaly escorts turned on them and started firing.

"Stay down," Payim barked, depositing Elena by the wall.

Apparently this foray wasn't going to go as smoothly as he hoped. Scala growled and returned fire.

TWO



IMPORTANT CONTACT

Ava

Ava exited the maintenance passage and headed through the storage room, toward the main corridor. This was the quickest way to Shanty town but if anyone stopped her it was also one of the routes to Kur's suite. She swiped the controls, cracked open the door and instantly froze, her eyes widening. The main corridor was sheer chaos with the flurry of movement, flashes of gunfire, snarls and shouts. Three Jurou Biljana were firing on a dozen other ones.

What the hell?!

Fights often broke out among the lizards, but usually they were fist fights. The outpost was descending into absolute anarchy. Further proof that something big was going down.

As Ava ducked back, fearing stray gunfire, her gaze landed on a dark-haired human woman huddled on the floor. She was new, which was a shock considering they were on an alien planet.

The fuck?!

The dark-haired woman stared at her, equally surprised. A blast hit the nearby wall and they both jumped, reminded of the fighting around them.

I'm probably going to regret this. The woman would inevitably slow her down, and she already had to backtrack to bypass the fighting.

I can't leave her. The woman would be killed in the crossfire.

"Come with me," Ava hissed, waving to the dark-haired woman.

“Payim!” the new woman shouted while scrambling for the door.

What the hell is she doing?! She’s going to alert the lizards. Ava glared as she grabbed the woman’s hand, tugging her into the storeroom.

“Wait. My friends,” the woman insisted.

“They’re not your friends.”

The woman was clearly new and totally ignorant about the Jurou Biljana. The lizards were not friends. Ava tried shutting the door, but the woman’s hand was in the way.

“I don’t have time to explain.” The dark-haired woman pulled on the door. “Payim!”

“I can’t wait. You have to come now!” Ava urged as she backed away. This woman had no idea what was at stake.

“Please, I promise you,” the woman pleaded with her to wait.

But she couldn’t wait. Too many people were depending on her. She couldn’t sacrifice all of them for just one person too foolish to see this was her chance to get free of the Jurou Biljana.

Ava’s eyes widened when a lizard entered the storeroom behind the woman. It was already too late. She felt bad but she turned and ran, heading back the way she came.

God, I hope everything isn’t ruined.

Scala

Amidst firing, Scala spotted Payim entering a room off the broad corridor. He then noticed Elena was missing.

“Time to go.” Scala nudged Faktil and pointed.

“Then let’s get our tails out of here,” Faktil agreed.

They managed to take out two more reptiles as they backed out of the corridor. He slammed the door shut and Faktil fired on the controls, sealing it.

“There was a woman. We need to follow her.” Elena pointed across the large storage room littered with supplies.

A female? A human female? Scala’s brow arched, surprised and confused. What was a human female doing wandering loose in the outpost? That hardly seemed right, knowing the slave merchants.

Payim plucked Elena off the floor, and they took off running down the main aisle.

“Please, wait. I swear we are friendly,” Elena called out as they moved through the storeroom.

A wisp of pale hair captured Scala’s attention.

“There.” He pointed toward another exit.

They sprinted faster, eager to reach the female before she disappeared. She could undoubtedly lead them to the other humans. They managed to catch up before she sealed the door. The female backed up, but didn’t continue running. She was dainty, shorter than Elena, and slighter, too. As tight as her threadbare jumpsuit was, it was clear she was underfed, though she still had the generous breasts and rear that made

human females so tempting. Long, pale hair framed a round, delicate face with a pert nose and full pink lips. She was positively ethereal, except for the red mark on her cheek and the fear in her blue-gray eyes. Scala's chest tightened and he was instantly struck by the need to protect her.

Ava

Fuck! Ava cursed when they reached her before she could shut the door. *Quick. Come up with an excuse for why you were going through the storeroom.*

She tried to think as she panned the three lizards with the woman. They were big sons of bitches. She had to crane her head to look up at them, then quickly remembered herself and diverted her gaze to the floor.

“We are not what we appear to be,” one of the Jurou Biljana insisted as she was about to make her excuse.

Her heartrate spiked as the overgrown lizard stepped nearer. She didn't like having the giant bastard so close. Surreptitiously, she glanced at him, trying to figure out his intent and what he was talking about.

His scaly green skin flickered then disappeared altogether, along with his tail. Her mouth gaped and she full on stared. The unusual man was covered from head to toe in what looked like bony armor.

No. He is most definitely not Jurou Biljana. What the hell is he?

The man was an absolute tank and had to be at least seven-foot tall. His chest and arms were bare. Cream-colored bony plates contoured over his mountainous pecs and eight-pack abs. A knotty ridge ran along the outside of his forearms and corded biceps. The black pants that molded to his thick legs revealed the bumps also lined his calves and thighs.

“We're here to help,” the armored man added. His undisguised voice was deep, his accent and the way he rolled

his Rs compelling. It was nothing like the grating hiss of the lizards.

She studied his face, trying to gauge his sincerity, but the way his bony armor flexed and shifted distracted her. How could he move his jaw at all? The armor of his head appeared to be one piece, with ridges extending from his temples over his bald crown, almost creating a spiky, bony hairdo. Even the hard ridge of his hairless brow, currently furrowing in concern, seemed impossible to accomplish given his anatomy. His red eyes were disconcerting but held no malice. The armored man certainly wasn't a lizard, and though he looked more human than the Jurou Biljana, he definitely wasn't that either.

It felt as if the floor beneath her shifted, or maybe it was her entire world that tilted on its axis as she gaped at the exotic alien. Life held pivotal moments. One of them was the fateful day she'd awoken to find herself enslaved by the Jurou Biljana. This felt like another one of those moments.

"Hey." The dark-haired human woman captured her attention as one of the lizards put her down. "I know Scala looks different," she gestured to the armored man, "and so do these two under the fake scales, but we are here to help. Please. Do you know where the others are?"

None of them are Jurou Biljana. They're why the Vicarius has been acting so odd. That had to be the reason. Could they really be here to help?

After being abducted by one kind of alien then enslaved by another, she was hesitant to trust yet another bunch of aliens. Her gaze flicked between the trio of alien men. Although she was reluctant to believe them, the dark-haired woman appeared sincere. Something in her gut urged her to take a chance and she really didn't have time to overthink this.

“I will show you, but we have to hurry.” Ava nodded, her mind made up, and took off running again down the maintenance corridor.

The bone-plated man passed her, taking the lead. “I will go in front. I’m armored.” He reengaged his disguise as he ran.

Do all men feel the need to take control of the situation? Her gaze narrowed on the presumptuous bony alien.

As expected, he ran right past the door they wanted. She stopped along with the human and the other two in disguise.

“Hey, skeleton,” she flatly called out as she opened the door. Though, to be honest, he looked nothing like a skeleton, more like a bodybuilder dipped in a hard plastic.

The would-be leader practically came to a skidding halt then turned. Despite the lizard disguise she could still see the sheepish expression on his face as he backtracked. If she wasn’t so anxious, she would’ve laughed. Ava held the door and waited for the armored guy.

“How about you let me lead,” she wryly suggested as he passed, unable to repress her sarcasm.

The armored man huffed, but he conceded and fell in with his companions. She couldn’t help the smile that tugged at her mouth as they moved through the mechanical room.

It was sort of sweet that he wanted to go in front, being armored and all. Her smile broadened but then quickly fell again. *Why are they here being so kind? What’s in it for them?* Ava grimaced as her trust issues reared their ugly head. Whatever their reason, it was too late to change her mind now.

They reached the door on the other side of the mechanical room and Ava held up her hand, gesturing for them to stop. She opened the thick door, looked up and down the main

corridor, then motioned them to follow. They barely made it a dozen yards when she heard a squad coming.

Fuck! She anxiously looked toward the intersecting hallway. They were so close, but there was no way they'd make it.

Gotta hide.

“Quick!” Ava sprinted to a nearby utility closet, swiftly tapped on the access panel and yanked open the door. “Get in.”

The sound of the approaching squad got louder. She wasn't able to make it inside as the lizards came round the corner. She barely even closed the door in time.

“What are you doing here?” Tac demanded when he spotted her.

“The Vicarius sent me to fetch something.” Ava diverted her gaze to the floor as she answered.

A bead of sweat ran down her temple as Tac stared at her for a moment. She didn't dare look up at him. Like most of the Jurou Biljana, Tac put up with her because she was the Vicarius' slave, but made no attempt to hide his derision.

“We have intruders. Did you see anything?” the foul lizard hissed, his breath fetid from pickled *yazil*.

“I heard something that way.” She gestured the opposite direction they needed to go.

Please just leave, she silently begged.

Scala

Scala clenched his jaw, worried for the pale-haired female as he stared through the narrow crack in the door. She hadn't made it into the utility closet in time and now she was facing the group of Jurou Biljana alone.

"The Vicarius sent me to fetch something," he heard her reply.

The Vicarius?! Scala's eyes widened, surprised to hear this bit of information. *She must be the Vicarius' personal slave.* That was the only thing that explained the little human's surprising level of access.

The sound of the Jurou Biljana moving away captured his attention.

She did it! She got them to leave. He nodded, impressed, as his shoulders eased from their tense position.

"Come on. You are slowing me down," the blonde female huffed when she opened the door and started running again.

We probably are slowing her down. Though their intention was to help.

Scala grimaced as they followed the female, replaying his fumbled attempt to shield her. She was obviously very resourceful, meanwhile he had no clue where they were going.

I was a lot of help, he sarcastically chided himself. It was downright embarrassing.

Still, the urge to protect her gnawed at him. It didn't matter how brave she was. The little female was no match pitted against the foul reptiles. The red mark on her cheek from

recent abuse was proof of that. It made him want to punch something with scales.

Vile reptiles! Scala repressed a growl. If left to the scaly bastards, half the cosmos would be enslaved. The little human was the embodiment of why he fought the Jurou Biljana.

They went down a short corridor then entered a set of doors. Scala's steps faltered at the sight that greeted him. The warehouse was filled with dilapidated structures cobbled together from discarded shipping containers. A dark-skinned human male standing in the middle of the makeshift street froze and stared at them, fear shifting in his brown eyes.

"It's time to go, everyone!" their pale-haired guide barked.

A handful of humans peered out of the shoddy huts, their frightened gazes focusing on him and his companions. He thought their blonde guide was in rough shape, but these people were emaciated.

"Goddamnit!" their guide growled in frustration. "Show them your trick." She gestured back at him.

Scala eagerly stepped forward, finally glad to be of service, and lowered his combat shell. The humans' eyes widened when his scaly disguise disappeared.

"They're not the Jurou bastards. So, unless you want to be trapped here, get moving!" the pale-haired female sternly shouted.

That seemed to get everyone moving.

"This way." The pale-haired female led them through the ramshackle town toward a set of doors at the far side of the warehouse.

A score of humans followed, yet kept their distance from him and his Cadi companions. Scala could feel their wary gazes on his back but ignored it. These poor people had every right to be afraid, considering what they'd been through.

“What about the others?” a dark-haired female frantically asked their guide.

“I know what you think of me, but I made a promise and I kept it.” The pale-haired female turned to the other humans. “We’re heading out through the refuse hatch. Don’t fall behind or you’ll be locked in,” she barked as she unlocked the set of doors.

Hurt and anger reflected in the blonde female’s eyes before determination quickly replaced it and she jogged into the corridor. There was obviously a story there.

I can’t begin to fathom what she’s suffered, he thought as he imagined what she could be alluding to. *What any of them have suffered.*

Scala’s gaze returned to the pale-haired female. Now that her initial fear of them had waned, she exuded a strength that far exceeded her petite form. It made her even more intriguing. Although it was obvious she was tired, moisture trickled down her face and she occasionally gripped her side, which must be cramping. She’d been enslaved and neglected, her inner strength was probably the only thing physically keeping her going.

She shouldn’t even be here. She shouldn’t have been in the position where she had to be brave and fight for her life.

He moved toward her, wanting to carry her and relieve some of her burden as they moved through the smelly passage littered with garbage. Then he remembered his attempt to take

the lead earlier and grimaced. As proud as their little guide was, she'd undoubtedly rebuff his attempt.

Scala's gaze shifted to a gray-haired female limping along at a good pace. It was surprising any of them could run at all. He shifted closer, prepared to ask if she wanted assistance. He could at least help one of them. Except the older female shied away from him before he could say a word. He sighed and kept with his group.

"There's others!" Elena commented to Payim, worry reflecting in her eyes that they were leaving people behind.

"I think our unexpected friend already got them out," Payim replied.

I bet she did. Scala again considered their ingenious guide. She obviously had the heart of a warrior.

The urge to go faster gnawed at him, but they were moving as swiftly as the humans could go. Soon they shimmied past several trash wagons and stopped at a set of doors. The tenacious blonde female swiped the controls, releasing the hatch.

"Everyone out." She gestured to the garbage spilling down the palisade wall. The stench was nearly unbearable.

What's the human phrase? Paupers can't be selective. Scala ignored the stench and began helping people out of the passage.

"Go." Payim held Elena's hand as she hopped out, staying back to also assist the humans exiting. "I'll follow."

"Okay." Elena nodded, then made her way down the garbage heap, aiding those already out.

The humans might be wary but many of them did allow him to lower them out of the hatch.

Scala's comm pinged and he paused to swipe it.

"We've got movement on the west side," his lieutenant reported from a cruiser hiding not far away.

"That's the others," their blonde guide confirmed as she helped a female step out of the passage.

"They're human. Pick them up. We also need assistance at our location, but the Jurou Biljana have sounded the alarm," Scala relayed to his lieutenant.

After the last person was out, he, Faktil and Payim leapt down onto the mountainous pile of trash.

"Cruisers are coming to get us," Scala assured as he reached up to help their pale-haired guide out of the passage.

"I can't." The female adamantly shook her head as she took a step back. "Keep your promise. Get them to safety." She surprisingly then took off.

What is she doing?! His heart leapt into his throat.

Something shouted that he needed to follow her, and he swiftly leapt into the opening before the doors could seal shut.

"If you don't hear from me within the quarter, get everyone off world," he instructed Payim then sprinted after the female, going back down the garbage disposal passage.

After a score of paces, the female slowed and cast him an angry glance. "Stop following me!" she snapped, then picked up the pace.

Despite the female's stoic expression and sheer determination to accomplish whatever was motivating her to

stay behind, the anxiety had returned in her gray eyes. Although he didn't want to add to her distress, she was too important to let slip through his fingers. They released the humans, but they still needed to know what the Jurou Biljana had accomplished here and where their fleet was. The brave little female was associated with the Vicarius. She managed to acquire access codes and undoubtedly knew more. Though it wasn't just the desire for intel that goaded him.

Scala hustled to catch up when she darted toward an exit and he managed to grab the door just before it slammed shut.

“Fucking hell!” the pale-haired female angrily huffed as she ran down the main corridor.

Before Scala could follow, footsteps echoed in the hallway behind him.

“Halt!” the Jurou Biljana hissed.

Thank Osegrin for this disguise.

He stopped and pivoted, so he could glare at the reptile and still keep an eye on the little female. Wisely, she also halted. Her gray eyes narrowed on him and it was obvious she was debating what to do.

Don't betray me, he silently conveyed with a pointed stare before focusing on the reptile.

He hoped he'd proven himself, but he'd witnessed captives do strange things when being liberated.

“I'm getting something for the Vicarius,” the little female reported.

Scala wanted to sigh in relief but repressed it.

The Jurou Biljana grunted and nodded, clearly familiar with the human. The reptile then turned his gaze on him.

“I’m with her. We’re in a hurry,” Scala curtly replied, knowing a polite response would garner suspicion.

The pale-haired female groaned behind him, but thankfully she kept it quiet enough the Jurou Biljana didn’t hear.

“There are intruders. Did you see anything?” the reptile demanded.

“Is that why I had to go through the trash route?” the female commented, feigning ignorance.

“No. We must go,” Scala hissed at the reptile in annoyance.

He was taking a big risk turning away from the reptile and joining the female, but he had faith in the little human’s story and her connections. She glared at him as he caught up to her, clearly not amused by his presence, but she hadn’t betrayed him when she could’ve. That was a good sign.

Scala’s shoulders eased when the reptile behind them grunted then jogged off. As soon as the Jurou Biljana male was gone, his reluctant companion started running again.

“Thank you,” he said as he sprinted beside her, but she ignored him. “I can help you,” he tried again, yet still got nothing.

The female attempted to duck through another door, still trying to evade him, but he grabbed it before she could shut it. The female spun around as he joined her in a sprawling suite.

“Seriously, I know you want to help, but just go. Help the others. Get out while you can,” she insisted, her brow furrowed in frustration.

Scala surveyed the suite. Besides being in disarray it was nicer than the average reptile’s quarters. It had to belong to the

Vicarius, though the outpost commander didn't appear to be here.

The rumor that Vicarius Kur fled must be true.

"I can't do that now. I followed you and you have all the access codes to the doors and exits." He followed her into another room, curious what she was up to.

"Of course. Great! I don't have time for this shit." She grabbed a bag sitting in the corner and spun back around to leave.

He stood in the doorway preventing her retreat and lowered his armor, so she wasn't looking into the face of the nasty bastards who'd enslaved her.

"Please let me help," he urged.

With a sigh, the female's expression softened as she reached up and touched his cheek. Her eyes were the color of a storm, sad and turbulent.

"You are sweet. But you can't help me." She shook her head then ducked under his arm.

Scala's hand shot to his tingling cheek. The sensation of her small hand lingered, searing through his shell straight to the quick. His heart beat faster. His shell had responded to her touch.

That could only mean... He couldn't even form the thought.

Still in utter shock, he spun in time to see the brave little female with stormy eyes fleeing the suite. More than before, he couldn't let her go. She was his mate.

THREE



WAYLAID

Ava

The hurried footsteps following her out of Kur's apartment wasn't a big surprise. The armored man had been persistent up to this point, so she hadn't really expected him to give up, despite her umpteenth refusal of his help. Ava let out a slight incredulous laugh and shook her head as he caught up with her. It was unfortunate he'd followed her, rather than escaping with the others. His altruistic streak was going to get him killed.

"I think you're in over your head," she informed him, making sure the corridor was clear.

"You're right about that," he huffed, wearing an odd grimace.

Her brow furrowed, trying to decipher his expression. He looked bewildered as he scrutinized her.

"I'm getting on a ship full of Jurou Biljana. You follow me and you'll really be trapped. Understand?" she slowly explained, worried he didn't get it.

The scowl on his face deepened as he processed what she said. His gaze darkened, growing more intense as it bore into her.

Now he gets it. She'd done what she could do. He'd been officially warned.

She turned her attention back to running down the corridor.

"And you're going to allow yourself to be trapped after what you just did?" the armored man incredulously asked after a minute, jogging right along beside her.

Is he serious?! She glanced at him, her brow raised.

“That’s what I said,” she informed him with a smirk.

I know I’m crazy. I don’t need him to point that out, and I don’t need his approval or help.

“Why?” he asked.

Ava faced forward, not bothering to answer his question, and concentrated on where she was going. She’d had enough talking. She pushed herself faster, needing to make up for lost time. Kur was already going to bitch about how long it took her to get back to the hangar. Undoubtedly, he’d hit her again, probably harder this time.

I’ll tell him I had to go the long way because of a skirmish among his men, she tried to think up a good excuse as they turned the corridor.

Scala

She can't possibly be my weakness.

The likelihood that a female from a distant galaxy was fated to be his mate was slim to none. Granted, Aculus, his friend and leader, had found his weakness among the humans, but the probability of it happening again was astronomical.

No. I must've been mistaken.

He cast her a sideways glance. The little female reached his sternum at best. He'd have to bend to even kiss her. Unbidden, the image of her kissing his chest, and what her full pink lips might feel like against his bare quick made him shiver.

No. It's not physically possible. He shook off the insane notion. How could a female that small even withstand an Osivoire male rutting atop her?

Humans were quite possibly one of the most fragile races he'd encountered, and this female especially so. Concern for her safety must have played tricks on his mind. After all, he'd dedicated his life to helping those like her.

And this female more than anyone I've encountered gives me cause to worry.

Her bravery far outweighed her diminutive size. He couldn't believe she planned to get on the Jurou Biljana vessel. She was going to get herself killed.

That would be a shame. His brow furrowed. The universe needed more people willing to stand up to tyranny. *Well, nothing will happen to her with me here.*

They took the corridor on the right and Scala looked around, trying to get his bearings. He wasn't familiar with the outpost, but it didn't feel like they were heading back to the hangar.

"Are you sure this is the way?" As stubborn as the female was, he wouldn't be surprised if she was attempting to lose him again.

"To the ocean-side hangar, yes," she replied curtly. She didn't appreciate him second-guessing her.

Of course. The best way off the planet was via water. It would make sense to have a hangar on the ocean.

He grimaced, feeling foolish, and was about to apologize for questioning her, but a trio of Jurou Biljana approached. Thankfully the reptiles ignored them. Once the trio passed, they again picked up the pace. The female was exuding a lot of moisture and breathing heavily, making him worry that she was pushing herself too hard. He was about to insist she let him carry her when they stopped at a large set of doors.

"Last chance to turn back," she informed him, reaching for the panel by the entrance.

"I'm going," he reiterated.

Duty demanded he go with her. Though if he had to admit it, that wasn't the only reason.

Ava

Ava shook her head at the armored man's persistence and entered the hangar. Her breath instantly rushed out, her heart dropping into her stomach.

"It's gone!" she stammered, frantically looking around the hangar for the giant spaceship, as if it could be hiding behind the small cruisers.

Ava ran to the Jurou Biljana manning the hangar.

"Where is Vicarius Kur's vessel? I had to get a bag." She shook the satchel, moisture welling up in her eyes.

"Gone," the lizard snapped, stating the obvious.

What am I going to do now?! Bile rose in her throat.

She knew she had taken too long, but for some stupid reason she assumed the Vicarius would wait. Ava whirled around on the armored man in the lizard disguise.

"You! You slowed me down!" she leveled the accusation as she started to panic.

He and his little raiding party were the reason Kur had left in a panic, of that she was damn certain.

Fuck, fuck, fuck! What am I going to do?

The armored man didn't even acknowledge her, his attention on the Jurou Biljana. The callous rebuff was like a stab to the gut. After his claims to want to help, she expected a little something, an apologetic glance at the least. This is what she got for trusting a perfect stranger. She wanted to punch him in his bony face.

“I need a cruiser. I have to take these *things* to the Vicarius,” he imperiously insisted, gesturing to her and the bag.

Ava’s mouth dropped open. She didn’t appreciate being called a thing, but then it occurred to her he was still playing his role, and he had a good plan, if it worked.

Pull it together. She’d let her emotions overwhelm her and she couldn’t allow that.

When the armored man headed for the nearest cruiser, she dutifully followed, playing along with what he’d told the lizard.

“I wasn’t informed of this.” The Jurou Biljana bristled as he trailed after them to the vessel the size of a city bus.

“You want to contact the Vicarius and ask?” the armored man countered.

No, don’t do that! Ava cringed.

“You know this atmosphere interferes with comm signals,” the Jurou Biljana huffed.

Ava’s eyes widened. Maybe the bluff wasn’t that bad of an idea after all.

“I do. I also know my orders.” The armored man insistently gestured to the cruiser and looked expectantly at the lizard.

Come on. Please. She fidgeted with the bag as she anxiously stared at the floor, waiting for the stubborn lizard to make up his mind.

“Fine, but I’m going with you. We’re both returning Kur’s property,” the Jurou Biljana finally agreed. “I shouldn’t have

to stick around when everyone else has cleared out,” he muttered the last part while disengaging the cruiser door.

Greedy bastard. The Jurou Biljana were always looking to weasel their way into profit or credit on any opportunity that arose.

“Agreed,” the armored man replied with a thump of his fake tail, perfectly mimicking the lizards.

Certain this situation would fall apart at any moment, Ava held her breath until they’d entered the cruiser, taken their seats and the doors were closing.

It’s going to be okay. It’s going to be okay. We will catch up with the ship. She forced her heart to calm as the cruiser lifted off the hangar floor.

Scala

Scala forced himself to focus on the task at hand as the female took the seat behind him. He'd hoped the hangar master would simply assign him the cruiser. Frustratingly, that's not what happened. The reptile didn't seem to suspect anything was amiss, but Scala surreptitiously watched for any signs as the male set the cruiser to intercept the Vicarius' vessel.

Break me! Scala clenched his jaw, noting the freighter's transponder code was secured with Dremin encryption. *I should've known the reptiles would be using the most up to date security to ensure the rift drives wouldn't be intercepted.* The flesh merchants were cruel and greedy but not dumb as a whole.

I'll have to take him prisoner. That was the only way to guarantee he had access to the Jurou Biljana cruiser controls. Scala's eyes narrowed on the pilot, sizing him up. *I can take him.*

"The freighter is already off planet. I despise launching in this atmosphere," the reptile grouched as the cruiser plunged out of the hangar, diving down the cliff into the ocean below.

On that, they surprisingly agreed. Gienah's atmosphere was so turbulent, crashes were common. Taking off from the middle of the ocean was the safest and only option to get off world. The question was, did he wait until they were in orbit to take control of the cruiser or do it before?

The pale-haired female gasped when the reptile abruptly maneuvered around an underwater rock formation, capturing his attention. He'd attempted to concentrate on the mission, but now he was painfully aware of her right behind him. Her

fragrant scent was impossible to ignore with the way it filled the cabin, growing stronger by the moment in the sealed space. The heady aroma was so thick he could taste it.

His whole life, his shell had dulled his sense of touch, and like all Osivoire, he derived pleasure from smell and taste. Sticky buns with *omal* sauce were sheer ecstasy in the mouth. The fragrant *caluda* blooms in the frigate arboretum could calm and invigorate the spirit with one breath. Her scent trumped everything he'd known and took pleasure in. The overwhelming perfume had him salivating and Scala swallowed hard.

What was it about this female that affected him so? She was very beautiful, stunning really, but he'd seen lovely females before. Maybe it was her sheer tenacity, the way she persevered in the face of impossible odds rather than breaking?

Scala glanced back at the female then grimaced, recalling she was angry with him for interfering. Her anger and distrust felt like a festering wound in his gut. He desperately wanted to convince her he was more help than a hindrance.

"It's sickening the way Vicarius Kur treats it," the reptile commented, noticing him checking on the female.

It? Oh, you mean her. He focused on the reptile. *It is sickening the way Kur treats her, but not for the reasons I'm sure you're about to list,* Scala silently commented, but merely grunted in reply.

"Letting Yitu touch and embrace it," the reptile spat in disgust.

"Embrace?!" Scala snapped, unable to repress the growl or the rage that sparked to life.

He'd been referring to the abuse she suffered, like the mark on her cheek, not sexual assault. Scala's heart sped up as he seethed.

“Aye. I'd rather lose my tail than touch one. Their skin leaks!” The reptile blanched in disgust, the spines on his neck twitching.

He'd liberated Jurou Biljana slaves before. They were abused and starved, which was horrible enough, but this, this was abhorrent. The rage coiled tighter in his gut, red bleeding into his vision as he pictured the reptiles touching her, forcing themselves on her.

She was not theirs to touch!

Ava

So what if Yitu hugs me? Ava smirked at the lizard's comment.

Yitu acted entitled, and taking care of him could be tedious, but he was just a child, a child without a mother and Vicarius Kur as a father. He might be Jurou Biljana, but he was still a little boy who hungered for affection. She shivered, recalling the last time Yitu forgot and hugged her in public. She got a beating for allowing it and still had the scars on her back to show for it. She was literally supposed to shove Yitu away from her, so the child didn't grow soft and bring shame to the Vicarius by embracing a slave.

Sadly, she was used to the lizard's disgust, yet when the armored man barked 'embrace,' sounding equally repulsed, it hurt. Her gaze narrowed on him, taking in his angry expression, and her own ire grew.

Don't judge me! She'd gotten enough of that from her fellow humans. She didn't care how much the armored man hated his enemy, she wasn't going to feel guilty for being humane to a child.

The abrupt flurry of movement from the armored man and the flash of gunfire tugged her out of her spiraling thoughts. She blinked as she stared at the lizard slumped over the ship controls, blood streaming from the large hole in his scaly head. Her hand flew to her mouth and she recoiled in her seat. Her gaze slid to the armored man as he shoved the lizard's body off the console, stunned by his sudden violent outburst.

"What did you do?!" she stammered, though the answer was pretty obvious.

What did she honestly think was going to happen? She'd found the armored man fighting the lizards. Of course, he was going to kill the Jurou Biljana the first chance he got. And yet his swift lethality shocked and worried her.

"Break me!" the armored man growled, ignoring her as he tapped on the controls, while the cruiser slowed in the water.

"He was taking us to the Vicarius' ship!" she shouted at him, realizing too late it wasn't wise to yell at the man prone to violent outbursts. At least she didn't add 'and now you've broken the ship.'

Oh fuck, he broke the cruiser! The fact sank in.

"You are not going on that ship!" the man huffed as he dropped his lizard disguise.

"That's not up to you to decide!" Her panic rose. "I have to reach them." She gripped the edge of her seat, feeling herself slipping, as the fear spiked.

"They abuse you," the armored man countered. "Why do you insist on going back after what they've done?" he snapped.

She cringed at his angry tone.

"Someone I care about is on that ship," she admitted.

The armored man's eyes widened in shock then narrowed on her. "Yitu?!" he demanded.

Her jaw dropped at his response. What if it was Yitu?! She was already standing on the proverbial edge, his derisive tone didn't simply nudge, it drop-kicked her over the edge.

"How dare you judge me!" She shook with outrage. "You know nothing about my life." She pursed her lips, refusing to

waste another breath explaining things that were none of his business.

“I’m sorry.” The armored man grimaced. “My people will hunt down the Vicarius, but you won’t be going on that ship. I won’t allow it.” He insistently shook his head.

“You won’t *allow* it?” she said almost calmly as something sank in. Yet again she found herself subjected to the will of some overbearing alien.

Ava looked up at the ceiling, her eyes burning. Try as she might to hold the devastation at bay, she pictured Lucas at the mercy of the lizards, and the tears poured from her eyes.

Scala

And I've angered her again. Scala focused on the cruiser, unable to look at her.

He wasn't very happy with himself either. He didn't intend to kill the Jurou Biljana, but then he'd snapped hearing how they'd violated her.

Accessing the cruiser's system is going to be more complicated now. He could crack his own shell.

Scala glared at the console and viewscreen. The cruiser went into emergency mode when the reptile landed on the controls, and now the hunk of metal was unresponsive as it bobbed toward the surface.

I must be soft in the head, Scala grumbled. He was usually more levelheaded than this.

He rubbed a hand over his face in frustration then hailed his frigate.

Thank you, Scala sighed when there was an immediate return ping from Thorac. *Good.* The frigate was waiting up the coast, not too far away. Thorac delayed take-off, hoping he'd be in contact. It was a good thing. Given the planet's atmosphere, his comm signal probably wouldn't have reached the frigate if it was already in orbit.

At least something is going my way. Scala relayed their current coordinates.

A salty scent reached him and he frowned.

That would be my fate. He swiftly looked around the cabin, wondering if the vessel had somehow sprung a leak.

Scala froze when he spotted moisture streaming down the female's cheeks. His chest clenched and his throat tightened at the sight.

"I am sorry," he repeated more sincerely, now that he'd had a moment to calm down.

He shouldn't have lost his temper killing the reptile in front of the female, and he shouldn't have reacted the way he did when she admitted caring for one of them. He'd liberated many slaves who claimed to care for their captors, despite the way they were treated. It was a coping mechanism and he knew that. How else could she live with the way they'd violated her.

You know this, so why didn't you act better?

Because it was different with this captive. The idea that she cared for her abusers didn't sit well with him. Not in the least. Not a single one of the scaly bastards, nor anyone else for that matter, deserved her affection.

And you're doing so well with her. The inner voice mocked him.

The female refused to look at him. He wanted to say her name to get her attention, then huffed realizing he still didn't know it.

"What is your name?" he asked, trying to keep his voice gentle, even though he felt anxious.

Still, she ignored him, looking at the wall instead.

"My name is Scala. Once my frigate gets here, you'll have all the food you can eat and medical treatment for that mark on your cheek," he explained, hoping that helped.

His brow furrowed when she crossed her arms over her chest and that was it.

“Please, what can I do to ease your fears?” he tried again, moving to the edge of his seat.

He truly wanted to alleviate her worries, but it was also eating him up that she refused to acknowledge him. He shouldn't press the issue, knowing what she'd been through, but he couldn't help himself. Osivoire females told you exactly what you'd done wrong and when, but this little human shut him out, almost like she'd grown a shell. It had him feeling slightly desperate.

Abruptly she turned to face him, and he cringed at the sight of her red-rimmed eyes.

“You can't do anything to ease my fears. I shouldn't have tried to be clever, taking advantage of the situation. I should've known that I couldn't help everyone, that fate would kick me in the teeth. That's my lot in life!” More salty moisture streamed down her cheeks. “I can't be rescued! Not all by myself. And any food I eat won't stay down, knowing I abandoned Lucas. I'm all he has and I abandoned him to play the hero!” she screamed hysterically.

Scala was instantly out of his seat and pulled the distraught female into his arms. Her pain physically made him hurt.

“I am sorry,” he said softly, his heart breaking as the female trembled in his arms. “I promise,” he paused, frustrated he still didn't know her name. He pulled back and cupped her cheek, urging her to look up at him. “Please tell me your name.”

“Ava.” Her mournful gray eyes stared into his.

Ava. It was a beautiful name for an exquisite female. Scala blinked as the shell on his palm didn't simply soften, it receded entirely, exposing his quick. Her cheek was so soft and warm, except for the cool, damp trail left by her tears. The sensation sent shivers up his arm. His heart sped up. Then her touch elsewhere registered. Her hands on the exposed quick of his chest felt like a brand. His dermis gave beneath her gentle fingertips and he felt every little digit. This was nothing like the dulled sensations he perceived through his shell. His gaze flicked from his chest back to his palm, noting the variegated iridescent color of his quick. It was the first time he'd seen his bare dermis and the sight was as staggering as the waves of sensation coursing through him.

He could no longer deny Ava was his weakness. There was no more definitive proof than this. Only his weakness, the one female meant to be his, could make his shell recede. Scala stared into Ava's gray eyes, utterly enthralled by the realization and the new sensations overwhelming his nervous system.

Ava was so small and delicate as she huddled on his lap. He felt like a giant beast compared to her. He was a beast. The desire to grip the back of her neck and kiss her pink, pouty lips had his fingers itching and lips tingling.

"Scala, if you want to make a promise, promise we're going to rescue Lucas. I promised I'd never leave him," she pleaded with him, her stormy eyes searching his face.

He shook loose of the distracting stimulus and focused on what Ava said.

Lucas?

Scala grimaced at the name. Lucas didn't sound like a Jurou Biljana name. Mixed emotions coursed through him.

Who was Lucas?

It's her mate. The sinking notion stabbed at him. *That's why she's so desperate to return to the reptiles. They're holding her mate.*

He'd found his weakness, but she already belonged to another. Devastation and jealousy stabbed deep, but Scala swiftly squelched them.

I didn't want to find my weakness, he reminded himself, though the words felt hollow.

“Ava, we will go after the Vicarius,” he assured her, focusing on his duty. “His people have committed terrible atrocities. They are altering their fleet with rift drives and must be stopped before they spread to places like Earth.”

“Earth?!” she gasped, horror filling her gray eyes.

“Yes.” He grimaced, realizing maybe he shouldn't have said that much. Ava had enough to worry about. “This is bigger than rescuing one person and we will need help from my people, but I promise I will find a way to get Lucas back,” he solemnly assured her, though a part of him rebelled at the notion of rescuing her mate.

“Thank you.” Ava nodded. Her brow then furrowed as she looked down at where her hands rested on his chest. “Sorry. I didn't mean to lose it.” She pulled away.

Holding Ava against his chest was inappropriate, considering she belonged to another, and he reluctantly let her go. Scala sighed as his shell expanded, again covering his quick. The intense stimulus eased, making it possible to rein in his emotions, though nothing could calm his turbulent thoughts. It wasn't just this mission that was suddenly more complicated.

Ava

I can't believe I just did that.

Ava awkwardly climbed back into her seat, her hands still shaking from her outburst. She'd completely lost her composure and bawled all over Scala. It had been a long time since she'd shown anyone her true emotions. Lucas was the only one who cared about her or her feelings, but even with him she'd hidden away her fears. She had to be the strong one. There was no place for frivolous emotions among the Jurou Biljana, not if you wanted to survive.

Ava's eyes glazed over as she recalled the first time that hard truth had hit home. She'd been in a cruiser just like this one, waiting to meet an unknown fate like she was now.

Sharp hisses awoke her, swiftly followed by scaly clawed hands tugging her out of the strange coffin. Then the humanoid iguana cruelly dropped her on the rocky ground.

This is a nightmare. It has to be. Her muscles wobbled from disuse as she struggled to her feet.

She squinted in the dim light that filtered into the rocky crevasse, but the horrific scene didn't change. The last thing she remembered was hiking with Lucas. This definitely wasn't the park. This place smelled of sulfur not pine. Her heart sped up and her breath came out in rapid panicked bursts as she looked up the steep canyon wall at the odd green clouds and the large ringed planet hanging in the sky. Not only was this not Carlyle Park, this wasn't Earth. Her gaze landed on the mangled wreckage of a spaceship.

Oh god! Oh god!

Strident screams sent terror screeching up her spine. Was the horrific sound coming from her or the crowd of people huddling nearby? One of the giant iguanas hissed, shoving her out of his way, again knocking her to the ground. She quickly scrambled to join her fellow humans.

They're aliens.

She panned the handful of lizards as they continued yanking people out of the futuristic coffins scattered about the narrow canyon. The overwhelming, terrible understanding that the lizards weren't here to rescue them made her waver on her feet.

"Ava!"

She barely registered the recognizable voice over the frightened melee. Ava blinked in disbelief as Lucas latched onto her. Disoriented by the surreal situation, it took her a moment to focus and realize it was truly him.

"Lucas!" Her arms wrapped around him, crushing him tight against her.

The momentary relief that she wasn't all alone was short lived. The hisses and cries grew louder, and they were abruptly shoved as the lizard men started herding their group.

"What's happening?" Lucas asked with sheer terror in his eyes.

Before she could answer there was a commotion to her right.

"No!" a man bellowed, punching one of the aliens in its long scaly snout.

The sudden series of flashes were blinding in the dimly lit canyon. Then the rebellious man lay on the ground, a hole in

his head and one going clean through his chest. Swiftly she turned away, gagging with the urge to vomit, but there was nothing in her stomach. The lizards snarled viciously as they aimed their weapons at them.

She gripped Lucas and tried to retreat farther into the crowd of humans, while biting her lips to silence the terrified scream trying to get free. Thank god no one else was foolish enough to attack the aliens, and after several frightening moments the lizards waved them forward again, roughly herding them to a spaceship farther down the canyon.

“We’re getting on a spaceship?!” Lucas commented as they were goaded up a short ramp into the elongated vessel the length of a bus.

Any other situation and Lucas would’ve been elated, loving all things sci-fi. This was cruelly not one of those situations.

She nodded, shuffling with Lucas toward a far corner. The last thing they wanted was to be noticed by the lizards, but there was nowhere on the ship that truly felt safe. The aliens packed them in like sardines and she could barely breathe by the time they took off.

Where are we going? What will they do to us? What if they’re cannibals? Her head spun with all the horrible questions, her breath coming out faster, quickly making her sick and lightheaded.

“Ava!” Lucas clutched her tighter, his hands trembling, forcing her to focus on her baby brother.

Pull it together! Lucas needs you, she snapped at herself.

Lucas was only a child and couldn’t be expected to cope with any of this. If they were going to survive, she’d have to be

strong enough for the both of them, because if she lost her head, they'd die just like that man.

"I'm right here. I've got you," she held Lucas close.

"Don't be nervous if you feel movement. My vessel has latched onto us," Scala said, pulling her from her thoughts.

Ava nodded and nibbled her lip as she considered Scala then looked toward the cruiser doors. In some ways this moment was worse than that ride. Lucas wasn't here. He was alone with those scaly bastards.

We're going to get him before anything happens.

She wasn't happy they weren't going after Lucas right this instant but Scala assured her that they were going after the Vicarius and her brother.

If he's telling the truth, then just maybe this is our way out of this nightmare.

Beyond getting back to Lucas, she hadn't thought of how they'd escape after she reached him. What did she really think she was going to accomplish once she was on Kur's ship? With Scala and his people, getting Lucas back wasn't just a pipe dream. Except hope was insidious.

What if I'm wrong about trusting Scala and his people?
The fear nagged at the back of her mind.

She'd hoped for nearly two years that somehow her and the other abductees' fate would change, until she realized she'd have to be the one to change it. She was the only one she could depend on.

God, I'm jaded. Would she ever be able to trust again?

Her gaze drifted to Scala, busy monitoring the control panel and Ava rubbed her arms recalling how gently he held

her when she had her breakdown. She was used to being handled roughly, but not gentle. Scala was huge, more than a head taller than her and twice as broad. The way he'd lifted her out of her seat and cradled her on his lap took little effort from the armored man. If he wanted, he could easily snap her in two. Yet, rather than lose his patience, he'd comforted her. Was that something someone could fake? Her brow furrowed as she toiled with the question.

Abruptly Scala turned and caught her staring. His mouth tipped up at the corners in an awkward smile. She couldn't help but smile back at him.

"We're in the hangar bay. It's all right to exit now." Scala pulled his gaze away as he stood and held out a hand gesturing to the door.

Despite the part of herself warning that Lucas would suffer if she was mistaken, she couldn't help but come back to the same conclusion. Scala was sweet.

Please don't make me regret trusting you.

She then banished the remnant of doubt, her mind made up that she'd give him a chance.

Ava grabbed her bag and they headed to the exit. She held her breath as the cruiser doors opened, praying a new better chapter in her life lay on the other side.

FOUR



BETTER ACCOMMODATIONS

Ava

“Scala, I am glad you made it!” Another bone-armored man greeted them the moment the cruiser doors opened.

This man didn’t look exactly like Scala, his nose was thinner, his jaw not so square, and the bony spikes on his crown formed a different pattern. She only gave him a cursory glance, her gaze drawn to the hangar. The massive hangar looked so clean, not a speck of rust afflicting the pale blue walls. The lights glowing overhead weren’t harsh, and the air was fresh, not fetid or dank like the Jurou Biljana base. She took a deep breath, pulling in the scent. It was odd how such a simple thing instantly brought her comfort.

“Thorac, this is Ava.” Scala gestured to her.

“An honor to meet you, Ava. You are safe now.” Thorac kindly reached out to help her down the ramp.

As she took Thorac’s hand, she noticed there was something different about the texture of his bony plates and how hard they were compared to Scala’s. She expected to see colorful skin, but didn’t. The observation was fleeting, because Scala’s arm abruptly encircled her waist, pulling her away from Thorac with an incoherent rumble.

The strange exchange was instantly forgotten when she looked to her left. Her eyes widened. Beyond a pair of teardrop-shaped cruisers, pods lined the hangar. They were the same creepy coffins she’d been yanked out of nearly two years ago.

“What are they doing here?” Her steps faltered and her fear spiked.

Scala's grip tightened around her middle, keeping her from tumbling down the ramp.

Oh god, there's so many people. She panned the stacked rows, quickly figuring at least fifty.

Vicarius Kur always told her his people didn't steal them from Earth. She hadn't believed Kur, but this made her question if he'd told the truth. Were Scala's people behind their abduction? Her breath started coming out faster.

Scala followed her gaze. "The human female you met, Elena, hid these stasis capsules and watched over your fellow humans. She's responsible for saving them, like you did your people at the outpost."

The admiration in Scala's eyes calmed her heartbeat and eased her worry. His reassuring expression told her she'd wrongfully accused his people.

"Oh." She gave him a slight smile, embarrassed by his compliment and that she'd jumped to the worst possible conclusion.

When will I stop doing that? Scala is not one of the lizards.

"We haven't woken anyone yet. The frigate is rather crowded at the moment," Thorac added with a frown.

She nodded in understanding, though still shocked there were this many people to save in the first place.

"Speaking of being crowded. Did the humans from the outpost make it safely aboard?" Scala asked.

Yes. What about the others? She looked to Thorac, equally anxious to hear.

"They did, though your fellow humans are still uneasy. They aren't willing to go to the clinic yet and are sticking to

their rooms,” Thorac replied.

“I’m sure they are overwhelmed. I know I am,” she interjected under her breath.

It was hard to believe they’d been rescued. Just the change of scenery and congenial demeanor of the armored people was jarring.

“That is very understandable.” Thorac replied to her comment with a kind smile. “There is a bit of good news. Elena found her clan among the captives. She and Payim are with them now.”

The dark-haired woman from the outpost found her family.
The news made Ava genuinely happy.

“Truly?! Elena must be overjoyed to be reunited with them.” Scala smiled, but then his smile fell as he glanced at her. “We have another human still in need of assistance.”

“Lucas.” Ava nodded, grateful Scala remembered.

Scala’s expression turned grim and official. “Lucas is being held on the Vicarius’ ship. It took off at some point while we were infiltrating the outpost.”

“We didn’t detect anything. But our sensors are hindered by this atmosphere.” Thorac shook his head.

“We were heading after the Vicarius, but there was an incident.” Scala grimaced. “There’s a reptile to be cleaned up.” Scala pointed back inside the cruiser.

Incident was an understatement. There were lizard brains all over the console. Just the mental image made her want to gag. She couldn’t fault Scala, he was obviously a soldier, and with that came killing. As much as she didn’t like killing in general, someone needed to take down the Jurou Biljana.

“Understood.” Thorac whistled and waved over another crewman in the hangar.

“We need to get off world immediately and see if we can locate the Jurou Biljana vessel,” Scala continued. “And we need one of our specialists to start working on the cruiser security. They’re using Dremine encryption.”

“That tech is a crack in our shell,” Thorac grumbled.

“Hmf.” Scala nodded grimly in agreement.

She didn’t know what that meant, but it didn’t sound good.

“I will get us off world, while you get Ava settled in. You’ll probably have to go from room to room to find a particular comrade,” Thorac informed her. “The humans are occupying roughly half and our crew is doubled up.”

The thought of sharing quarters with her people made her stomach twist in knots. She hadn’t stayed with any of them for nearly two years and had been reviled for much of that time. Although she was glad they were free, she didn’t relish the idea of bunking with any of her people.

“Can’t I stay with you?” Ava anxiously looked at Scala.

Scala’s eyes widened, his mouth opening, looking like he might object. Ava stiffened as it occurred to her Scala might not be thrilled to share his room with her. She hadn’t exactly been her best self with him. She made him chase her through the outpost, blew up at him, then had a meltdown. She was the worst candidate for a roommate.

“That sounds like a solution. I imagine you’re comfortable with Scala after the adventure you two just had. The captains’ quarters are large enough and befitting someone who bravely released her people,” Thorac replied before Scala could say anything.

Although it felt strange since they just met, she did feel comfortable around Scala. He'd been understanding and kind, despite the way she'd chastised, misread, then subjected him to her nervous breakdown. She bit her lip as she stared up at him, hoping he'd be understanding again.

Scala closed his mouth and gave a nod of agreement.

"Thank you," Ava mumbled, her shoulders easing as she smiled at Scala in appreciation.

"I truly am glad you both made it safely. I'd hate to report to Aculus that we lost you." Thorac slapped Scala's back. "I've got this handled." Thorac then headed toward one of the bony crewmen waiting nearby for orders.

Apparently, Scala was the captain of this giant ship. That brought her comfort. It meant he had the authority to carry through with the promise to save Lucas. It was also nice seeing the genuine comradery between Scala and Thorac. Kur's men always kissed his ass, then complained behind his back. In fact, none of the lizards ever seemed to genuinely get along. This was a pleasant change.

Things are going to be okay. She nodded as they headed out of the bay.

Scala

She's staying in my quarters. Scala grimaced as they entered the main corridor. *This is a bad idea.*

His fingers twitched with the need to touch Ava. He tried to not think about it, but then the itch spread. For the first time in his life, it felt like his shell was chafing, and his quick was burning up. Add that his mind was racing and it was becoming a struggle just to find his quarters. The longer he was around Ava, the worse it seemed to get.

I knew I didn't want to find my weakness.

These new sensations would swiftly drive him insane. Scala scratched at his forearm, repressing the urge to outright claw at his shell.

Despite his objection, Ava was his weakness. There was no denying that, now.

Osegrin, help me, he sent up a desperate prayer. *She's not mine! She belongs to another.*

Even if he wanted to give in to these strange new urges, he refused.

This was what happened to Adius. Scala's heart pounded in his chest, his breath coming out faster.

His sobrus had formed a bond of affection with Cala, but then she found her weakness. Adius was devastated. Scala squeezed his eyes shut, trying to shove aside the memory of finding Adius in the estuary.

I can't stay in the same room with her. He adamantly shook his head. Ava belonged to another, but the instinct to claim her

rode him hard. He couldn't stay in his quarters with her.

Scala glanced sideways at Ava, and his grimace deepened, again noticing the mark on her cheek. Guilt swamped him, remembering she needed medical attention. He should've headed toward medical first, but had been preoccupied. There was also a twinge of relief. There were other people in the clinic. He didn't want anyone touching Ava, like Thorac had, but he didn't trust himself to be alone with her either.

"We should get you to the clinic, so Cartil can tend to your cheek and any other injuries you might have," he suggested.

While she's being treated, I can find someone to bunk with. Faktil and Thunder probably have room in their quarters.

"I'm okay. I really don't want to see a doctor." Ava shook her head. "I'm pretty tired. I'd like to just relax, if that's okay." Ava looked hopefully up at him.

He opened his mouth to urge her to reconsider, then saw the anxiety shifting in Ava's large gray eyes. She was in an entirely new environment, uncertain of everything, and no doubt afraid. She did need to be treated, but there was no way he could coerce her into doing something she was uncomfortable with. Regret suffused him for even trying and his mouth instantly snapped shut.

Scala nodded, conceding. Ava smiled, relieved, then looked away.

Not only had Osegrin ignored his prayers regarding finding his weakness, the deity wasn't even going to give him a break. Scala sighed as they continued to his quarters.

"Thank you again," Ava said when they entered the lift. "I know it probably seems silly that I don't feel comfortable

staying with my people, but because I was Kur's servant, many of them weren't very nice to me."

Scala frowned, anger heating his veins. On one hand he understood that her people probably needed an outlet to blame for their plight and couldn't lash out at the Jurou Biljana. Yet hearing Ava had been mistreated by her own people as well as the reptiles pissed him off. His fists clenched with the need to rectify that.

"None of them would dare do that now. Not after what you did for them," he assured her as they exited onto the upper level.

The pain in Ava's gray eyes deepened. "That would be worse."

He found himself reaching for her and pulled back, clasping his thighs to corral his wayward hands.

"If they didn't like me before, I certainly don't want their gratitude now," she continued, her slight brow furrowing. "Of course, I helped them when given the chance. I'm not a monster." She angrily shook her head, her cheeks flushed.

He understood what she was feeling and wanted to say something to ease her pain. Clearly Ava underestimated how exceptional she was.

He focused on her, looked her in the eyes and ignored the gnawing hunger in his gut. "You have every right to be angry at them, so don't take offense at what I'm about to say, but perhaps you can try to shift that anger to pity," he gently suggested. "People may want to do the right thing and be brave in an impossible situation, but not everyone is as strong as you are. I don't know that I could have taken the risk you just did and I'm shelled and trained for battle."

“I know they’re scared, but so am I. I shouldn’t have to be strong all the time.” Ava frowned then walked a few paces ahead.

“No, you shouldn’t.” His chest tightened in sympathy.

Before he could stop himself, he reached out and ran his hand over her silky pale hair.

Ava’s steps slowed and she leaned into his touch. He shivered from the spike in sensations coursing through his palm and up his arm. Ava’s hair was unbelievably soft. The sympathy and need to comfort her shifted, turning hungry again. His gaze shot to his hand, confirming that his quick was exposed. This was supposed to be about soothing Ava, not his own gratification. Swiftly, he pulled his hand away.

“Here we are.” He quickly took the remaining paces and stopped at his quarters. “It’s not much,” he fumbled over his words as he attempted to open the suite.

“I’m sure it’s great.” Ava smiled appreciatively at him as the doors opened.

Her sweet smile didn’t help him regain a semblance of sanity.

I wish she’d stop doing that. He shoved down the desire to trace her ruddy full lips, wanting to feel the texture and suppleness of her skin.

“Oh, it is lovely!” Ava walked into his suite, dropping her bag on the floor. “The pattern on the blue walls reminds me of waves.”

He enjoyed her happy expression as she turned, admiring the quarters, glad she approved. It didn’t have all the amenities of a terrestrial home, but it was a nice suite, one of the best on the ship, considering his rank.

“They are waves,” he informed her. “Osi is an arid planet so we enjoy and revere water.”

“Ah.” She nodded and pivoted on her little feet then paused. “Wait, is that a hot tub?” She pointed to the estuary in the corner of the suite. “All the plants behind it make it look like a tropical oasis,” she gasped.

Scala groaned at the breathy sound, his groin aching as his spurs swelled. His head swam from the jolt of need that gripped him. How could something so simple be his undoing? And yet, the surprised gasp emerging from her luscious lips nearly brought him to his knees.

“Whoa!” Ava clamored and grabbed hold of him. “What’s wrong with the ship?!”

Scala’s eyes widened as he gripped her tight against him. “The frigate must be taking off,” he heard himself saying while an inner voice screamed ‘pin her against the wall.’

Images assailed him of stripping Ava and touching her all over, until every inch of his shell receded. His grip tightened around her back, threatening to drift to her rear, while her breasts pressed against his stomach. He would rub his bare quick against her smooth soft skin, then wrap her legs around his waist and bury his spurs in her hot little body. He’d never impaled a female, at least not with his spurs, but on instinct he knew exactly what to do.

“Wow, that was a little freaky.” Ava pulled back when the turbulence halted. “Thanks for keeping me from falling on my butt.”

Scala’s eyes widened and he quickly let her go. For a moment, when she said freaky, he thought she’d read his mind

and saw his carnal thoughts. He then realized she was talking about the vessel taking off.

“Yes, ah, make yourself comfortable. I should, uh, go find you something to eat.” Scala headed for the door before he could act on his wayward thoughts.

“Um, okay,” Ava replied.

As he exited, she released a forlorn sigh that tugged at him. He was tempted to turn around but continued into the hall instead.

She is not mine, he reminded himself.

Ava

Ava frowned as Scala hustled out of the suite like the room was on fire. He said he was going to get food, but she wasn't convinced that was the real excuse, based on his intense expression.

"Maybe the take-off wasn't so smooth," she mumbled to herself.

I hope everything is all right. Wouldn't that be my luck to get saved then instantly die in a crash. She grimaced. No. I'm sure it's okay. Scala would've said if there was a big issue and there'd probably be alarms. This ship looks nice. Not the least bit rundown.

She marveled at how her environment had changed in a day.

It's not just a nice room, it's luxurious.

Her room at the outpost had been little more than a closet attached to Yitu's bedroom. But compared to Shanty town, where everyone else stayed, it was lavish. She'd been lucky to have a secondhand mattress, and she didn't have to fight off any squiggly insects that infested the barracks.

Scala's quarters, though, were infinitely better than even her memories of fancy hotel suites back home. With only a bathroom branching off the large room, it wasn't as big as Kur's suite, but it was cleaner. The blue wavy mural was calming, and better to look at than depressing rusty metal. There were no chips or cracks in the small dining table. The leather sofa didn't have rips in it, and neither did the bed at the far end of the room.

Well, Scala doesn't have claws like the lizards do. Scala had dark nails that ended in points, but she wouldn't call them claws. He also probably doesn't pitch fits when he's mad.

She shook her head, recalling Kur's violent tirades. More than once she rushed Lucas and Yitu out of the room as Kur started tossing furniture.

No, that doesn't look like that's happened here.

The overstuffed bed shrouded in crisp fresh linens looked unbelievably inviting. She let out a deep sigh, suddenly feeling exhausted as she wandered over to it. The intense day of rushing around the outpost was catching up with her.

“Oh, I was right. It is nice,” she moaned as she ran her hand over the silky bedding.

What she thought were mounds of bedding was actually a glorious marshmallow puff of a mattress, the pillows built into the all-in-one bed.

I bet it's like sleeping on a cloud.

Ava then spotted how dirty her hands were and grimaced as she quickly pulled them back.

I could grow potatoes under my nails. She gaped in horror at them then scanned the mattress, hoping she hadn't sullied it. Another thought occurred to her and she sniffed her armpit.

“Oh god!” She instantly recoiled.

How could Scala stand to be around me?!

Her gaze shifted longingly to the small pool in the corner of the room and suddenly found herself skirting the edge of it.

I probably should wait and ask Scala if it's okay, she mused even as she slid off one sandal and dipped her toes in.

“Oh,” Ava moaned. The water that lapped at her foot wasn’t too hot, wasn’t too cold, but just right, and too much of a temptation.

Maybe I’ll just get in real quick. I’d be doing Scala a service. No one wants a dirty girl stinking up their room, she reasoned as she kicked off her other sandal and stripped out of her worn jumper.

A frisson of guilt suffused her as she descended the steps, knowing her baby brother was still with those scaly bastards, but then the warm water inundated her and she was lost to the glorious relaxing sensation.

Scala

Another moment more and I would've tackled her. Scala scowled as he headed down the corridor. The memory of Ava's little body pressed against his needled him.

Ava was human. They were an isolated people that knew nothing of other races, let alone their mating habits. She had no clue she was his weakness. Scala groaned as he imagined how traumatized she would have been if he lost control.

And hurt. I would have hurt her. He wanted to be gentle with Ava, especially after what she'd been through, and yet the savage beast that prowled inside him just wanted to aggressively rut atop her.

I won't let that happen. Scala shook his head as he stopped at the door and pinged the occupants.

"Scala!" Faktil tossed up his hands in greeting as the door opened. "Thorac messaged that you made it aboard, but I'm glad you stopped by. You had me worried when you didn't join us." The Cadi warrior's red tail swished, a sign that the male was truly happy to see him.

"I managed to get the human female, Ava, out, too," Scala relayed to his friend.

You had me worried, and I never worry, Thunder, the mute Toufik male, signed with his furry hands.

"I'm glad to have made it back with my shell intact," Scala said, then let out a slightly anxious chuckle, since that wasn't entirely true. His shell had actually been breached big time.

Sit, drink, eat, Thunder added, waving to the dining table as the furry male stood.

A stiff drink or a dozen sounded great right now. Scala longingly looked at the carafe.

“No. That’s all right. Go ahead.” He shook his head instead. The last thing he needed was to get inebriated. He could just imagine the foolishness that would ensue.

I was just leaving. I’m on the next shift in engineering, Thunder signed, then patted Scala on the back as he headed for the door.

“Thank you.” Scala appreciated the Toufik and Cadi warriors’ assistance in hunting the reptiles.

“One moment, I’m climbing down a trash pile thinking you’re behind me and the next moment, Payim says you’re gone. Tell me, what happened?” Faktil eagerly insisted as he patted the seat at the table.

“There’s not much to tell.” Scala shrugged. He certainly wasn’t going to tell his friend that he’d found his weakness. He’d hardly accepted it himself. “Ava headed back to catch the Vicarius’ starship, to join her mate Lucas, but the reptile left her behind.”

“Truly?!” Faktil’s eyes widened and Scala nodded. “That’s quite a brazen female. I’m not sure if I could give up a chance at freedom to join my mate on a ship full of those scaly bastards,” Faktil admitted as he grabbed a bite of *togu*.

“Sure you would, if you had a mate. You’re a good male,” he disagreed.

“Hmm, probably.” Faktil chewed the juicy meat.

Then again, what do I know of being a good mate? After all, he’d left his weakness alone in his quarters.

Scala frowned recalling Ava's comment. She was brave, but she was also tired of being brave. She was new to the ship, to all of this, worried about her mate and even her very future.

I shouldn't have rushed out. It was cowardly. But I would've done something foolish if I stayed. That's worse than leaving her alone.

"So how did you make it out?" Faktil urged, pulling him from his thoughts.

"Ah, yes, I was hoping to infiltrate the Vicarius' ship, but it was gone by the time we reached the oceanside hangar," he continued with the story. "I think they detected us when we landed on Gienah, if not, our skirmish once we infiltrated certainly tipped them off."

"True." Faktil nodded.

"I managed to convince one of the reptiles to fly us to the vessel, but there was an issue shortly after we got out of the hangar." Scala grimaced, reliving the anger he'd felt as he fired on the Jurou Biljana pilot. The male died too quickly. "Now there's a dead reptile aboard and a tech working on the encrypted cruiser systems," he quickly summed up, eager to get to the real issue that brought him here.

"Oh, that's frustrating. The scaly bastards can't have made it too far," Faktil commiserated.

"I don't know. They're using illicit security, so who knows what other upgrades they've made to their ships that they shouldn't possess." Scala clenched his fists.

He was angry he missed the Vicarius, but it was better that Ava was here. She'd been in enough danger.

"Who's selling tech to these vile flesh merchants!" Faktil growled.

It *was* frustrating. The Osivoire, Cadi and their allies were working to rid the quadrant of slavers and reprobates like the Jurou Biljana, but then black-market auction houses run by greedy races like the Topus kept doing business with the wretched reptiles.

“Sadly, it’s another problem for another day,” he huffed.

Speaking of problems for another day. Scala remembered why he was here.

“Is that bed free?” He gestured to the third bunk that had been brought into the small cabin.

“No. Thorac gave up his quarters to Payim and Elena.” Faktil shook his head.

“Ah.” Scala nodded in understanding. Being the co-captain, Thorac’s quarters were as nice as his own. It was only right that Thorac let the newly mated couple have his suite, and yet that meant this room was now full.

“I gather the female, Ava, is in your quarters.” Faktil took a sip of his drink.

“Aye.” Scala nodded.

“Why isn’t she staying with her people?”

“It’s a long story.” Ava’s sad expression crossed his mind from when she’d mentioned how her own people treated her.

His stomach twisted in a knot, his thoughts returning to Ava all alone in his quarters. She’d been all alone when she released her people, and it sounded like she had shouldered the brunt of her people’s derision alone, too.

Why didn’t her mate help her? He clenched his jaw, angry with this Lucas, even though he hadn’t met the male yet.

If I'd been captured with Ava, I wouldn't have allowed her to be abused. He'd have sooner died. Lucas is no mate.

Obviously, her situation, like many of the mating bonds he'd witnessed, was less than ideal.

"You sure you don't want something to eat?" Faktil gestured to the food as Scala stared blankly at the dining table.

"No, I should go." His mind was made up.

If Ava had suffered being the Vicarius' slave and bravely risked her life to free her people, the least he could do was shove down his issues and be a friend when she was uncertain and all alone. He felt calmer now. He could do this.

Scala turned to leave, then paused and grabbed the platter of *patki* off the table.

"I expect the rest of the story once you get some rest," Faktil laughed as Scala exited with the pilfered dish.

Scala headed back down the corridor toward his suite. A door opened and a human poked his head into the hall.

"Greetings." Scala smiled at the male.

The human's eyes widened and he quickly ducked back into the room again.

They're still afraid of us. He shook his head, feeling bad for the humans.

Ava was truly brave. She was coping with her fear much better than her fellow humans. A smile tipped his lips and warmth filled his chest. Ava honored him by trusting him enough to want to stay in his room.

FIVE



REVELATION

Scala

Scala entered his quarters and froze, his gaze zeroing in on Ava in the estuary. The view of her was obscured by the water, but it was obvious she was nude. Her pale mounds bobbed just beneath the surface, their ruddy tips playing peek-a-boo, taunting him. His heart kicked into high gear and the jittery sensation instantly returned.

Just as swiftly, fear supplanted the hunger when he noticed the way her head rested on the edge of the pool, her eyes closed.

She shouldn't be sleeping in the estuary. Her lungs weren't that different from his own.

Images of Ava floating lifeless layered over the memory of finding his sobrus' body in a similar situation. Scala launched forward, the platter of food falling from his hands.

"Ava!" he barked and dropped down beside the estuary.

"What?!" Ava flailed, splashing water everywhere.

"No, no, no!" He grabbed her hand just as she was about to slip under.

Ava sputtered and blinked while he helped her get a grip on the ledge. She then mopped her face and focused on him.

"I was just resting my eyes." Ava incredulously arched one brow at him.

"Sorry. I scared you. You shouldn't sleep in the water," he insisted.

Ava's expression eased. "You're probably right." She nodded in agreement and gave him a slight grimace. "I hope

you don't mind. I really needed a soak."

"Not alone. Not while you are sleepy." He couldn't bear the thought of her drowning.

"That's good advice. It just feels so nice," Ava groaned. "Maybe you should get in. Talk to me and keep me awake." She grabbed his arm, urging him to join her.

Scala sharply exhaled as pleasurable tingling warmth shot up his arm, her luxurious moan echoing in his ears. With disaster averted, his wayward libido picked up exactly where it left off. Rather than standing at a safe distance, he was leaning over Ava, and she was nude in his estuary.

This is not good.

The curve of her bare back drew his gaze down to a pair of full globes. Ava had missed too many meals and yet her bottom remained luscious and round. His fingers flexed with the urge to squeeze the full cheeks, as he tugged in the sweet scent radiating off of her.

She asked me to join her. His spurs kicked, rebelling at being trapped in his shell, making his groin throb. He wanted to join her, but Ava had no clue what she was asking him. His people didn't just revere the estuaries, they mated in the pools. Her hormones mixing in the water would soften his shell, making it recede faster. He was barely resisting her pull now, if he joined her his fight would be all over.

"Oh, your skin is stunning," Ava declared with a breathy gasp.

His gaze swung to his forearm, where his quick was exposed. His shell continued receding up his arm as Ava traced his dermis.

“It’s so many colors, like the inside of a seashell.” Her delicate fingers followed a magenta striation until it shifted to blue.

Scala sucked in a sharp breath as the pleasure inundated him. He had to do something. He was quickly losing his grip on the reins.

“Why does your armor come and go like this?” Ava curiously tilted her head.

She asked me a question, a very important question. He couldn’t focus as he stared into her eyes. Her irises weren’t entirely gray. There were pale blue flecks, like starlight, and a ring of yellow around her black pupils. It was reminiscent of a solar eclipse, and he got lost staring at the little universes.

“This didn’t happen when I took Thorac’s hand,” she added, and the mention of another male caught his attention.

He recalled Thorac clasping her hand in the hangar and jealousy reared its head.

It didn’t happen with Thorac because you’re my weakness!

The words nearly made it past his lips but he tamped them down.

She is not mine!

“I should go.” Scala beat back his desire, and pulled his arm away from her. “This isn’t right. You have a mate.”

“Mate?” Ava frowned in confusion. “I don’t have a mate.” She tilted her head.

She doesn’t have a mate?! His eyes widened in shock.

Ava

What the hell is he talking about?

“Your mate, Lucas!” Scala insisted as he backed away from the pool, looking like he’d been punched in the gut.

Oh! The pieces suddenly fell into place.

Long ago she’d lost any self-consciousness about being naked. Kur would barge in the bathroom or her closet-bedroom and it didn’t matter if she was naked or not. Scala’s intense gaze didn’t scream disgust at seeing her nude, but it was obviously an issue. He was also probably still freaked, thinking she was about to drown.

Then I asked him to join me. If some naked dude invited her into a hot tub back on Earth, she’d have been more than a little uncomfortable. Her tired brain was too out of it to realize the faux pas beforehand. *Open mouth, insert foot.*

Oh my god. Her eyes widened as she recalled pawing at his arms as she admired his skin. *Boundaries, Ava, Jesus.*

And he thinks I’m married. That added another layer of awkwardness. *But he thinks I’m married to Lucas!* She would have laughed if the thought of being married to her eight-year-old brother wasn’t so disturbing.

The uncomfortable expression on Scala’s armored face screamed that’s exactly what he thought.

“I’m sorry if asking you to join me and touching your arm was inappropriate. I’m just so tired.” She grimaced. “Lucas is not my mate. Go look in that bag.” She gestured to where it lay on the floor.

Scala spun around and went for the bag, his movements stiff.

Ugh. Great! I've disgusted and offended him.

Scala

The thundering in Scala's ears made him miss half of what Ava said, but it sounded like she said she wasn't mated as she gestured to her bag. He opened the satchel and was perplexed by what he found.

"These are playthings." He pulled out matching stuffed creatures, utterly confused as he looked at Ava.

"Yep. One of those is Yitu's, the Vicarius' son, and the other belongs to Lucas, my baby brother." Ava nodded then rested her chin on the edge of the pool.

Scala processed what she said as he looked back down at the toys. This should be good news given the hungry thoughts running through his mind, but his illicit thoughts were the exact reason this wasn't good news at all.

"Oh." He dropped the toys and the bag, then took another step backward, away from the pool.

"Kur couldn't be bothered with his own son, so he decided Lucas would be Yitu's playmate, and I was to keep them both out of his way," Ava continued explaining.

She's not mated. He reached out to her, his hand literally extended of its own free will, but he swiftly pulled it back. *It doesn't matter. You can't pounce on her. She was just released. She's tiny and delicate.* And his hunger was anything but delicate.

"I understand," he stammered. "I should get you a drying sheet."

Scala spun and noticed the food lying on the floor, from when he'd abandoned the platter in a panic. He took several

deep breaths as he went to the console on the wall. The tightness in his groin was impossible to ignore while he attempted to initiate the cleaning unit. His spurs were straining inside his shell, demanding to be free. All he had to do was join her in the estuary...

“Enough,” he growled under his breath then smacked his groin in frustration.

Agony radiated through him and he doubled over. He’d been hit in the crotch before and his shell always protected him, but not this time, not around Ava. Scala’s mouth opened and he repressed the painful groan as he looked up at the ceiling for help.

Never do that again! The part of his mind that could form rational thought made note.

“Does it matter that Lucas isn’t who you thought?” Ava innocently asked from the pool.

“Yes,” he choked out. It mattered very much that she wasn’t mated. He gripped the wall, trying to rein in the excruciating pain perversely mixed with pleasure and need.

“But we’re still going to go get him, right?”

The distress in Ava’s voice caught his attention. He forced himself to stand upright and turned to face her.

“We’re still going to save him. He is a youth,” Scala managed to say, realizing he’d worried her and caused a misunderstanding with his distracted response.

Distraction was the name of the game as he stared at her leaning against the edge of the estuary. Her pale, damp, hair hung to her creamy shoulders, framing her delicate face with its large gray eyes, rosy cheeks and deliciously full lips. This was a trap. She had to be the water goddess come to tempt

him. The very same deity that cursed his people with their shells for the way she was mistreated by her male. The story was supposedly a myth, but now he wasn't so sure.

“Thank you for agreeing to help him,” Ava said, relieved. She then smiled. It was tentative but appreciative, and breathtakingly gorgeous.

She is a goddess. Scala's chest clenched with deep longing and a twinge of unease.

He had to tread carefully.

Ava

“I’ll get you that drying sheet,” Scala mumbled, then finished tapping on the control panel before going to the wall by the pool.

She’d known Scala for all of a day, but he was acting strange. He’d just done some weird contortions and now his movements were jerky as he pulled a large piece of fabric out of the hidden cabinet.

I made things awkward. She groaned. She shouldn’t have stripped naked and hopped in his pool like she owned the place.

Something in the corner of her eye caught her attention. A slim little robot emerged from the wall and started cleaning up what looked like a plate of chicken wings littering the floor near the door.

Oh no! That must’ve happened when he thought she was drowning.

Scala dropped the towel next to her then retreated. She couldn’t tell if it was anger shifting in his pink eyes or just agitation.

“I’m sorry. That’s a shame.” She pointed to the mess being cleaned up by the ingenious little vacuum. “I hate wasting food.” She frowned in remorse.

Fuck me! I’m making a great impression.

“It is all right. I will make more.” Scala overtly looked at the large towel he just delivered then gave her his back.

She got the hint and waded toward the steps.

“Don’t make anything for me. I’m not hungry.” She shook her head, her stomach in knots as she climbed out of the pool.

“You should eat.” Scala glanced over his shoulder then swiftly looked away again.

He doesn’t want to see your weird human body. Ava cringed and swiftly wrapped the towel around her.

“I think I’d like to just lie down,” she replied.

“Take the bed,” Scala grunted and gestured, his back still facing her.

“I couldn’t do that. Where will you sleep?” She frowned. The couch didn’t look like it would fit him.

She’d invaded his room, used his pool, made him drop the food and now was stealing his bed. He probably wished he left her behind.

“I’m fine. If you need to relieve yourself, there’s a unit in the washroom. Just press the green sensor on the far wall.” He pointed to a door on the back wall.

“Okay. Thanks. I really appreciate everything.” She truly meant that. He’d been kind as she wormed her way into his room and mucked with his mission.

Feeling defeated, Ava headed into the bathroom. She’d sweated so much today she really didn’t need to go, but it was always better to try. She pressed the green button.

Well, tomorrow’s a new day, she sighed as she watched the toilet basin emerge from the wall.

In the scheme of things, today had been good, people were saved and she’d found help to rescue her brother. Yet she’d managed to rub Scala the wrong way. Hopefully, with a little sleep she’d be able to smooth things over tomorrow.

Scala

With his back turned, he listened as Ava headed into the washroom. The instant the door closed Scala tossed his hands into the air.

“Break me! What am I going to do?!”

He turned in a confused circle, looking for a way out, while a part of him refused to leave for fear Ava would somehow get injured in his absence. His inner beast demanded he give in to instinct after learning she wasn't mated, but what reprobate leapt on a female the instant she was liberated?

“Argghhh!” Scala rubbed a hand down his face.

Just go lie down on that settee and don't move! He started toward the sofa then paused. *No, I should find her clean clothes.* Her dirty jumpsuit lying on the floor was little more than a rag.

He spun the other way, nearly losing his balance. Scala caught himself before falling. This was getting embarrassing. If he was ever this awkward in battle, he'd have died long ago. He wasn't going to survive this.

As he headed toward the replicator on the wall, the washroom door opened behind him.

Don't turn around to look at her, and you'll be fine, he coached himself.

“I'm just making something clean for you to wear. It will be just a moment,” he said over his shoulder.

The pitter patter of Ava's delicate feet paused, and he could feel her staring at his back, while picturing her wrapped

in the drying sheet. How easy it would be to tug the bit of cloth off, revealing her curvy, naked body.

No! He struggled to banish the thought.

“Okay. I’ll just lie down while we wait.”

“All right.” He nodded and forced himself to focus on the console.

I need something. He stared at the screen. This wasn’t the first time they’d encountered humans, so there had to be human clothing in the system. He concentrated as he scrolled through the options, ignoring the sound of Ava rustling the bed.

I don’t know her dimensions. He scowled as he continued to the next screen. Finally, he came across something called a wrap dress. *That looks versatile enough.* He sent it to the small replicator embedded in the wall.

Scala opened his mouth to report his luck but a slight rumbling sound greeted his ears. He spun and found Ava sprawled on the bed. His eyes widened when the indelicate sound emerged from her again.

She’s asleep already! And sleeping heavily from the sound of it. She hadn’t lasted until her dress was done. She didn’t even last until he’d selected something.

Ava had been through a lot, too much. It shouldn’t have been a surprise how quickly she fell asleep.

Scala grimaced at the damp towel wrapped around her. He didn’t dare remove it, but she was so slight, and fleshy species were prone to getting cold.

Blankets, there are blankets here somewhere.

He panned the walls trying to recall which compartment they were kept in. His gaze landed on the cabinets by the bed, which should've been his obvious first choice. He hustled to the wall and opened one then another cubby, until he located the bedding. Scala grabbed a blanket and triumphantly held it up as he spun toward the bed.

"I'm just going to put this over you," he said softly. It was more of a reminder to himself to do that and only that, since Ava was fast asleep.

As he started to lean over, her scent wafted into his nostrils. His spurs shoved at the inside of his shell, demanding to be free.

No! he groaned, swiftly stood upright and tossed the blanket atop her, then backed away.

Go to the settee!

Except on the way to lie down, the rippling water of the estuary captured his attention.

Ava

A sound roused her and Ava froze. This wasn't her scratchy mattress. This bed and the warm blanket covering her were silky and soft, like a wonderful dream. Then she recalled everything that happened and where she was. It was a dream, sort of. Ava cracked open her eyes to further confirm she was indeed still on the rescue ship. Her eyes widened and she tugged in a sharp breath at the sight that greeted her.

Scala stood in the large hot tub up to his waist, his pants laying crumpled on the floor nearby. His massive hands cupped water, pouring it over his broad shoulders, letting it run down his chest. She watched in awe as his bony armor melted in its wake, revealing the wondrous bright pattern that striated his soft skin. He really did look like the inside of a seashell.

With his armor gone she could clearly see Scala was as muscular as he appeared on the surface. His head was tipped back, eyes closed, as his broad palm chased the water. His hand smoothed over his colorful bare flesh from his mountainous pecs down to his stacked abs. He was absolutely stunning. Never before had she seen a man as large and ripped as Scala, looking like an incubus from some X-rated fairy tale.

She bit her lip in anticipation, following his hand downward, over the taunting vee-shaped muscles flanking his waist, where it disappeared beneath the water. His corded arm flexed as he gripped something below the surface, and his hand began to move up and down.

Is he jerking off?! Her eyes widened, her mouth dropping open. I think he is.

She squeezed her eyes closed, tucking her face beneath the edge of the blanket, not wanting to intrude like some peeping tom. Except her curiosity got the best of her and she cracked them open again. It was the wrong thing to do, and not just because she was invading his privacy. Scala's eight-pack abs bunched, making him reflexively hunch over. He grabbed the edge of the pool to steady himself with his free hand as he stroked himself beneath the water. Ava shivered, warmth spreading through her, ruthlessly zeroing in on her lips, nipples and between her thighs, while she surreptitiously watched.

Oh, hell! Ava bit on her lower lip to keep a needy moan from escaping.

Her teeth tightened harder, nearly drawing blood when the head of Scala's cock breached the surface. The bright pink, bulbous crown appeared similar to what she was familiar with, though she barely got a good look before Scala stroked downward, tugging it out of view. She wasn't sure if noting the similarity was a good thing or not, since it only served to torture her more. Yet raptly she watched, desperate for another peek.

When was the last time she'd had sex? Hell, when was the last time she'd thought about sex? *Too long!* And when was the last time she got her rocks off with a strapped man who had enough balls to walk into an enemy outpost like James Bond? *Never! That's when.* Her nipples hardened to hard points, and her stomach cramped, her pussy feeling painfully empty. It might be wrong, but like hell she was looking away.

Without the shell, the features of Scala's face were softened yet still masculine. The way his brow was furrowed and his jaw clenched with the mounting pleasure was nearly as

erotic as the rest of his physique. He was exotically handsome. She'd noticed it before, but had been too stressed. Now it was all she could see.

Scala's hand moved faster and he groaned repeatedly, the rumbling grunt matching beat with his pumping fist. Scala had been nothing but kind and gentlemanly with her, but the deep growling sounds hinted at something animalistic lurking inside the man. It called to a part of her, kicking off a spasm in her pussy. She wanted to groan, too, or maybe whine, desperate to roll over and submit to whatever savagery he'd subject her to, but she quickly stifled it.

Then Scala looked straight at her, as if he'd heard the catch in her breath or read her illicit thoughts. Sheer ecstasy contorted his face as he shook from the climax. His eyes struck her and she forgot how to breathe. His red eyes were gone, replaced by a mesmerizing bluish-white that seemed to glow. She had no clue if he saw her looking back at him or not. She couldn't look away even if he had caught her spying. He was stunning!

Too soon Scala turned away from her and exited the pool. She was grateful for the sight of the best and tightest ass in the universe before his bony armor miraculously slid over every inch of his hot body.

I must be dreaming, Ava sighed. She closed her eyes and attempted to rein in her heartbeat, at the same time praying for another dream just like this.

SIX



TWO STEPS FORWARD, ONE
BACK

Ava

Ava startled awake.

I slept too long. There'd be hell to pay.

She blinked to clear her eyes then focused, her gaze landing on Scala stretched out on the sofa. Ava smiled and relaxed, remembering where she was. She also remembered what she'd witnessed last night. Ava hugged the blanket against her chest and bit her lip as the mental image taunted her. The exotically colorful man, straining as he stroked his cock, brought out feelings she hadn't experienced in a long time. Her stomach fluttered, heat coursing through her. It was a shame he was again armored, dressed in a pair of gray leggings.

Ava cringed, noting how his long legs dangled over the edge of the sofa. It looked uncomfortable, meanwhile she languished in his luxurious bed. She pulled in a stunned breath realizing at some point Scala had covered her with the blanket she was holding.

He's not just sexy, he's kind and brave. She gripped the blanket tighter. Scala risked himself to help people he didn't even know, not only in the outpost, but elsewhere in the universe, like Earth.

Her gaze shifted from her discarded jumpsuit by the pool, the bag in the middle of the floor and the damp towel she'd kicked off in the middle of the night. It wasn't an outrageous mess, still she wouldn't have left it if these were Kur's quarters. Scala deserved better than that.

Ava wrapped the blanket around herself and got up. She wasn't sure what to do with the large towel, so she draped it over a chair at the small dining table, then grabbed her bag and neatly placed it on the table, too. She tiptoed toward the pool to grab her dirty jumper, debating if she should bother to wash it. As she passed the settee, Scala jerked awake, bolting upright.

“What?!” Scala frantically looked around, wide-eyed and startled. When he spotted her, his expression eased, though he was still stiff, his shoulders practically hugging his ears. The poor guy probably had a kink in his neck from sleeping on the sofa.

“Sorry.” Ava grimaced. She'd managed to cause him angst yet again. “I was just cleaning up a bit.”

Ava hustled to the pool. As she dipped to grab her clothes, the blanket gaped, exposing her right side. Scala was uncomfortable with her nudity, and after seeing him jerk off, being naked around him was suddenly awkward.

“Oh, crap.” She hurriedly grabbed for the gaping blanket. Her feet caught up on the hem and she lost it entirely as she pitched forward.

“No!” she declared in alarm and mortification.

A pair of strong hands gripped her hips, halting her just before her face slammed into the hard floor.

“Are you all right?” Scala spun her, worriedly checking her face.

She had to stare straight up to make eye contact with the giant man, and sheepishly grimaced. His fingers slightly kneaded her hips, highlighting the fact that she was entirely nude. From the corner of her eye, she spotted his shell

receding where her hands rested on his chest. It was the same where her breasts pressed against his abdomen. The cool, hard sensation was replaced by warm, smooth muscle that made her skin tingle and her nipples harden. The butterflies in her stomach went wild as she fixated on his lips, desperately wanting to kiss them. She probably would have, too, but she'd have to leap to accomplish it.

“Your dress is done,” Scala said through clenched teeth, released her and stepped back, roughly gesturing to a blue gown draped over the back of the sofa.

“Oh. Okay. Thank you,” she replied when he turned to give her privacy. The pang of desire withered, embarrassment swiftly taking its place.

She grabbed the blanket to cover herself then fetched the dress and hustled to the bathroom.

Great! I'm starting this new day just great! She looked at the wall while debating slamming her head into it.

Scala

She's so tormenting soft, Scala groaned, his muscles quivering as his shell slid back into place.

It had been all he could do to let Ava go. Her little hands and full breasts pressed against his bare quick were disorienting. Never had he been touched like this. He'd had nude females in his bed before, but they weren't his weakness. They didn't truly touch him, not like this. The way Ava gazed up at him through her delicate fringe of eyelashes was wildly alluring, adding to his torment. Her sweet feminine scent was stronger today, if that was even possible. It held a note of something so mindlessly delicious, he was salivating. He'd given in to the hunger last night and stroked his spurs for the very first time, hoping for a reprieve. It merely stoked the fire, he wanted Ava more than ever.

“What happened to, ‘I don't need a mate’?” he mumbled under his breath as he paced his quarters, grabbing a shirt and tugging it over his head on one of his laps.

The thought had his mind drifting. Bonding with Ava would be nothing like joining with an Osivoire. If she were Osivoire, he'd be expected to mate not only with her but the conclave of females that came with her. He'd watched his patrem try to split his attention between three sisters and it pulled the male apart. Perhaps what he really wanted was to be bonded with one person who he could share himself with entirely. His friend Aculus was mated to a human, and only the two of them made up their little conclave.

Maybe Ava was the answer he never knew he was seeking. Scala stopped pacing, his gaze shifting to the washroom door.

And what about her? What if Ava isn't interested in me? She was, after all, human. From what he'd been told, human females didn't respond to physical cues like their shell weakening. That was wrong; humans did respond to the instinctual connection, but they didn't let it determine who their mate was, he corrected, recalling Payim's words. Human females were very confusing, yet he could see the benefits and nothing stood in his way now.

Scala shook his head. He was digressing again. Just because he'd accepted Ava was his weakness and she wasn't mated, it didn't change that only yesterday she'd been liberated. Pouncing on her would be bad, very bad. She'd need time to accept him, if she ever did.

Ignore the spurs shoving at your shell and see to her needs. That's what a decent mate and decent person would do. He could be patient, for Ava.

He picked up her clothes and headed toward the replicating unit embedded in the wall. It would clean and repair the jumpsuit along with her strappy footwear. Scala slid open the door then paused.

First, I should make her something to eat.

The washroom door swished open as he dropped her clothing on the floor.

"This is lovely. Thank you," Ava said with a slight tremor in her voice.

Something was wrong. He turned and his chest clenched, spotting the moisture glistening in Ava's eyes before she gazed down at the blue gown. Her hands reverently smoothed over the fabric and he understood what was wrong. It touched and also angered him that such a simple thing as having new

clothing moved her. Ava deserved infinitely more than that! He wanted to gut the Jurou Biljana for what they'd done to her, but squelched his anger.

“You deserve it, and it's hardly the lovely one.” He turned toward the replicator before seeing if she heard the compliment. “Please, come, pick what you might like to eat. Our human menu is limited, but it's growing.”

“Oh, okay.”

His lips tipped up hearing the cadence of her bare feet pattering lightly on the hard floor. His shell clicked, though when it receded, his steps sounded much like hers. It was an odd observation, and yet it gave him joy. Scala smiled when Ava joined him by the console on the wall.

“I don't know what dialect you read. This one is called English.” He adjusted the human menu so it displayed the human script then stepped aside.

She did something with her hair, he noted as she stepped to the panel. Scala panned the intricate woven pattern cascading down her back. The plaiting looked complicated and it fascinated him that she'd managed it on her own.

“That will work.” Ava appeared surprised as she looked at the script on the screen then back at him.

“We assisted a human female and her family. Now, Nadzia is mated to our Premiere Servant, Aculus. She is adding food to the catalog all the time, but I must warn the dishes won't be exactly like what you're used to,” he gave her the abbreviated explanation.

“I'm used to scraps of barely cooked *caro* and wilted *gramen*, so I'm sure this will be great,” she chuckled, her reptile accent impressive.

He wanted to be mad at the pathetic food she'd been subjected to but her amused laugh dispelled his anger.

"Then compared to raw meat and steamed grass you should be very pleased with the human approximations." He smiled back at her, then raptly watched as she scrolled the options. He couldn't help but admire her positive perspective.

"Pizza! There's pizza in here!" she declared, her eyes dancing with excitement as she pointed at the dish on screen.

"Is that what you'd like?" His grin broadened, beyond pleased by her reaction.

"It all looks so tempting, but I think, yes." She nodded emphatically.

"How many would you like, three, five, ten?"

"Um, I can probably only eat half." She looked incredulously up at him.

"Are you certain? They are only the size of a platter and you need to eat," he urged, approximating the size with his hands.

"Yeah, just one is more than fine," she chuckled.

Her laugh was wonderful. The bubbly sound was the embodiment of pure joy, and the way her little nose scrunched up was beyond adorable. He suddenly had a new goal in life, making her laugh.

"I will make three. I haven't tried this human dish." He swiped the screen, engaging the replicator.

"Wow! Okay." Ava's eyes widened, her gaze then shifted to the replicator as it went to work.

While her head was turned, he got another good look at her cheek and frowned.

“Once we eat, please consider going to the clinic. The mark on your cheek has gone from red to purple.” He wanted to touch the spot but resisted.

“It’s really fine, but if that will make you feel better, okay,” Ava agreed.

“It would,” he sighed in relief.

The inner beast that had been pacing was momentarily appeased, now that Ava had clothing, would eat, and would have medical care. Seeing to her needs instinctually trumped his own, making the gnawing hunger almost bearable.

Ava

Scala wasn't acting awkward after she emerged from the bathroom. In fact, he was more at ease than he'd been since they arrived on his ship. If he could forget it, so could she.

We'll just say the day started when I came out of the bathroom. No embarrassing naked falling incident happened here. She nodded, trying to wipe it from her memory banks.

It was a little difficult to forget, though, since every time she looked at Scala, she could feel his massive body pressed against hers.

He was so warm, and smelled nice, too. She had wanted to kiss him and still did. And those were the thoughts that were going to have her doing something embarrassing again. *Ugh. Chill!*

"I think something went wrong with the process." Scala frowned, his bony brow knitting together as he pulled the boxes out of the replicator.

"No." Ava giddily clapped her hands. "They're in pizza boxes," she squealed, reaching for the top box.

Scala's eyes widened and his head reared back in surprise.

Ava cringed, realizing her squeal was probably deafening. She couldn't help it, the goofy detail made her absurdly happy. Ava threw open the lid and steam rose off the pizza. The crust was slightly green, the sauce yellow, and the cheese a pale blue, but the smell was right, piquant and greasy. When she lifted a piece, the cheese threatened to slide off and the gooey strings clung to the neighboring pieces, just like she

remembered. Ava quickly folded the slice, then brought it to her mouth.

“Careful. It’s hot,” Scala warned as he held the stack.

She nodded, tentatively blew on the slice, but couldn’t resist it any longer and crammed the end into her mouth.

“Mmm,” she groaned, closing her eyes. This wasn’t like the pizza chain near her apartment, it tasted like it was from one of those artisanal places, and it was absolutely divine. “Whoever did this is an angel,” she moaned as she chewed.

“I’m sure Nadzia would be pleased to hear that.” Scala grinned at her.

She paused chewing to take in his smile. He was handsome already, but stunning when he smiled. She grinned back and took another bite.

Scala balanced the stack of boxes in one arm, and grabbed a slice. “Oh, no,” he declared as the cheese slid off.

“Rookie,” she laughed with her mouth full.

One of Scala’s bony brows arched incredulously. “I think I have a solution.” He put the empty bit of crust onto the other piece with all the cheese, making a sandwich, then grabbed the whole ensemble and crammed half of it into his mouth.

“Now you’re learning,” Ava giggled and took another bite, though not nearly as big as he’d managed.

No wonder he thought three pizzas were necessary.

“Mmm. This is unusual, but tasty.” Scala nodded as he chewed and swallowed. “I will definitely relay our appreciation to Nadzia.” He took another bite.

“Should we go to the table?” She gestured.

“Or we could eat in the arboretum. It’s on our way to the clinic,” Scala suggested.

The idea had her perking up.

“That’s with a lot of plants, right?” she confirmed, another bite poised at her lips.

The mix of trees and flowers decorating Scala’s suite were the first plants she’d seen in years, having been trapped inside the outpost. The prospect was as inviting as eating the pizza.

“It is.” He nodded.

“That sounds nice,” she eagerly agreed, though being poked and prodded in medical didn’t sound very exciting for dessert.

She popped the end of the crust in her mouth and looked around, finding her sandals where he’d moved them by the wall.

“I should put your clothes in the unit to get clean,” Scala commented as she slipped on her worn shoes.

“Don’t bother. Just burn the jumpsuit. It’s hardly worth the effort.” She shook her head as she considered the rag.

She wouldn’t have dared waste the clothing if she were still at the outpost. A part of her rebelled a little even as she’d suggested burning it, but her situation had changed for the better and she was choosing to put her faith in that.

“I can do that,” Scala chuckled. “Ready to go or do you want another piece?” He extended the stack of boxes toward her.

“I think I can wait. The walk will let this piece settle so I can fit another.” Ava patted her gut as they headed for the door.

“Don’t tell me you are satiated already.” Scala eyed her.

“I will eat another piece, maybe a third, but my appetite isn’t what it once was.” She grimaced, feeling guilty. “I guess one pizza was more than enough. The rest won’t go to waste, will it?”

“No. Don’t worry. I’m sure I can manage whatever you don’t eat.” Scala shook his head as they walked down the corridor.

Scala nodded at one of the armored crewmen they passed and she smiled in greeting before turning her attention back to him.

“Really?! You’ll be able to eat the rest?” She gaped at him.

“Aye.” He didn’t even appear fazed by the idea.

“You’ve got quite an appetite, although you are a big dude.” She glanced him up and down, again taking in his towering height. “What happens if you gain weight, armored like you are?” she couldn’t help but ask.

“I have to expend the extra energy and my shell is strengthened. If I eat more, more often, I gain mass, and my shell expands to compensate.”

“Ah.” She considered his explanation. “How does your armor, I mean your shell, move and still remain solid like it does? I hope this doesn’t sound offensive, but back home, creatures with exoskeletons aren’t able to move the way you do.”

She rubbed her jaw, that being the spot on him that she was most distracted by when he spoke. On bugs and shellfish, the bottom jaw would be an entirely separate mandible. It wasn’t that way with Scala, otherwise she might have been a little creeped out.

“I’m not offended. Micro fractures on a cellular level that rapidly heal. There are areas that don’t flex as much, so my shell is stronger there.” He tapped on his forehead wearing an amused expression.

“You’re hardheaded. Got it,” she snorted.

“Aye.” His grin broadened. “Not so much at my regularly used joints.” He balled his hand then unclenched it, demonstrating what he meant as he exposed his palm. “I also have more sensation at these flexible points.”

“That’s miraculous. So, where does your shell go when it disappears?”

Scala stiffened and grimaced as he glanced around, though there weren’t people for several yards.

“Sorry if that’s a personal question,” she quickly added, not wanting to make him uncomfortable.

“It’s all right.” He gave her a hesitant smile. “My shell recedes into these nodes.”

He pointed to the ridges that ran along the outside of his forearms and up his biceps, which matched the ones on his legs and head. She recalled the knotty protrusions had remained, but she’d been too preoccupied by how amazing his whole transformation was and the colorful skin revealed. Such a transformation hardly seemed possible.

“Fascinating. Well, your skin is very stunning.”

“Thank you,” he mumbled, refusing to look at her, instead staring straight ahead.

Okay, no more talk about his skin. Scala had been at ease conversing with her until she brought up the subject. She

wouldn't like it if someone kept bringing up her naked private parts. Maybe that was how Scala felt about his whole body.

They walked in silence for a while. As they moved through the corridors they passed several bony crewmen, and some from other races like the red-skinned guys who had tails, but no humans.

“Um, where is everyone, my people, I mean?” she asked after a bit, needing to break the silence.

“They are still hesitant to leave their rooms. I don't think they believe they are rescued and we don't want to pressure them.”

She recalled Thorac mentioning that in the hangar.

“I understand.” She nodded. “It is really hard to accept. I think they're protecting themselves in case it turns out you aren't who you say you are.”

Scala paused and turned toward her with a frown. “Is that how you feel?” he asked, his expression wounded.

She cringed, feeling guilty. He was very astute.

“At first, yes.” She refused to lie. “But not anymore. You let me steal your bed and made me pizza.” She smiled and gestured to the boxes he was carrying, trying to lighten the mood.

It really wasn't the bed or food that swayed her, or even the sexy peep show she'd witnessed, though they had helped. Actually, it was seeing that Scala genuinely cared, except she couldn't bring herself to admit that. Maybe she was a coward.

“True.” He smiled. “Ah, here we are.” He gestured ahead.

The corridor opened into a massive botanical garden.

“Wow!” Her mouth dropped open as she leaned on the railing and panned the multi-story arena bursting with life.

Towering exotic trees extended up to a domed ceiling with a view of space. The gorgeous specimen closest to the railing was so thick with pink blossoms it reminded her of dogwoods. She followed a winged insect as it flit from one of the flowers to a waterfall cascading from several floors above to a stream below.

“There’s a whole forest in here,” she whispered in awe.

“A ship this size benefits from having an arboretum. The plants help with the air and the crew’s mood.” Scala led her down a ramp toward a picnic table a level down.

“I can imagine.” She felt both calm and invigorated just stepping into the giant garden. “Oh, wow, that tree has rainbow colored bark!” As they passed, she reached out to feel the tree that strangely reminded her of Scala’s skin.

“Don’t.” Scala grabbed her hand. “Some of these plants can irritate, have spines or other characteristics. Watch.” He pointed to a clump of flowers by the path.

An insect landed on the purple blossom, and it instantly snapped shut, capturing the creature.

“Ooh. It’s like a Venus Flytrap.” She nodded. “We have things like poison ivy back home, so I understand no-no touch plants. I’ll keep my hands to myself.”

“I am unfortunately not familiar enough with the various types to know which are safe.” Scala set the pizzas down on the table.

“It’s okay. I don’t know a maple tree from an oak back home.” She took a seat on the bench.

“I’m going to grab us something to drink.” He gestured to a nearby fountain. “I have seen your forests,” Scala continued as he dispensed two cups of water. “The wooded areas on Osi aren’t as plentiful as on Earth. My conclave would visit the preserves when I was younger.” He smiled at the memory as he glanced around the arboretum.

“Your conclave?” Ava tilted her head in confusion as he returned to the table.

“My family,” he clarified and sat down across from her. “On one of the trips, my sisters, sorus, sobrus and I ran around a field carpeted with cushioning plants like that.” He pointed to a swath of groundcover reminiscent of grass. “We weren’t even playing a specific game, just cavorting like newborn *bovol* calves,” he chuckled.

“I love that.” She soaked in his gleeful expression, picturing a smaller version of Scala galloping around in the grass. “Thanks.” She took a sip of water from the cup he set beside her, then cleared her throat. “Who are your sorus and sobrus?” She tilted her head in curiosity.

“Sorus are female and sobrus are male. They are siblings born to the other matrons in my conclave, where my sisters were born to my matron.”

“Ah, like half-siblings.” She nodded in understanding, grabbing another slice of pizza. “Lucas is actually my half-brother, my sobrus. Despite our age difference, I have fun playing with him. We would roll down the grassy hill in the backyard, just being silly, like you described.” She grinned at the memory while taking a bite.

Scala was in the middle of taking a slice when his gaze swiveled to hers. “You have a sobrus?!” he incredulously asked, seemingly surprised.

“Yes,” she managed to say, quickly finishing her bite. “My father remarried just before I headed off to college and Catherine had Lucas not long after. That’s why Lucas is so much younger than I am.” She’d always been like his second mother, that bond growing since they were abducted.

“Remarry?” Scala’s brow furrowed. “I wasn’t aware that humans took multiple mates.”

She studied his confused expression. What part of remarry didn’t he understand? The creepy language implant the lizards had given her translated most words, but not every concept translated cleanly.

“Well, with my people,” she began, deciding to explain everything, hoping to catch whatever he found perplexing, “we tend to find a person, fall in love and then we have a marriage ceremony. Sometimes that relationship doesn’t work out and we separate, then might find another person we love and we remarry.”

“Ah, but you don’t mate multiple people at one time?” he asked.

She was about to reply no, but stopped. “Generally, no. Although there are some people who are happy in open or polyamorous relationships.”

“Generally, no.” Scala nodded as he repeated the gist of her answer.

Her brow cocked. Now she had a question. “And what about your people? You mentioned having half-siblings.”

“The Osivoire are different from humans. Males are rare, outnumbered by females, so we form conclaves with many females at one time, though only one is our weakness, the rest are her siblings or sometimes friends.”

Wow, so Osivoire men collect a harem of women. She was tempted to ask if Scala was married to a bunch of women. Then again, she didn't want to know. It would just ruin the naughty loop from last night playing in the back of her mind.

"Interesting," she said instead. "So are your men rare because of some war or genetics?"

She was enjoying their conversation and learning about a new culture. She'd had a hard time appreciating the Jurou Biljana's unique and foreign ways, considering what that culture did to her. With Scala, she felt comfortable enough to indulge her curiosity.

"Depends on if you believe the myths, but scientists would tell you it's our genetics." He took a bite of his pizza, and she took the opportunity to do the same.

"Mmm." She chewed, enjoying the cheesy goodness. "It's the same with us. So, what's the myth?" she asked after swallowing the bite.

"My people believe long ago, when our existence was new and the planet had plenty of water, that many males fought over Unda, the water goddess. Vasta killed her in the process, and with her dying breath, Unda cursed the Osivoire with this shell." Scala tapped his arm. "For females it was to protect them from males. For the males it was to hold in their baser urges." Scala glanced downward, toward his lap.

"Oh." Her eyes widened then she nodded, understanding he was referring to his cock.

"Osegrin waged a great war and killed Vasta. Sadly, it didn't earn Unda's forgiveness and our shells remained. In fact, things grew worse. When they scattered Vasta's cursed ashes, his essence spread, forming the deserts of Osi."

“Yikes. That’s rough. It’s never good to anger a god. So, basically your men are outnumbered because they died in the great war against Vasta,” she summarized.

Mythology was always intriguing. Amazingly, many of the stories were rooted in a sliver of fact buried by time.

“Aye, and because of the fight for water that ensued. There is more about Osegrin’s weakness and how he formed the first conclave in the estuary he built, but that’s basically what my people believe, to a certain extent,” Scala concluded.

“I have time, if you want to tell the rest. What was Osegrin’s weakness? You’ve mentioned that before.” she asked, enjoying the tale.

She would tell the boys stories, so it was nice to hear someone else share one for a change.

“Uh, maybe later. We should finish eating and see if Cartil is in the clinic.” Scala shoved a big bite of pizza in his mouth.

Her eyes widened at the abrupt way he’d ended the conversation.

What made him clam up this time? She hadn’t talked about being naked.

Ava studied Scala, trying to tease out what it was, then shrugged. She’d only just met the man. There was clearly a lot to learn about him and his people.

“Thank you for the story. I like your myth.” She smiled in appreciation. “A lot of people on my planet believe God made the world in a week, that he put the first man named Adam in a lush garden like this, called Eden. When Adam needed a woman, God made Eve from one of Adam’s ribs.” She poked her side. “Can you believe it? A single rib! It’s a little insulting if you ask me.”

Scala grunted in acknowledgment, but rather than say more he shoved another bite of pizza into his mouth.

Maybe we should get moving, like he suggested. She sighed, her attempt to get the conversation started again having failed.

She hadn't talked a lot to anyone besides Lucas in the last few years, so she thought she'd be the awkward conversationalist, but apparently not.

Ava took another good look around the garden. "Well, if you want to head to the clinic, we can." She put the last bit of pizza in her mouth and stood.

Scala nodded, grabbed the pizza boxes, and dropped their cups in a box by the water fountain. At least he didn't rush them out, taking the meandering path so she could see the rest of the amazing garden. It was a little hard to truly appreciate the sight with the tension that had returned between them.

She couldn't help but assume it was her fault. Was this awkwardness because she invaded his space, or had her growing attraction affected how she was behaving somehow? Ava nibbled her lip as they walked, trying to figure out specifically what she'd done.

SEVEN



REPAIRS

Scala

They were both quiet as they headed through the corridor. He wanted to say something to Ava. Talking with her was nice. She gave him her full attention, smiled, and nodded as she listened. Except somehow the conversation kept shifting into areas he was uncomfortable with. He should've explained what a weakness was. This would've been the perfect opportunity to broach the subject. Except a nervous part of him kept insisting it was too soon.

Break me! He groaned, wanting to punch the wall. Why couldn't he act normal?!

They entered the clinic. Besides Cartil, Elena and Payim were the only ones there.

“Do you have a medical emergency?” Cartil, their physician, asked, as he quickly panned them.

“No.” Scala shook his head. “Ava agreed to have her cheek treated.”

“It's not that bad.” Anxiety threaded Ava's voice as she stepped closer to him.

Warmth filled him that she gravitated toward him for comfort, but he also didn't like that she was worried.

“Hello again.” Elena waved, approaching them. “Cartil can look at your cheek first. There's really nothing wrong with me. Payim just insisted I get checked out. So, you're Ava. I'm Elena.”

“You survived off ferns and insects in a cave since the crash!” Payim declared, following behind his mate.

“Whatever.” Elena rolled her eyes, eliciting a laugh from Ava. “Hey, are those seriously pizzas?!” Elena hungrily eyed the boxes in his arms.

“Nice to officially meet you,” Ava greeted Elena, her voice lighter. “Yes, they are, and it’s really good.” Ava eased away from his side.

“I’ll trade you the brownies Payim bribed me with to get me here.” Elena gestured to a platter on the nearby counter.

Ava’s gaze shifted to the pile of brown squares with a look of longing, which was surprising since the strange dish looked unappealing.

“I thought that was my fee for service!” Cartil teased the females with a smile.

“I think there’s enough pizza to share. Right?” Ava looked up at him for confirmation.

Scala quickly nodded. There was no way he’d say no to her, especially after seeing how much she wanted the brownies. It was also a relief to see Elena had distracted her from worrying.

“I must decline trying this pizza. If you are all right, Elena, I will go keep your clan company so they do not worry.” Payim rubbed Elena’s back.

“They’re your family, too, now.” Elena smiled at the Cadi warrior then raised up on her toes.

Payim placed his lips against Elena’s. Heat suffused Scala, picturing doing the same with Ava. He shook off the mental image before it got out of control.

“It was good seeing you. I’m sure we’ll have a chance to converse later,” Scala said as Payim left the clinic. “I’ll place

these cartons right here.” He put the pizzas down by the platter of brown squares.

The females crowded around, nudging him out of the way. He grinned when Ava eagerly snatched one of the dark cubes, while Elena tossed open the top box and grabbed the last wedge-shaped piece of pizza. His gaze traveled between the females as they hurriedly bit into the food.

“Mmm,” they simultaneously moaned in delight.

The pleasure transforming Ava’s face was too much to bear. His spurs swelled, shoving at the inside of his shell. He was suddenly irrationally jealous of the brownie. He wanted to be the reason she made that face.

“You would’ve lost a hand if you didn’t get out of the way when you did,” Cartil chuckled.

“True.” Scala tried smiling. The females probably would’ve attacked if he lingered in their way.

“It is good they are both eating. I hope the rest are,” Cartil added.

The captain in him forced its way past his desire and Scala focused on Cartil.

“Agreed. I expected the clinic would be full.”

“No.” Cartil grimaced. “I’ve only managed to treat two females and one male for serious injuries and infections.”

“They are too afraid to leave their quarters,” Scala sighed, feeling terrible for the freed captives. “As the head of health and welfare, do you have a plan?”

He hadn’t had a chance to catch up on ship business since boarding with Ava.

That's not entirely true. He could've read reports, but was too unfocused around his newly discovered weakness.

“Thorac approved the plan. I have my team making regular rounds to the quarters and the stasis pods. When we got the humans settled and showed them the facilities, we made a list of individuals we were concerned about. I'd like to work my way through that list a little faster, but you can see how successful I've been.” Cartil waved to the empty clinic.

“It will take time, but I think that's a good plan until they grow comfortable with us.” Scala patted Cartil's shoulder in appreciation. His gaze shifted to Ava. “She's a brave female. She released half the captives before we arrived, but she was hesitant to come here.”

“Those reptiles!” Cartil spat in disgust.

Cartil was a congenial male and the anger was uncharacteristic, but not surprising. The physician had treated too many captives rescued from the Jurou Biljana and he'd seen the worst.

Scala frowned as he recalled something Ava said. She wasn't comfortable around her kind because of the way they treated her. For her sake, it was a good thing the clinic wasn't crowded. He studied her stance and expression as she spoke with Elena. Ava didn't appear uncomfortable around the female. She actually looked happy. Maybe this was a good chance for him to do his job, the thing he'd neglected for a full cycle.

He moved closer to Ava, hating that he was interrupting the females' feast, since they looked positively giddy. “I need to check in with Thorac about the ship. Will you be all right here?”

“She’s fine, Scala, go do your thing.” Elena waved him off.

He looked to Ava and she nodded with her mouth full, brown crumbs clinging to her lips.

“Good. Enjoy your brown squares.” He smiled at how adorable she was then headed for the door.

His steps slowed as he reached the door. He glanced back, and Ava smiled at him as she waved.

She’ll be all right. He mimicked the gesture and forced himself to leave.

The urge to return to her got stronger the farther he went down the corridor. It warred with the logical part of his brain.

If I don’t go handle business her safety is at risk! he silently snapped, and his baser instincts quieted, conceding to the bigger imperative.

“This...this is madness. I’m fighting with myself,” he uttered under his breath.

This was the true meaning of weakness. Everyone thought it referred to the weakening of the shell, but it was the mind it truly referred to. He was going crazy playing a mental game of tug-of-war.

He managed to reach the control room without turning back and entered.

“Scala,” Thorac nodded in greeting.

“I’m sorry, I’ve left you to do the bulk of the duties. What have I missed?” he asked his co-captain.

“We have to flow with the needs of the mission.” Thorac waved off his concern. “The fleet is on its way, but I notified

them that the Jurou Biljana are on the move. Unfortunately, they won't reach us until the reptiles are well out of this sector to Osegrin knows where."

"And we hold precious cargo, so going after the Vicarius' vessel puts more lives at risk than we expected with this recon mission. I got it." Scala nodded, quickly getting up to speed.

"Once we pull the heading out of that Jurou Biljana cruiser, we can follow at a distance, before we lose the reptiles entirely, but if we're spotted..." Thorac grimaced at the thought.

When they reached the Vicarius, they fully expected to find the remaining reptile fleet. Their lone frigate couldn't go up against that many ships.

"If we use the Jurou Biljana cruiser, we have a better chance at getting closer," Scala mused. They could use the same plan they'd used at the outpost, getting close with the reptiles' own ship.

"Our techs are still working on the Dremin encryption. On the positive side we did pick up some residual disturbance from when the Vicarius took off, so we know a general direction to head."

Scala nodded, noting the heading onscreen and how fast they were moving. At least they wouldn't lose the reptiles entirely.

"If everyone is all right here, Thorac, let's go check on the cruiser and discuss our next move further."

Thorac nodded in agreement then focused on the lieutenant at the controls. "Condyle, you have the bridge."

"Aye," the lieutenant answered and they left the control room.

“I would ask who you had in mind to track the Vicarius, but I think I already know.” Thorac looked sideways at him as they walked down the hall.

The male had read his mind.

“I must. I promised Ava I’d rescue her sobrus,” he replied to his comrade.

“And that becomes harder to accomplish once our fleet arrives.” Thorac grimaced in understanding.

When the Osi fleet engaged the Jurou Biljana, it wasn’t going to be pretty, the only way to assure Lucas wasn’t lost would be to get him off the reptile ship before it happened.

“It’s the only option. I can’t risk someone else’s life on this.”

Ava

“I’m going to turn into a brownie.” Ava physically grabbed her own hand as she tried to reach for the platter again.

“I know, my stomach is screaming and still I want another bite,” Elena groaned, her mouth glossy from the greasy cheese pizza.

Ava laughed at the sight, though she was certain she had chocolate in her teeth and looked equally amusing.

“Don’t make yourselves ill. Neither of you have had nearly enough calories for a long time, but you can’t make them up all at once,” Cartil admonished.

“Is that a challenge?” Elena asked with a cheeky grin, glancing at her conspiratorially.

Ava laughed harder. She liked Elena. It helped that the Latina woman wasn’t one of the captives in the outpost. The woman didn’t look at her with judgment. Sharing the treats with her was reminiscent of going out with friends, she wasn’t even worried that Scala left to handle ship business.

“I think it was a challenge.” Ava grinned and nodded.

“Incorrigible,” Cartil chuckled.

Cartil wasn’t pushy but she was here to be treated. As fun as chit chatting with Elena was, she probably should stop wasting the Osivoire doctor’s time.

“So, how was the treatment or whatever?” Ava asked Elena as she gestured to the clinic.

She had no clue what to expect in the high-tech medical suite. The walls were a comforting shade of turquoise, but the

pretty color wasn't enough to soothe her this time. Her heart kicked into high gear as she panned the row of pods along the back wall. They were way too similar to the glass coffin she'd awoken in on the hellish planet.

"I can't say. I got here not long before you." Elena followed her gaze. "You've got good memories of those pods, too, huh?" Elena dryly asked with a haunted look in her eyes.

"Yeah." Ava nodded somberly.

"You don't have to get in the sanative capsules," Cartil interjected. "It's quicker with assessment and healing, but I can use a manual scanner and dermal unit with some supplements."

The doctor smiled kindly as he stood nearby, patiently waiting for them to decide.

"Can it shave my legs, too?" Elena joked.

Ava glanced down at her calves and blanched at how long the hair was. The notion of shaving hadn't entered her mind in forever and now it was all she could picture.

"And the armpits. I bet I can braid the stuff," she added with a snort.

Elena nodded in agreement, glancing toward her own armpits, even though they were covered by the jumpsuit the woman wore. Ava had on a dress, but didn't dare look for fear she'd predicted the truth.

"The sanative capsules can remove hair, temporarily and permanently," Cartil replied.

Ava's eyes widened.

"Seriously? I was kidding." Elena gaped at the doctor.

“I am serious, if the hair is truly concerning you.” The bone-armored doctor gestured to her legs.

With Scala in mind, the idea of doing a little grooming was very tempting.

“Although you would need to get into the capsules for that treatment,” Cartil encouraged.

Logically, she understood that the creepy units could help, but convincing herself wasn't so easy. Her hands were shaking at the mere thought, and she wasn't even in the thing.

“How is it with fingernails?” she found herself saying as she focused on her ragged nails.

“Yes. I could use a manicure and some pink nail polish,” Elena jumped on the suggestion.

“Pink nail polish?” Cartil tilted his head in curiosity.

“Colored paint to decorate our nails,” Elena clarified.

“I suppose we can tint the keratin.” Cartil rubbed his chin as he considered the notion. “Yes. That should be possible.”

“It's a spa. That's all this is, just a fancy spa,” Ava said confidently to her new friend.

“That's exactly what it is.” Elena nodded, grabbed her hand and they resolutely marched to the frightening space coffins.

“Will it hurt?” she asked as they paused in between two of the units.

“I have different physiology,” Cartil gestured to his armor, “but I'm assured by others of your kind that there is no discomfort.”

Really? She looked over at Elena, confirming that she wasn't the only one surprised by that. Her experience with the limited medical treatment she'd received from the Jurou Biljana was that it hurt.

"I am pleased you are willing to participate in this assessment," the doctor continued. "I would like to further review what the plan is, if you don't mind."

Cartil's request stunned her. Whenever the lizards did their shitty first aid, it was never with her permission. She was just lucky she was the Vicarius' slave or she wouldn't have been treated at all. Then again, Vicarius Kur was always the reason she needed treatment to begin with.

"First, I wish to scan you to assess what injuries or conditions may be affecting you. The scan is considered noninvasive and you can remain awake. I am told you might be familiar with X-Rays or CAT scans as comparison. Is the assessment scan acceptable?" he asked.

"Yes." Ava nodded ascent.

"You have my deepest respect and I wish to apologize that you were taken from your home and suffered at the hands of the Jurou Biljana. You are both obviously very strong, because, from a visual appraisal, I don't foresee any major health problems," Cartil assured them. "However, if we identify areas of injury or disease, do you wish for them to be automatically treated or would you like to review the discovery before making a decision?"

Ava felt the bump on her forearm. "My arm was broken. I know there's something wrong with it," she said, realizing this was her chance to get rid of the persistent ache.

“Do you want me to automatically repair it?” Cartil again asked.

He was very professional. It was refreshing, though he didn't seem to catch on that she was giving him permission by mentioning it.

“Yes, please, fix my arm and anything else.” She nodded.

“Agreed,” Elena added.

“Good. Take your time climbing in.” Cartil released the lids and the clear domes retracted on the pods.

Elena squeezed then released her hand. Ava's heart sped up as she approached the capsule.

“Do we need to get undressed?” Elena asked.

Good question. Ava paused.

“No. The unit handles that. It was built so if someone is injured, we needn't bother undressing them.

“That makes sense.” Ava nodded.

It's a fancy spa. A fancy spa that's going to fix your arm.

Ava straightened her shoulders and shoved aside the nightmare of waking up in one of the pods. She could do this. She would do this, because she needed to be in top shape when it came time to rescue her brother. Resolutely Ava shed her sandals and stepped into the capsule.

Scala

“We’re close to getting the system decrypted,” the engineer relayed as they stood by the open maintenance hatch on the Jurou Biljana cruiser. “As you can see, the security hardware connects to all the ship’s systems, so it’s taking longer than expected. I imagine we’ll finish up within the quarter.”

Scala stared at the unit the engineer was pointing to. Apparently the Dremin encryption wasn’t merely a program. Once installed, it worked its way through the cruiser, like spreading mold. Under different circumstances he would’ve found it fascinating.

“And then we can get the cruiser back out there?” Scala probed the engineer.

“I suggest caution,” the engineer replied. “Besides the Dremin system, the vessel is still typical reptile handiwork.”

“Aye, a cobbled together mess,” Thorac grunted.

“I am used to it.” Scala shrugged.

Thorac gestured to him and he stepped away from the cruiser.

“Are you sure about this?” Concern shifted in Thorac’s eyes.

Infiltrating the reptiles, again, stealing the little male, then getting away was a fool’s mission, but he’d made a promise to Ava.

“Someone has to get close to the Vicarius’ vessel to obtain the location of the Jurou Biljana fleet. I’m merely adding a side mission.” Scala downplayed the scenario.

“You know you’ll have to wait to rescue the youth until you are assured of the fleet’s location,” Thorac continued to point out the hurdles.

“Yes. I understand.” Scala nodded, doing his best to not be exasperated with Thorac. “If I liberate the youth too soon, the reptiles will suspect us, and divert course rather than rendezvous with their fleet.”

“There’s much at risk.” Thorac paced.

“I know, my friend.” Scala put a hand on Thorac’s shoulder, halting the male.

Thorac focused on him, his concern shifting to acceptance. “Very well, but I don’t have to like it!”

“We’ve seen some pretty harrowing adventures and emerged with our shells intact.” Scala smiled and patted Thorac’s shoulder.

“Aye, we have,” Thorac agreed.

They turned back to the cruiser and started reviewing what might be needed for the mission.

Ava

Ava took a deep breath as she lay back and the capsule lid began to close.

Don't breathe too fast and hyperventilate. She forced herself to slow down.

Her heart jumped as the lid clicked, and there was a slight gasp from the capsule pressurizing. Her eyes widened when the glass frosted, but she didn't have time to get too claustrophobic because an image of her appeared on the inside of the glass.

"Touch the areas you wish to have permanent removal of your hair," a pleasant voice came from the speakers on either side of her.

"I don't know about you, but I'm thinking everything from my nose down needs to go," Elena commented from the other capsule. The strain in her voice translated through the speakers.

Ava considered the option. "Um, I can't permanently erase the bush. That feels awkward." Ava grimaced, picturing what she'd look like forever.

"True," Elena giggled and Ava couldn't help but join her.

They were both stressed and the idea of being as bare as the day they were born was funnier than it probably would've been at any other time.

"Don't make me laugh. I'll end up making myself bald," Ava snorted, trying to still her hand as she reached for the projected image.

She swiped her upper lip, chin, armpits and legs. She then looked at her crotch.

Maybe a nice little triangle wouldn't be so bad. She carefully traced the shape then pulled her hand back.

“Say yes to confirm the selection,” the computer voice chimed.

She confirmed the blue highlight only covered the areas she wanted hairless.

“Yes.”

“Select a color for your nails,” the computer instructed and a color wheel appeared.

She went with a pink shade.

“Say yes to confirm the selection,” the computer voiced again.

“Yes,” she quickly said, understanding the routine.

“Thank you. Scan commencing.”

Several beams emerged from the edges of the capsule and began mapping out her body.

“Thank you,” Elena said after the pod started working its magic.

“Are you talking to me?” Ava’s brow furrowed.

“Yes. You freed my family. Thank you, Ava.” There was a quiver in Elena’s voice.

“The Avilas are your family.” She realized. Elena did look like a younger version of Maria.

“Yes,” Elena replied.

“I feel awkward saying you’re welcome,” she admitted. “Didn’t you save everyone in the pods filling this ship?”

“I know what you’re saying,” Elena gave a slight humorless laugh. “Taking credit for it feels wrong. Still, thank you. I had no idea my family was in that reptile base, but I wondered. We were all together when we were taken.”

“The same for my baby brother and I. Lucas is still with the lizards.” Ava’s chin quivered and her eyes burned.

“Oh God, Ava, I’m so sorry! That’s why you went back. Fuck!” Elena cursed.

“I hate that I’m here, eating pizza and brownies, having a spa day while he’s there.” She shook her head, unable to rectify the mental picture.

“Surely Scala can do something,” Elena insisted.

“He promised to get Lucas back, but I can’t let go of the image of him all alone.” The tears streamed down Ava’s cheeks.

“If Scala said they’ll get him back, they will. These guys are like superheroes,” Elena tried to comfort her.

“I know. I keep telling myself we have a much better chance with Scala. I really didn’t have a plan when I ran back into the outpost.” Ava shook her head, wondering what she’d been thinking.

“You were doing the best you could,” Elena insisted.

She had been, and yet it hadn’t always been enough, people went hungry, got hurt or were even killed. She wasn’t at fault for that, but the guilt weighed on her just the same.

“Scan complete,” the computer announced. “Initiating repairs.”

Her gaze swung to her forearm as a frosted shield arched over it, immobilizing the old injury. Ava held her breath, waiting for a pinch or an uncomfortable twinge, but all she felt was a slight coolness waft over her arm. She couldn't see what was happening beneath the shield, then again, maybe that was for the best.

“Did you really live off bugs in a cave?” she asked her new friend, needing to distract herself from more than just her arm being fixed.

“There were plants and eggs, too, but yeah, I ate a lot of bugs. I like cooking so I treated it as a challenge. I was lucky to have equipment salvaged from the crash,” Elena relayed.

“Still, that must have been tough. I got replicated meat but mostly it was raw, if it's any consolation.” Ava grimaced. Kur wouldn't let her cook it when he was around, insisting that was gross.

“It is,” Elena snorted at her less than thrilled tone. “I won't miss the constant smell of farts or worrying about those volcanoes.”

“The air on that planet did stink,” Ava agreed. “And I cringed every time those volcanoes erupted. The lizards' shoddy construction didn't inspire a lot of faith.”

“The outpost looked like the inside of a garbage truck.”

“Smelled like it, too,” Ava chuckled. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“You looked pretty friendly with the red-skinned guy.” The man reminded Ava of a demon with his red skin, black hair and long tail, but Elena seemed sweet on him.

“Payim is my husband,” Elena giddily replied.

“Husband?” Ava’s brow furrowed. “How long were these guys on the planet?”

“It happened fast,” Elena chuckled. “Payim crashed a handful of days ago while trying to do surveillance. I ran from him, tried to boil him in hot springs and then bashed him with a rock when he came into my cave.”

“Wow. That does sound like true love,” Ava snickered. “I don’t feel so bad making Scala chase me through the outpost, now.”

“I do love him,” Elena said dreamily.

Ava smiled. She didn’t quite understand how it was possible to fall in love so fast, although she had an inkling as she pictured Scala. The exotic man was awkward, but he was persistent when it came to helping her, sweet with his kind words, unbelievably brave, and very nice to look at. If she was going to quickly fall for anyone, it would be him.

EIGHT



I'M GOING

Ava

“Sequence complete,” the computer announced.

“Oh, thank god,” Ava sighed as the shield covering her forearm retracted.

She instantly grabbed her arm and felt the bone. The lump was gone and so was the ache. There wasn't even a scar from where the machine repaired it. A giddy laugh burst out.

This can't be real. It's fixed and didn't hurt one bit.

She blinked in disbelief then caught sight of her pink nails.

“Amazing,” she whispered in awe.

Ava started hiking up her dress to see how well the hair removal went, but only got so far as checking out her calves before the capsule lid started retracting.

“How are you feeling?” Cartil greeted her and Elena.

“It wasn't as bad as I feared.” Elena nodded as she climbed out.

“My arm feels wonderful.” Ava couldn't help herself and hugged the doctor. “I had no idea how much pain I was putting up with. Thank you.” She blinked, trying not to tear up.

Suddenly another body was hugging them both.

“I love you guys,” Elena sobbed.

Ava smiled and the tears she tried to suppress fell down her cheeks. Another brick in the wall she'd erected to protect herself fell. The Osivoire were for real.

“Your gratitude and affection are appreciated. It was an honor to be able to help.” Cartil patted both their backs in a

fatherly manner. The doctor had probably done this a dozen times. “Is there anything else I may assist with?”

“I’m going to make sure the family comes, and try to get the others, too,” Elena said as they parted.

“That would be helpful. Thank you.” Cartil nodded in appreciation.

“I think if they do it in groups, it’ll be easier to cope with. I know being able to talk to you helped.” Ava squeezed Elena’s hand in gratitude.

“Wonderful advice. Would you like me to contact Payim and Scala?” the doctor asked.

“We can find our way,” Elena chimed in.

“We can?!” Ava’s eyes widened and swung toward her new friend. *I certainly can’t find my way around.*

“It’s easy. Let me show you a trick I learned. Osivoire vessel, where’s Scala?” Elena said.

“Captain Scala is located in the primary hangar,” the computer voice replied.

“Osivoire vessel, please show how to get there,” Elena added.

“Follow the amber illumination displayed on the wall by the exit,” the computer replied.

Sure enough, by the door there was a slowly strobing yellow light.

“See. Come on.” Elena waved for her to join her.

“That’s pretty great. It was good meeting you, Cartil, and thank you,” Ava said as she followed Elena.

“Yes. Thank you.” Elena waved.

“You are welcome.” Cartil bowed as they exited the clinic.

“The people are nice. The ship is nice. It’s a big change,” Ava commented as they followed the yellow line leading them down the broad corridor.

“It’s also overwhelming,” Elena added with a little cringe.

“Yeah.” Ava nodded in agreement then smiled sympathetically at her new friend.

“I am overjoyed to see my family, but being with all of them, all of the time...” Elena paused and grimaced rather than finish the sentence.

“It’s suffocating. I get it. Don’t feel bad. Every time someone says something nice, my first instinct is that it’s sarcasm, or a ploy of some kind,” she commiserated.

She’d been surrounded by scaly assholes. Elena had been all alone. This was a big change for them both.

They walked in silence for a bit, but a question popped into her mind she couldn’t shove aside.

“You’re not going back home, are you?” she asked Elena.

“No. Not being married to Payim.” Elena shook her head. “Before he found me, I accepted that I never would, but I wouldn’t want him to risk his safety on Earth.”

Ava nodded. She’d accepted she wouldn’t make it back to Earth either.

“But even if I never met him, I don’t think I could go home and pretend like nothing happened,” Elena added.

“You have a point.” Ava paused. “I never thought about that. I’d have to lie about all of this or they’d lock me up.”

“Right.” Elena grimaced as she nodded. “Even if you could keep it a secret, how miserable would that be? And look at how amazing all this is.” Elena waved to the ship.

“It really is.” Ava looked around the ship and the alien people passing. She then sighed. “But what am I going to do?”

That was more shit she’d have to figure out. Would she be welcome among the Osivoire? How did someone earn their keep in alien society?

And what about Lucas? she wondered as they started walking again. *Do I even have the right to make this decision for him?* Her mind started to spiral. *Don’t get ahead of yourself.* She shook off the premature worry.

The yellow trail ended at a familiar set of doors and they stopped.

“We’re here. You want me to join you?” Elena asked.

“No. I’ll be fine. Thank you for showing me this.” Ava patted the light on the wall. “If you want some more alone time, check out the arboretum, but don’t touch any of the plants,” she suggested, remembering to add the warning she’d been given.

“That’s a good idea. Thanks. Let’s get together later.” Elena gave her a bear hug.

She’d never been a big hugger, especially when she’d just met a person, but Elena was a kindred spirit.

“Definitely.” She hugged her back.

They parted and Ava waved goodbye then entered the giant hangar.

“May I assist you?” the Osivoire crewman stationed by the door inquired.

Ava glanced at the crew working around the handful of cruisers and was reminded Scala was working, too.

Maybe it's not appropriate for me to be here. She wouldn't walk onto the tarmac at an airport. This wasn't much different. Her gaze shifted to the crewman who just asked her what she wanted. *Well, it's a little late now!* She inwardly cringed.

"I'm looking for Scala," Ava replied and anxiously bit her lip.

"He should be there by the Jurou Biljana cruiser." The crewman gestured without batting an eye.

"Oh, thank you." She smiled, relieved that was so easy, and looked across the hangar.

Picking out the lizard's ship wasn't hard. Compared to the pair of sleek, silver Osivoire cruisers, the Jurou Biljana ship was a flying rust bucket.

Ava stayed inside a set of illuminated lines on the floor that seemed to be a walkway and made her way across the hangar. Her steps slowed when she spotted the trio of Osivoire talking by the cruiser. Scala's back was to her, but she knew it was him, and not just because of the clothes he was wearing. Maybe she'd studied him more than she realized. She panned from Scala's broad shoulders down to his fine ass. The way he casually leaned against the ship, one hand planted on the hull, fingers splayed, was oddly sexy.

Or maybe you have a crush. Just behave, the man's working!

She admonished herself as she quietly approached Scala, Thorac, and another crewman, not wanting to interrupt their discussion.

“Besides the limitations I mentioned, you are ready to go,”
the crewman said to Scala.

“Good. I’ll be leaving soon,” Scala replied.

What? Ava’s brow furrowed, certain she misheard him.

Scala

“Don’t you mean we’ll be leaving soon?” Ava said behind him.

Scala tensed, stunned she’d managed to walk up right behind him without him realizing it. He should’ve scented her presence, but her sweet perfume covered him and he’d been smelling it all day.

Scala turned to face Ava and cringed at her upset expression. *Vasta!*

He thought after she made friends with Elena, she’d be okay with him leaving her on the frigate. Apparently not.

“Ava, getting the tactical information and retrieving your sobrus will be very dangerous. I need you to stay here,” he explained.

“I know it’s dangerous,” she quickly countered, her hurt expression turning incredulous.

“Ava,” he started again, hoping if he rephrased the situation she’d understand.

Ava stepped toward him. She was small, yet her aggressive stance was daunting, and her eyes flashed like a brewing storm. It froze the words in his mouth. His weakness wasn’t merely upset with him, she was livid and determined.

“If it weren’t for my brother,” Ava continued, “I wouldn’t have the right to say anything except be safe.” Her expression briefly softened before going hard again. “But Lucas is on that ship. I’m your way to get close enough to get him. I’m your reason for showing up on the Vicarius’ ship. If I’m no longer a slave, I get to decide my own fate, and I’m going!”

Her last comment was like a knife in the gut. In a heart stopping instant it occurred to him that this was a turning point. Every instinct demanded he make Ava remain where she was safe, but if he did then it was certain he'd lose her. His chest clenched, the weight of this pivotal moment crushing him.

Before he could even think of what to say, Ava spun and headed into the cruiser, ending the conversation.

“Break me!” he groaned, rubbing a hand over his face.

“Aye,” Thorac agreed sympathetically, though the male didn't know the half of it.

“I need to step away and think,” Scala mumbled and walked away.

He honestly needed to step away from that spot to think. Ava's scent, sweet and angry, lingered in the air, making it impossible to form a coherent thought. Scala groaned again as he walked away from the cruiser, reminded of his other problem. He glanced down at his aching crotch in frustration. As tenacious as Ava was, if he wanted her off the cruiser, he'd have to physically pick her up and remove her. The problem was, once he put his hands on Ava, there was no way he'd be able to let her go.

“I'm going to crack. I'm-I'm going to crack,” he mumbled, shaking his head, his fists clenching by his sides as he headed to the supply locker.

Ava

Shaking, Ava stomped up the ramp into the cruiser. She was going with Scala come hell or high water. She paused in the small central bay, noticing the difference in the Jurou Biljana cruiser despite her anger. It smelled fresher. Her gaze shot to the front controls and was relieved to see the lizard's body was gone. At the back, the small lounging quarters even looked like it had been cleaned. It was a slight consolation as she stomped to the second row of seats at the cockpit and plunked down with a huff.

No sooner had she settled when footsteps thudded on the metal floor behind her. She glanced back and her stomach dropped seeing Thorac, not Scala. It was disheartening Scala had nothing further to say to her.

“Why am I not surprised?” she commented when Thorac sat beside her. He opened his mouth, but she continued before he could start. “He’s avoiding me, and certainly doesn’t want to be cooped up on this ship with me.” She released a morose little laugh. “I took over his room, invaded his pool without asking, and embarrassed him by commenting on his skin. I didn’t mean to offend him, but I have to go on this mission. I have to be there for my brother. I know I’m not military, but I can get him on that ship.”

Thorac’s eyes were wide. “What about his skin?” he asked, leaning in toward her.

Shit! Was that the big taboo I broke? It has to be. You don’t comment on people’s bodies.

“I commented and touched his colorful skin on his arm,” she slowly admitted with a grimace.

And the skin on his chest, and maybe he saw me spying on him naked in the pool, but she wasn't about to mention all of that.

“Oh.” Thorac’s eyes got even wider as he panned her, clearly surprised.

He got up and started pacing, occasionally looking at her wearing an expression that was somewhat hard to read, but he was definitely debating what to do with her.

“It’s that bad, huh?” Her frown deepened as worry set in.

Please tell me I didn't break some law, like commit assault or something. She sank in her seat, her anger about being excluded from the mission practically forgotten, though not entirely.

“I have to go on this trip. My brother must be terrified. Is there a way to fix this with Scala?” she pleaded.

Thorac stopped and looked at her like she’d grown two heads. “Fix this? Hmmm.” His brow furrowed and he started pacing again.

That sounded far from encouraging and her heart sank further. Thorac was Scala’s co-captain. If he also said no, there was no one else she could turn to.

“Tactically, it would be good for you to go,” Thorac’s steps slowed, “but I now understand why Scala wants you to stay behind. He won’t be able to concentrate around you. Except he won’t concentrate with you gone, either.”

She understood being around Scala would distract him. She was an untrained civilian and tended to rub him the wrong way. *But why wouldn't he be able to concentrate if I'm not on the cruiser?* She frowned, confused by Thorac’s little rant.

Thorac squeezed his eyes shut as he tapped his temples, clearly in a quandary. Anxiously, she waited.

“I figured it out. I know what I’m going to do.” He pinned her with his red gaze. “I’m going to stay out of it!”

Her mouth dropped open when Thorac spun and headed for the door.

He was absolutely no help at all! And he was as awkward as Scala. What the hell?

“You two need to talk!” Thorac added, almost like a jibe, before departing.

“I’ve tried,” she grumbled under her breath.

Scala

It didn't occur to Scala he'd made a decision until he was staring at the array of combat shells.

"She'll need to wear one," he sighed.

Even though he was agreeing to let her go, there was no way in the goddess' name he'd leave her unarmored. The combat shell wasn't foolproof but it would protect her against those scaly bastards until he could violently end the threat. With a mollified grunt, Scala added the additional suit to the cart along with a few more weapons for himself, then closed the equipment locker.

"You have a safe and successful journey." Thorac placed a hand on his shoulder, wearing an odd expression. "It appears you are going to be busy with Ava, so I will wait for you to contact me if you need anything." Thorac patted his back, shook his head and walked off.

Scala's brow furrowed at the strange send-off. "Safe journey to you as well," he called out to his parting friend anyway.

He looked at the cart, assessing if he had enough supplies.

Who knows? Scala sighed and headed back to the stolen Jurou Biljana cruiser.

Between his desire and his worry, Ava had him turned inside out. He could only hope he grabbed everything they might need.

This is why my patrem was harried all the time. It suddenly occurred to him. He couldn't imagine dealing with this level of stress from more than one mate.

Scala trudged up the cruiser ramp, the need to try one more time to dissuade her gnawing at his gut. He paused when he found Ava sitting in the second row, looking at her slender little fingers on her outstretched hand. For a moment he thought she might have hurt herself, then he spotted her tiny nails. He tilted his head, noting they were painted a pale red that slightly shimmered. It was a curious thing he hadn't observed before. His gaze raked over her. Her nails weren't the only difference since she'd returned from the clinic. Ava's pale flaxen hair was shinier, her cheeks fuller. She'd obviously spent time in a sanative capsule. She was beautiful before, but now she looked more vibrant, healthy.

Good. Knowing that anything ailing her had been treated was a great relief, bigger than he'd anticipated. His shoulders eased now that at least one weight had been lifted off them.

"Ava, please reconsider," he asked again.

Ava turned her attention to him. "Scala, if it was your brother, where would you be?" Her gray eyes pleaded with him.

His heart clenched in his chest. She'd unwittingly used the only other argument that could possibly sway him. If he had a chance to save Adius, nothing would keep him off this vessel. Scala sighed and gave her a curt nod.

"I can do my best to stay out of your way, or I can help you put those things away." Ava pointed to the supplies he brought as she stood to help.

"No. I've got them." He shook his head.

"Okay," Ava said quietly then climbed back into her seat.

Scala cringed at the tone of her voice. He was letting her go with him, yet she sounded so defeated.

Quickly, he stored the supplies then sent the cart back down the ramp to a waiting crewman. As he shut the cruiser door, he stifled the urge to bring up the subject again. Once Ava's mind was made up, she didn't back down. She certainly hadn't when she ran back into the outpost to reach Lucas, and she wouldn't now.

She's here, so stop acting juvenile and pull your shell together, he admonished himself.

Ava was uncomfortably quiet while he did a final visual inspection on the interior. He was out of his element and hated it.

Say something! he goaded, desperate to smooth over the tension as he joined her in the cockpit. His gaze landed on her hands clasped in her lap.

"I like the color on your nails," he commented with the first thing that came to mind.

"Thanks. Cartil was able to do it." A smile transformed Ava's face. "We did my toes, too." She lifted one foot to show him.

For a moment he was transfixed by her breathtaking smile and then he glanced down at her little toes wiggling in the sandal. He smiled at the matching tint on those nails, too. It was fetching, but the point of such decorations eluded him. Her nails were too delicate to be functional, so he wasn't sure why anyone would draw attention to that. The reason really didn't matter, though, the nail tint pleased Ava and that was reason enough.

Pleasure. The notion took hold.

His wholesome thoughts shifted and his gaze traveled over her foot, traced the contours of her slight ankle, then moved up

her shapely calf to the hem of her dress. The mental image of Ava nude in the pool and the rest of her soft curves blurred in his mind, despite her being fully clothed. His heart beat faster. The desire to rip off her gown and feast on what lay between her thighs made him physically hurt. He hadn't even taken off from the hangar yet, and again, all he could think of was feeding the hunger clawing at him.

Break me! Scala stifled a groan, tugged his gaze away from Ava's shapely legs and forced himself to walk past her to the console.

"We're taking off momentarily." His voice came out thick and raw, as raw as his quick felt trapped inside his shell.

He engaged the controls and was about to bring up the viewscreen to distract himself then recalled the engineer recommended he let the autopilot handle everything. With a huff he took the seat beside Ava in the second row, to keep from mucking with the console.

"Don't you need to pilot the ship?" Ava frowned, looking from him to the empty pilot seats, as the cruiser lifted off.

He probably should've stayed up front, putting a little more space between them. Did Ava have any idea how stunning she was? Even her concerned quizzical expression was sexy with the way her ruddy lips remained slightly parted after her question. Those full, lush lips taunted him, hinting at her other equally tantalizing parts that remained maddeningly elusive.

"The cruiser is set to locate then head toward the Vicarius' vessel. I'm not supposed to tax the system. The reptile ships have their limitations." The explanation came out as stiff as the spurs shoving at his shell.

“So, then, what do we do now?” Ava asked.

It was the wrong question, because he could think of only one thing.

NINE



CUT TO THE QUICK

Ava

Scala had tried to make polite small talk about her nails, but clearly he was still aggravated by her presence, his response to her question stilted and gruff.

Without warning, Scala lunged forward, and her eyes widened as he clasped the back of her neck then reeled her in.

“I told you not to come,” his deep voice rumbled an inch from her face, scary and deep, his sharp teeth flashing.

Shit! He’d finally snapped, sick of her interference.

Then his lips slammed into hers. Surprised, she gasped and Scala took advantage of the opportunity, his tongue delving into her mouth.

Oh! The revelation slapped her in the face. She’d been wrong about Scala’s intense mood, very wrong.

Desire she hadn’t felt in years instantly ignited as she replayed his warning. ‘I told you not to come.’ It hadn’t been meant as a double entendre and yet her perverse mind couldn’t help but twist it. She gripped his shoulders and hungrily kissed him back, her pussy spasming, eager to come.

Scala’s hard lips swiftly softened as his shell receded. His lips were supple and she couldn’t resist giving them a little nip. He groaned, his tongue again tangling with hers. Surprisingly, Scala tasted like oranges and she wanted more.

“Mmm.” She fervently explored his mouth.

Scala’s fingers tangled in her hair, refusing to break their kiss, while he tugged her to the edge of her seat. His firm warm fingers pressed against the inside of her knee and she

jumped. As eager as she was, no one had touched her there in a very long time and she was as skittish as a virgin. Scala grunted something incoherent against her mouth, and she felt him start to pull back. As unexpected as all of this was, she didn't want it to stop. Not in a million years.

Ava grabbed his hand, holding it on her knee as she kissed him harder. Her other hand found the hem of his shirt and worked beneath it. She reveled in the sensation of the hard armor covering his abs melting beneath her hand. The ridges of muscle quaked beneath her fingers as she traced them.

“Ava!” Scala groaned and pulled his mouth from hers, his voice sounding pained.

The soft skin of his entire face was revealed and the hungry look in his eyes matched what she'd witnessed while spying on him in the pool. He was one massive, imposing man. He was kneeling in front of her seat, and yet he came to eye level. This was a man who could hurt her without any effort at all. Except Scala wasn't Vicarius Kur. He used his strength to protect, to save. Instead of fear, her desire burned hotter.

“God, you're sexy.” She bit her lip, then eagerly tried to tug off his shirt.

She wanted the exotic god of a man. After years of getting the shaft from life, she was finally going to get the kind of shaft she wanted.

Scala

Ava's sweet taste lingered on his lips which tingled from her kiss. His head was swimming from it. There was something he should say, something about what was happening, and who she was to him. Except, being able to feel her without his shell to dull the sensation drove away all rational thought.

Ava then tugged at his shirt and whatever held him back completely fled. He eagerly whipped the garment over his head then captured her ruddy swollen lips again. Scala released a satisfied grunt when her hands returned to his chest, the jolt of it rocking through his entire body. She returned his kiss, exploring his mouth while her fingers did the same. More and more of his shell receded, inundating him with sensations that were still so new, driving his hunger.

One thing was for certain, Ava wanted him.

He flexed his fingers, kneading Ava's knees, then let them wander beneath her dress. Ava's flesh was smooth and gave beneath his fingers as he caressed her thighs. Had anything ever felt so soft? He urged her knees apart and kept exploring higher. He grazed a tuft of hair and a part of her that was warm and slick.

"Scala!" Ava squeaked as she jumped, her legs squeezing shut, attempting to trap his hands before they could explore farther.

He froze. Ava may have responded to his advances but he was going too fast and frightening her. He focused on her stormy gray eyes, expecting to find fear, except that's not what he saw at all. Her pupils were dilated behind eyelids heavy with desire, and her cheeks were flushed as she pulled

stuttering breaths through her luscious lips. She wasn't denying him, he'd hit a nerve.

Yes! His inner beast roared in triumph.

Ava

Scala tossed up her dress and tugged her knees farther apart. She wasn't wearing panties so her pussy was instantly exposed. His fingers trailed the edge of her labia again, making her jerk. He'd barely touched her, but she was so unbelievably sensitive after being neglected for so long. Reflexively, she clasped his biceps, needing to hold on to something. His hand stilled on the inside of her thigh, the other massaging her knee, his glowing eyes meeting hers.

“Your pink folds match your lips,” Scala rasped in awe, sounding as if he'd confirmed some mystery.

His intense gaze returned to her pussy, studying her. She hadn't been touched since way before she'd been abducted, so she certainly hadn't been looked at. Embarrassment heated her cheeks, but worse was the sense of vulnerability that washed over her as she toiled over what he must be thinking. A part of her wanted to close her legs again, also realizing just how far this had gone and so fast. Scala was utterly foreign to her. Did she really know what she was getting herself into?

“Beautiful.”

Before she could register the compliment, his large hand left her thigh. And though she should've expected it, she released a sharp gasp when Scala touched her labia. Her breath came out faster as he slowly stroked downward, splaying her slick lips until he reached her vagina. Frozen, she watched him, unsure if his fingers were trembling or if she was the one shaking. It had to be her. She was definitely on edge, her fingers squeezing his corded biceps tighter. He traced the rim of her pussy. His fingertips barely entered her and she

spasmed, releasing another flood of desire. Scala instantly noticed and with a sexy smug expression he captured the moisture as it slid down her cleft. Her eyes widened when his slick finger circled her puckered rear.

“We are compatible,” he growled, his voice an octave deeper. The lust-filled rumble elicited a shiver and her nipples hardened further.

She knew they were compatible, but she’d also watched him jack off in the pool. Still the acknowledgment made her giddy, her stomach muscles fluttering.

Abruptly, Scala dropped, wedging his head between her thighs.

“Scala!”

She tossed her head back against the seat when his hot tongue speared into her vagina. Her thighs clenched around his head, her needy pussy spasming.

“Mmm,” Scala groaned, his tongue pressing deeper, undulating against her sensitive walls as he lapped up her desire.

“God!” she moaned from the jolt of pleasure that continued rolling over her with each lick.

How long is that thing? Her gaze rolled to the cruiser ceiling as her hands clambered, finding purchase on his shoulder and the back of his head. She didn’t know if she wanted to hold him close or shove him away. To go from nothing to being tongue fucked was too much.

As she was trying to cope with his inhumanly gifted tongue, his fingers continued to explore her. He found her clit and she gasped from the added spike of pleasure. Scala growled, feasting on the new flood of moisture. He stroked the

engorged bead again, forcing out a plaintive moan as her pussy clamped down on his wicked tongue. She quivered when his tongue slid free of her body, but he wasn't giving her a reprieve. Scala latched onto her clit, fervently sucking and flicking it.

She was already on the precipice when two slick fingers delved into her pussy and another surprisingly breached her ass.

“Scala!” she cried out when the orgasm erupted.

Her back arched and she clawed at his back as the pleasure inundated her. This was nothing like the paltry and rare attempts she'd made to find her own release. He kept sucking and tonguing her clit as his fingers thrust into her convulsing openings. The ecstasy spiraled higher, taking over every inch of her, building for another cataclysmic release.

Then abruptly Scala stopped and retreated. Confused, she blinked, trying to focus on him.

“Oh,” she panted when he kicked off his boots, his large hands jerking open the clasp on his waistband.

Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open when Scala tugged his pants over his hips. There was his very prodigious cock in all of its glory and below it was another...

“Two,” she gasped, staring in disbelief at a pair of erect cocks.

In the pool she'd only seen the one breach the surface.

Well, I was obviously wrong!

Now she understood why Scala commented they were compatible while he fingered her ass. Her heart thundered faster as she gaped at the beasts aimed straight at her.

Neither cock was small, and her thighs clenched reflexively. The broad crowns were grooved all around the engorged rim, and both shafts had a row of knots along the top, running from root to tip. They were stunning and would feel amazing, assuming they fit. Considering where that lower cock had to go, she doubted it!

Oh god! She was about to get more than she'd bargained for.

Ava quickly stood, nervously watching Scala step out of his pants. The confident gesture exuded sexy as he stripped for her. His colorful muscular body was to die for, but she just might die if he fucked her with those beasts. She hadn't had traditional sex in too long and anal never. As stunning as he was, her mind screamed retreat!

Before she could run, Scala snagged the tie on her wrap dress and yanked it, uncoiling the gown and stripping her with a dizzying spin. He cupped her ass and lifted her against his chest.

"Scala!" she declared, feeling his arousals as he wrapped her legs around his waist. It seemed to be the only thing she was capable of saying.

"Ava." Primal desire shifted in his glowing eyes. "You are my weakness. When you touch me, I feel such exquisite pleasure. It is unlike anything I've ever known," he rasped, his deep voice raw with passion. "I want your pleasure, but I am new to this, so please forgive me."

For a moment she thought he was saying he was a virgin, but the way his mouth had mastered her, that couldn't possibly be true. Still, his sweet words and the fact he didn't instantly impale her made her heartbeat slow from a run to a gallop, her panic easing. In her relief she didn't notice Scala had taken a

few steps back to an empty seat. He knelt with her, then leaned in for a kiss, reclining the chair in the process. Ava again tensed, suddenly finding herself on her back, caged beneath the sexy giant, the pair of long and impossibly thick cocks branding the back of her thigh. This was where he impaled her.

I'm not ready. It was doubtful she'd ever be ready for being double-teamed by the massive man. All the sex she'd ever had had been vanilla at best. A frisson of anxiety coursed through her even as more desire leaked from her clearly foolish pussy.

Instead of thrusting his hips, Scala's mouth again found hers. The kiss was coaxing and she parted her lips, needing to focus on this instead. As his talented tongue dominated her mouth, his fingers roamed, caressing her cheek and neck, slowly working his way down her chest. It was reverent and easily the most erotic caress she'd ever known. All the while, Scala lightly brushed his chest against hers, grazing the aching hard nipples of her heaving breasts. When his hands finally reached the two mounds, her nipples were screaming for more attention, and she wantonly arched her back. He circled and rolled one erect bead, sending an arc of pleasure straight to her pussy.

"Mmm," she moaned into his mouth, another flood of need squeezing from her core.

Scala pulled away from her and gazed at her with those mesmerizing inhuman eyes. "You like this," he gently pinched her nipple, "but I believe you enjoy this more."

His hand slid lower, over her quivering stomach to find her slick swollen clit. He was spot on, his first stroke making her gasp and jerk.

“Yes!” Scala proudly growled and hungrily recaptured her mouth.

His thumb continued stroking her clit while his other fingers teased her vagina and ass, goading more desire to flood from her body. The little orgasms were compounding into one explosive release, when Scala’s fingers suddenly disappeared. He shifted his hips then his hot arousals bumped against her prone bottom. She tensed, gripping his shoulders tighter, bracing for what was coming.

“Easy,” Scala rasped, while peppering kisses over her cheek to her ear. “You are tight, but you are very soaked.”

That last part groaned into her ear was meant to soothe, but it just ratcheted her anxious anticipation up another notch. Then one thick cock was prodding at her pussy. Her breath came out in rapid gasps as he pressed forward, goading her vagina to stretch. She barely processed the sensation of his broad crown demanding entry when there was pressure on her rear. The stinging pain of the virgin opening being stretched swiftly became too much to bear.

“Scala!” she whimpered, then sucked in a frantic breath, shoving at his hips.

Scala froze. “I’m hurting you.” He raised up and stared at her, a crease marring his brow. “Break me! I’m sorry. You are so wet and I thought...” he growled, angry at himself.

He attempted to get off her. Her legs tightened, not quite ready for him to leave.

“I-I just haven’t had anal sex before.” She bit her lip.

His gaze softened as he processed what she was saying. He nodded then eased back down. He reached between them and

shifted his cocks, positioning the lower one at her vagina instead.

“And how about this, my stunning weakness?” he husked, his lips brushing hers. “Can you take me like this?” His hips nudged forward, the broad head of one cock prodding at her pussy while the other slid between her labia, bumping at her clit.

“Yes.” She pulled in a sharp breath, instantly seeing the merits of this new position, though honestly it was still daunting.

Scala groaned then kissed her neck, while he rotated his hips and leaned in.

Her nails dug into his back when the building pressure resumed as he stretched the entrance of her vagina, forcing her to accept his thick crown. Her eyes rolled back with an incoherent prayer. Her ass was given a reprieve but she still might not survive this. If it weren't for the sexy huffing growls Scala made as he incrementally worked his broad head into her straining pussy, she might've chickened out. God, she really wanted this man.

“Open up for me,” he groaned.

The salacious comment and hungry tone made her muscles flutter around the crown of the steely invader. Scala released a garbled sound in response, his body quaking as his cocks spurt, adding to the desire already coating her sex. The hot release and the way his upper cock pulsed against her swollen clit kicked off another round of spasms in her nerve laden channel.

“My weakness!” Scala snarled and thrust hard.

“Oh, god!” Ava keened from the exquisite torment as the broad crown burst through her opening. “Oh, god,” the plea came out again, this time as a deep guttural groan.

She gripped Scala’s shoulders, arching against the press of his massive body, while her vagina strained to accommodate him. The sense of fullness was overwhelming—and he wasn’t even all the way in yet!

She was always up for a challenge but this time she’d bitten off more than she could chew. God help her if he decided to get her poor ass involved.

Scala

Amazing was too simple a word to describe Ava. Before this moment the taste of her skin, her hormone-laced perfume and breathy pants would've been enough pleasure to satisfy him. He'd had lovers before, but none of them had been his weakness. With those others he had to settle for the pleasure his eyes, nose, ears, and mouth could drink in, but never touch. He hadn't truly known all that he was missing until now. Without his shell the sensations were magnified. The press of her soft, lush thighs gripping his waist, the rub of her stiff nipples against his chest, the taunting slick heat of her channel as he worked his spur in were all overpowering. He wasn't even buried in her glorious body yet and the sheer pleasure had forced a release from his aching spurs. That's when he lost control, unable to hold back.

Ava screamed when he thrust, shoving his crown past the constricting muscles at her entrance. Instantly he froze, barely daring to lift his face from her shoulder so he could focus on her. Ava panted rapidly, her brow furrowed, torment etched on her flushed delicate features.

Vasta, you're hurting her again! The alarm broke through his pleasure. What was he thinking? She was too damn delicate for him to mindlessly rut on her. He should've stopped after he discovered her rear passage was too small to accommodate him, but he was selfish. Scala wanted to crack his own shell as he started to pull back.

"Stop! Don't!" Ava frantically insisted as the head of his spur tugged at her opening. "Keep it in," she panted, her heels digging into his rear.

He halted, holding his weight on his forearms, desperate to not add to her discomfort. The way Ava's warm, wet channel constricted him was a mix of pleasure and pain, unlike anything he'd ever known. His jaw clenched in concentration. He tried to maintain control while her hormones continued mixing with his, but he was quickly lapsing back into the haze of ecstasy. All these new foreign sensations made it impossible to stay still. He groaned as his hips curled of their own will.

"Scala," Ava moaned when his spur pushed past her slick, clenching walls, sending a wave of pleasure rolling over him.

"Break me!" he bit out, futilely attempting to halt the press of his hips.

It felt too good. Much too good. Even the swollen bead of flesh at the top of her slick cleft rubbing along his front spur was pure ecstasy. The bundle of nerves was so odd and yet it was his new favorite thing. With just a touch of her nub, Ava unraveled, and it was so readily accessible on her luscious body. The discovery stirred a merciless, wicked part of him. He would definitely be tormenting it often. Goddess, she was clearly made for pleasure and he just couldn't resist her pull.

"Yes, break me," Ava groaned.

Ava obviously had no clue how suggestive that was, but hearing his sexy little female utter the dirty phrase shattered his grip on sanity. His primal side *did* want to break her. He wanted to rut atop Ava and own her completely, the way she owned him.

Ava

Scala snarled and thrust home, burying his cock to the hilt. She cried out from the unfathomable pressure and agonizing pleasure. Scala curled tighter around her. His grip on her hip and shoulder was bruising as he pulled back and stroked in again, lighting up every nerve in her pussy while his other arousal played havoc with her clit. Faster his hips moved, repeatedly slamming into her. Her cries grew delirious as the pleasure coiled tighter. Her head thrashed back and forth in denial, her hair sticking to the sweat coating her.

“Scala!” she screamed when she detonated, the shockwave of ecstasy making her muscles seize, her fingers clawing, toes curling. Her pussy convulsed uncontrollably from the savage pleasure ripping through her.

“Ava!” Scala snarled, his cocks jerking, one spurting inside her, the other spattering her belly with his release.

The added stimulus tipped her over the edge, nirvana shorting out her senses.

Scala

His breathing slowed and Scala blinked as the euphoria eased. His eyes widened, panic filling him. He was slumped atop Ava, his face nestled in the crook of her neck. This was his first-time bonding with his weakness, and the pleasure had been indescribable, but it was no excuse. Thank Osegrin his weight was resting on his forearms or he'd have completely crushed his petite mate. His gaze swiftly darted to her face. Ava's eyes were closed, her face lax. The steady rise of her beautiful breasts assured him she was okay and he sighed in relief.

Goddess, she's gorgeous.

He admired the flush of Ava's skin that extended from her cheeks all the way down her chest. Her mouth was parted slightly, reminding him of her sweet cries while he possessed her. His spurs kicked at the memory, blood again filling the eager appendages.

Later! he berated them. If their bond was going to work, he really had to do better. He should've been gentler with Ava.

Aggravated with himself, Scala gingerly lifted off Ava. She moaned when his spur slipped free of her body. Her channel fluttered temptingly but he ignored the urge, the need to tend to her overriding the insatiable hunger.

"Shh. I have you, my weakness," he softly said as he picked her up.

Ava's eyes fluttered open and she smiled as she wrapped her arms around his neck. His heart stopped at the stunning expression. He never wanted to find his weakness. Was he

even worthy of being graced with such a breathtaking and brave female?

Probably not. His brow furrowed.

Yet now that he'd found her there was no way he was giving her up. He'd prove to the goddess he was worthy.

Scala glanced at the ship's controls. They were still on course.

Good. He headed to the rear of the ship, cradling Ava in his arms.

He nodded, seeing that the small quarters on the right had been sanitized by his crew. They'd kindly replaced the bedding on both bunks and upgraded the replicator. He glanced to the left and confirmed the washroom had also been cleaned. Alone, he would've made do, but with Ava he appreciated how thorough his crew had been. With a swipe, he called up a pair of large, cool waters from the small replicator.

"Drink." He gently held one cup to Ava's lips.

"Mmm." She opened her eyes as she took a big gulp. He grinned at the trickle that escaped down her chin and the way her eyes widened. "Oh, um, thank you." She pulled her lips back, smiling shyly at him as she wiped away the dribble.

"You are adorable," he chuckled.

"Adorable. I haven't heard that in a while." She grinned at him.

"You are." He lifted the cup in her honor then took a refreshing swig. "Shower?" he asked once he'd swallowed, heading toward the washroom.

"Yeah, but, um, I need to do some business first." Ava nibbled her full bottom lip, squirming slightly in his arms.

“Ah.” He understood what she needed, still he didn’t want to let her go. Holding Ava felt right, but he forced himself to gently set her down next to the basin in the washroom. “I’m proud to say my people cleaned everything before we took off.”

Ava stared intently at him as he reached for the bathing stall controls.

“I’m just adjusting the temperature,” he let her know.

“I, ah, I know we just had sex, but do you think you could give me some privacy?” Ava’s cheeks, which were still flushed, reddened further.

“You find relieving yourself embarrassing.” His brow cocked at the revelation. It was something he hadn’t considered, never having the need to relieve himself.

“Not embarrassing but I’d rather not have an audience.” She fidgeted with her hands, betraying the fact that she wasn’t being entirely truthful with him. She did find it embarrassing.

“Very well.” He stepped out of the washroom.

My weakness is uncomfortable relieving herself in front of me. He filed the info away with the details he’d been collecting about her, while busying himself pulling the mattresses off the bunks to make a larger bed on the floor.

“Okay,” Ava called to him and he returned.

Scala stopped at the entrance of the washroom, finding Ava beneath the spray in the bathing stall. Again, he was struck by just how gorgeous she was as the water sluiced over her curves. He panned her delicate round face with its button nose and sweet lips, down her slender neck to her breasts with their ruddy nipples. He envied the water as it traveled over her soft belly, lush rear, and down her full thighs.

“It’s nice. Aren’t you joining me?” Ava’s smile beckoned him.

She didn’t have to ask twice. He quickly joined her in the stall.

“Oh. Your armor has returned.” Ava pointed to his chest, then abruptly grew alarmed. “Sorry, I shouldn’t comment on your skin.” Her hand dropped and her chin tucked, diverting her gaze.

“It is all right.” His brow furrowed, confused by her reaction. “You may say whatever you wish about my body.”

He didn’t want her to repress herself, not with him, not at all. The idea actually pained him.

“Oh. I thought it was inappropriate. You seemed awkward when I mentioned your skin.” Ava studied him, her expression uncertain.

“Awkward? Awkward,” he said more slowly and cringed, realizing what had happened. “I was awkward because of the way I respond to you. You weaken my shell.”

He lifted her hand, placed it in the middle of his chest, and his shell instantly receded. He pulled in a breath feeling her fingers on his bare quick again. One day he’d grow accustomed to her touch enough that it wouldn’t totally derail his thoughts, but he wouldn’t dare wish away this moment.

“That’s because of me?!” Ava declared, her soothing gray eyes widening with shock and awe as she stared at his chest.

“Aye,” he groaned when she smoothed her hands over his pecs, chasing his shell as it continued to retreat.

“So, you like me, huh?” Ava continued exploring.

“Aye.” He closed his eyes, soaking in the sensation. “Very much.”

He jerked and gripped the wall when Ava caressed his lower abdomen. This was not what he expected. He should be apologizing for the way he rushed their bonding. He should be letting her rest. That was his intent, to resist the inner beast demanding he claim her again. Ava’s roving hands were very unexpected.

“I thought maybe you were annoyed with me.” Her hands paused painfully close to his spurs, straining to be free of his shell, though not close enough.

He groaned in disappointment, then what she said reached him. His eyes flicked open, processing the distressing comment. That was the last thing he wanted.

“I am sorry I made you feel that way.” He clasped her distracting hands and brought them to his lips. “I did not expect to find my weakness in a Jurou Biljana outpost, then I thought you were already mated. When I learned Lucas was your sobrus, I couldn’t simply mount you. You were just liberated. I still should’ve waited. I was too eager.” He shook his head.

“You *are* sweet.” Ava smiled at him and cupped his cheek. Her expression then turned thoughtful. “Weakness, you’ve mentioned that before. It was in the myth you told me.” She tilted her head.

Scala paused, realizing he now had to explain. This wasn’t something he could gloss over again. Hopefully Ava would understand.

Please understand. Scala took a deep breath, bracing himself.

“Ava, a weakness is the one person so perfectly suited for us that their touch weakens our shell, making it possible to mate. Some Osivoire search a lifetime and never find their mate. I was awkward because until I found you, I’d never seen my quick.” He touched his bare dermis. “I’d never felt the air on it or even the barest touch,” he admitted.

Ava’s eyes widened. “So only I do this to you?”

“Aye.”

“And you were cooped up in your shell until you met me?” She scanned his body before looking into his eyes.

He again nodded in confirmation.

“But how do you pee?!” She gaped at him in disbelief.

It was not the question he was expecting and took him totally by surprise.

“I don’t,” he laughed, watching her eyes widen farther. “Our bodies are very efficient. It comes from evolving on a harsh planet. Our shell uses anything our body doesn’t, since it’s constantly regenerating.”

He didn’t mind explaining these physiological details, but this really wasn’t on topic. Did she understand what he’d just told her about being his weakness?

“Wow.” She studied him, her expression intrigued. Then she frowned. “Wait.”

Now she figured it out. He clenched, waiting for her verdict.

“If you only have one weakness, how do you have harems of women?”

Before Ava even finished the question his shoulders slumped. Again, she was a bit off the mark.

She's human, not Osivoire, he reminded himself, trying to be patient, but he was desperate to know if she was receptive to the idea of being his mate. He had no idea what he'd do if she rejected him.

“Once a couple finds their weakness, the resulting hormones can also weaken other females’ shells. It’s probably an evolutionary response to assure our species survives. That’s why we tend to have sex in estuaries, the hormones mix in the water. But I do not have a conclave of females awaiting me back home,” he quickly added, remembering that Nadzia had taken exception to Aculus’ conclave of females.

“Well, that’s good. I don’t share very well,” Ava said flatly.

Wait. What just happened? Scala’s eyes widened in shock.

Not only did Ava object to the idea of sharing him, which made him deliriously happy, she didn’t seem to be surprised by what he’d revealed about their relationship.

“You are human. I know you bond differently. Do you understand what I am trying to explain?” He really needed to clarify.

Are you trying to get her to reject you?! He grimaced at himself.

“I’m starting to understand how Elena and Payim got married so fast,” Ava chuckled then pinned him with her gray eyes. “Now that I am free to do what I want, I could tell you no, that I don’t care that I’m your weakness.” Ava took a step forward.

This didn’t sound good. He anxiously took a step back, bumping into the stall wall.

“But I’ve known evil and I’ve known mediocre in my lifetime.” Her gaze softened. “Yet, I’ve never met someone as brave, as sweet, or as sexy as you, Scala.”

His heart paused between beats trying to incorporate what she said. He then gasped when Ava leaned in and pressed her lips to his chest and she began caressing him again.

“It is a surprise,” she added in between kisses. “But it’s like I hit the lottery.”

Her acceptance sent him reeling, and the way her lips and hands moved ever lower had him panting. His shell receded from his groin and his spurs instantly sprang free.

“Definitely hit the lottery.” Ava’s breath whispered over his spurs as she fisted them.

Then her mouth was enveloping his forespur. Her tongue rolled around his crown, sending a spike of pleasure erupting up his spine.

“Ava!” He slapped the stall wall, repressing the urge to grip her head, his knees quivering, threatening to give out.

He’d orally pleased females, but had never been on the receiving end. There was no preamble to the exquisite pleasure, it just instantly assailed him like a hurricane.

“Mmm hmm,” Ava moaned, her mouth vibrating his arousal as she stroked him.

Goddess, the suction...the suction. His spurs jerked, his stomach muscles flexing uncontrollably.

He wasn’t going to last. No one could resist such erotic torture. This was not what he expected, not at all. Then again, he never expected to find Ava.

Ava

Ava was surprised to learn she was Scala's fated mate, and she was equally surprised to discover how that made her feel. She had it bad for the exotic man. It started in the outpost when he ran ahead trying to shield her from danger. But the warm feeling in her chest wasn't just because he was sexy or rescued her. The vulnerability in Scala's eyes as he bared himself physically and emotionally called to a part of her that had long been dormant. She was his weakness, she literally weakened the amazing man's armor. That was a pretty big thing, making her feel beyond special. Who had ever considered her special, or looked at her like the whole universe existed in her eyes? Certainly not her cheating ex. She couldn't deny Scala. She didn't want to. With Scala, it was like pieces of a puzzle had fallen into place, and for the first time in a long time, she wanted more than just her freedom.

Ava sucked Scala into the back of her throat, needing to show him just how much she truly wanted him. He was so big, she couldn't take him very deep, so she stroked both his throbbing cocks in tandem with each pull. Scala made sexy growls as he shook. It spurred her on and she forced herself to take him deeper, repressing the urge to gag. A spurt hit the back of her throat and she quickly swallowed, tasting a hint of citrus.

"Ava!" Scala tugged her off his cock and crushed her against his chest. "You keep doing that and I'm going to toss you onto the floor and mount you again!"

Her eyes widened at the intensity in his glowing eyes and the deep growled warning as his cocks jabbed at her stomach.

Her pussy still ached from his possession and yet a gush of desire spilled down her thigh.

Scala took a deep breath and must've scented her desire. With a painful groan he released her. She might be a glutton for punishment, but she needed to remember this was new for Scala. That was also hard to believe. She couldn't fathom being trapped in a hard shell her whole life.

"Okay." She reluctantly stepped back into the spray. "Is it like touching a raw nerve when I touch your bare skin?" she asked, wondering if his body was as sensitive as the skin under a fingernail.

"A little. It's the best pleasure, but it also borders on pain. Even my shell feels like it's chafing when I'm around you," he replied with a groan.

"That's the epitome of being uncomfortable in one's skin." She frowned in sympathy.

"No. Do not frown." He lifted her chin, tilting her head back to look up at him. "I will get accustomed to it. You can most definitely try that again." He smiled encouragingly at her.

So, his first blowjob wasn't so bad.

"Oh. Okay." She smiled wickedly and leaned forward, her mouth parting as she went for his cocks.

Scala quickly captured her shoulders. "Later!"

With a rotten snicker, she stood upright again. "Okay. I'll wait before I take another taste of that rainbow." She grinned, staring pointedly at his multicolored hard cocks.

"Maybe we should wash," Scala said with an uneasy chuckle and then sighed, releasing her shoulders.

Scala was again awkward. He called her adorable, but he was the cute one with the way he cast her surreptitious glances as he washed himself in the spray. This time she knew why. He was basically a virgin, attempting to wrangle a libido he'd only recently discovered. Try as she might to behave, that knowledge incited her naughty side. Just because she couldn't touch him as he regained his composure didn't mean sexy time had to end.

Ava couldn't resist stroking herself suggestively as she bathed. Her hands smoothed the water over her breasts and down to her pussy. Briefly her fingers dipped between her slick labia, before moving on to her thighs. Scala's hands paused with their task and he intently watched her with his stunning glowing eyes, his cocks standing at attention. She turned then looked over her shoulder.

"Want to do my back?" She innocently batted her lashes, though she was anything but innocent.

Scala hungrily growled and lunged, his steely arms wrapping around her.

Oh, that did it!

Her heart sped up as he marched into the neighboring room and dropped onto his knees, landing on the mattresses laying on the floor. With his hand on her belly, he pulled her back against his chest as he leaned in, finding her ear.

"You are truly my weakness. You tempt me more than you know," he rasped.

She nodded, feeling the hot evidence prodding her back.

"You said you haven't had anal sex." His free hand dipped between her butt cheeks. "Does that mean this has never been possessed?" His finger circled her puckered opening.

“Yes,” she replied breathlessly, his touch making her jumpy. Maybe goading him wasn’t such a wise idea.

“Is this something you’re opposed to?” he roughly asked while collecting the moisture from her pussy and dragging it back to smear around the sensitive tight hole.

“We’d have to work up to it.” Her chest heaved.

“Mmm. I can feel that,” he groaned, his warm, full lips ghosting over her ear.

Her breath hitched when Scala’s thick finger pressed into her anus. She clutched his arm banding her stomach, and his right thigh, steadying herself as he delved deeper, one knuckle then the next pushing past the ring of muscles. It was so odd since he wasn’t touching her clit or pussy to distract her from the foreign sensation. She tucked her head, her cheeks heating, unsure of what to make of it.

“You are very tight, and so warm and soft inside. It makes me painfully hard imagining you stretched around my spurs.”

His finger slid in and out of her as he whispered the salacious things with his husky voice and compelling accent. The pleasure wasn’t instantaneous, it was more of a slow building burn, made all that much hotter by his commanding large body at her back, the steely arm holding her just where he wanted her. Her heart hammered faster in her chest, her pussy and ass squeezing at the image he painted, knowing full well he’d one day make good on the promise to own her ass.

“You get so wet for me.” He again captured the desire leaking from her core. “Two, you can take two of my fingers.” It was more of a demand than a question.

She nodded and he pressed another thick finger into her ass, further stretching her. She bit her lip as his fingers worked

in and out of the unused hole. He was gentle at first but with each pass his thrusts became more demanding.

“More,” she panted and squirmed at the unexpected mounting pleasure, clenching his fingers as she chased a new kind of orgasm.

“Goddess, don’t tempt me,” Scala growled against her neck. “As much as I want it, you aren’t ready for me yet.” He pulled free of her body.

Ava scowled and almost whined. As reluctant as she’d been about having her ass fingered, she was now left feeling empty and disappointed, but then Scala pressed a hand to her back, urging her forward.

Oh. Maybe they weren’t done.

Ava’s hands planted on the mattress. His one arm banded around her hips, the other braced against the floor as he curled over her back. Before she really had time to process the possibilities of this new position, one cock found the entrance of her pussy then Scala thrust.

“Fuck!” she cried out when he impaled her vagina in one fell swoop, the other crown battering her clit as it slid through her slick labia.

Scala retreated, his broad crown dragging along her sensitive walls and tugging at the mouth of her pussy without pulling free. Then he swung his hips, hammering back in. Her back arched and her cry came out a groan. Each stroke came faster, driving deeper, as Scala grunted against the crook of her neck.

His hand returned to her ass and his thumb worked its way into the constricted opening, made even tighter by the thick cock buried in her pussy. She’d wanted more and Scala was

giving it to her. Ava reeled from the agonizing pressure and bite of pain just the addition of his thumb elicited. Maybe she was a masochist, but she loved it, desperate for the exotic man to use her for his pleasure.

The sweet torment swiftly morphed as he repeatedly struck her G-spot and other nerves hidden in her pussy and ass. The broad head and ridges on his engorged cocks felt unbelievable sliding over her sensitive flesh. Her channels spasmed, her pussy squirting more desire.

“Yes, goddess,” Scala snarled, pounding her harder, his pelvis slapping against her at a punishing pace.

The force of his possession made staying on her knees impossible and she collapsed onto the mattress. Scala’s finger retreated from her ass as he followed her down. He continued impaling her, grinding deep, the weight of his hot body pressed against the length of her back. She cried incoherently into the mattress and clawed at it, quaking from the spiraling pleasure. Scala reached beneath her, gripped the cock not currently impaling her and pressed it harder against her pulsing clit. The burst of rapture was blinding as he continued savagely pounding out his lust. She writhed beneath the man, tears squeezing from her eyes at the pure bliss.

“Mine,” Scala snarled, his sharp teeth closing over her shoulder, holding her in place but not breaking the skin as his cocks jerked and erupted.

The added twinge of pain and his hot seed set her off. Ava shattered into a million pieces and let out a guttural cry, the sheer ecstasy claiming her.

TEN



I DON'T DESERVE YOU

Ava

Ava roused then groaned, instantly feeling the aftermath of what they'd done while her bladder demanded relief. Scala spooned her back, one cock still buried in her pussy, the other nestled between her labia.

Not in my wildest dreams. Never would she have imagined Scala would be doubly endowed. *And the things never really go soft.* She glanced in disbelief at the girthy evidence between her thighs.

With a furtive smile she recalled waking up to find Scala with his head buried between her thighs, feasting on her pussy before fucking her again. At a certain point, she'd been too exhausted and delirious to participate or even move, just letting the euphoria wash over her.

I created a monster.

She'd goaded Scala and now he was trying to make up for lost time. Thankfully he was waiting to give her ass the same pounding her pussy got. As it was, she was going to be walking funny for a while. If this was just a taste of Scala's insatiable appetite, she would definitely need to stretch out more. Her cheeks instantly heated with embarrassment as she acknowledged just what part she'd have to 'work out.'

I didn't think I was a prude, but maybe I am. Her cheeks got hotter. Thank god, Scala didn't seem to have a problem playing with her ass or she'd be crawling in a hole right now instead of attempting to go to the bathroom.

Ava glanced down at Scala's limp arm draped over her. His huge hand with its naughty fingers spanned her entire

stomach, and his forearm was as thick as a small tree trunk. She grinned, liking the sight of it resting there, but nature called. Gingerly, she attempted to lift his arm.

Ugh. And it's heavy, too. She somehow managed to shift his arm down to her thighs. *Of course he's heavy, the man's damn near twice my size.*

She attempted to ease away and her pussy protested. Her eyes widened when his cocks throbbed and started to grow stiff again as the one slid free of her body.

How is he still horny? She inched away. *Well, he's not human,* she reminded herself with a grin.

“Where are you going?” Scala recaptured her before she could make it very far.

“I personally need more than sex to survive,” she chuckled and wiggled free then rolled off the mattress. “Food, Scala, we need food.” She pointed in censure at the randy beast hungrily grinning at her, her mouth pressed flat attempting to look stern.

“Yes! You must be hungry!” Scala suddenly, eagerly leapt to his feet.

Unfortunately, his shell slid back in place, robbing her of the image of two hot cocks bouncing as he got up. In fact, with his shell in place, Scala's crotch was as smooth as a department store mannequin. It was both a little disconcerting and amusing at the same time. Scala turned and trotted off the mattress.

And that gorgeous ass is now armored, too. Ava smirked, pouting for a moment. *Wait a minute, we're married!*

The fact that they were as good as married according to Scala's people was a novel idea, and would take some getting

used to, but not entirely without its perks. She got up and went after Scala, grabbing his two delicious taut cheeks before he reached the replicator. Scala paused and looked over his shoulder.

“Ava?” His brow rose.

“Just a moment.” She held up her finger, instructing him to wait.

His eyes widened and he made a funny face as his mouth closed, reminding her of the endearing expression when he tried to lead in the outpost.

“Good boy.”

She grinned then continued massaging his ass, raptly watching as his shell disappeared, revealing the fine craftsmanship beneath his armor. His ass reminded her of a butterfly, with the way both muscular cheeks pinched in on the sides, and it was colorful like one, too. She was never going to get used to the way she affected Scala’s armor or how ripped and mouthwatering his body was.

“Yes, very nice.” She nodded in approval, giving one cheek a little slap before stepping back.

“I thought we were making food.” Scala turned around to face her, wearing a rakish grin.

“We are. I was just taking a little peek.” She craned her head just to be able to look him in the eyes.

“I would like a little peek at something, too.” Scala panned to her bare crotch as he grabbed for her.

“Oh, no! I know what you want, and it isn’t just a peek.” She danced back. “Besides, I need to go to the bathroom.”

Scala chuckled as she retreated to the bathroom. The deep rumbling sound was pure joy and it filled her with warmth. As she did her business, she couldn't help but replay it with a happy smile.

How did I get so lucky? She had accepted that the best she could expect would be getting free of the lizards followed by a rough existence on an alien planet. Finding joy or even love had been far too much to wish for.

And I'm his one. She let out a breathless little sigh as the unexpected feelings suffused her. Finding Scala hardly seemed possible.

"I hope you don't mind, I selected something from the human food list. It is flagged, so it must be a favorite. I hope you enjoy it," Scala said as she exited the washroom.

"We could've had something from your people. I'd like to try more of your food." She joined him at the small table and took a drink of water from one of the cups.

"Same." Scala smiled. "I enjoyed the pizza and wanted to try something else."

Even though his shell covered his eyes and they were again red, they danced with excitement. She grinned at his cute, eager expression.

"Okay. What did you select?"

"Ras Gana, I believe. It will be a bit before it's complete."

"Ras Gana? I don't know that one." She shook her head, while scouring her brain. "Maybe it's Indian."

"I guess we will soon see." Scala shrugged then attempted to help her into a seat.

“Just a second.” She halted him. “I should put something on. I know this place was cleaned, but some of us don’t have a shell, and I’m not sitting with my bare lady bits on that seat.” She wrinkled her nose and shook her head.

Scala glanced down at her crotch wearing a randy grin, then his expression changed and his gaze popped up to focus on her.

“Ah! That reminds me,” Scala declared then abruptly left.

Ava stifled a snort. His reaction reminded her of a cat darting out of a room as if suddenly late for a very important appointment.

She peered out the door to see him rummaging in the central supply hold. He grabbed two boxes that looked like briefcases then headed to the open cockpit.

Ah. How sweet of him. She smiled as he approached her blue dress laying on the floor.

Except he checked the controls and walked right past the gown, returning to the small lounge.

“Um, did you forget something?” Her brow arched.

“No.” Scala moved the drinks and set the two cases on the table. “We can get this calibrated while we wait for food.” He opened the top box, revealing a handful of odd tan discs.

“What are they?” Her head tilted as she studied them.

“It’s a combat shell. It’s what I was wearing when we first met.” He lifted one oval shaped disc.

Her heart leapt, recalling the amazing technology.

“Oh. I get a cool disguise?!” She did an excited little dance.

“Yes.” Scala grinned, staring at her bouncing breasts.

“Hey! Back to my cool disguise!” she snorted.

Ava threw an arm over her bare breasts, halting the jiggling and hiding them from view. She also took a step behind the table, so his gaze didn’t wander to her muff either. Although it was a shame to hide her newly manicured bush.

Now I’m getting off topic!

“Fine.” Scala smirked. “This is more than a disguise. The combat shell protects against munitions, as its name implies, and can provide an artificial environment,” he explained, sounding like a true soldier.

“Wow. All that from those little discs!” Her eyes widened. “But I don’t know why I’m surprised, you have a spaceship and are 3D printing food. Why not a magic space suit?”

Even the Jurou Biljana, as savage as they were, had technology that put Earth to shame, so she should’ve been used to it by now.

“Are you all right with wearing it? It would make me feel better.” Scala held out the oval disc, concern flickering in his red eyes.

Oh! Her heart clenched.

“I would’ve agreed anyway, but definitely if it makes you feel better.” She reached out and rubbed his arm. “I understand why you didn’t want me to come, but I appreciate that I am here and will wear whatever gear you tell me to.”

Scala appeared slightly surprised and then panned her. This time his gaze wasn’t filled with lust but more appreciative, giddy, and proud.

“Thank you.” Scala took her hand and placed the disc on the outside of her wrist.

It stuck to her skin without pinching, like it possessed invisible suckers. The device was neat, but she was more curious about Scala’s reaction.

“What was that expression? Why were you surprised by my response?” she asked.

Scala was pensive as he put another disc on her other wrist.

“I guess I’m surprised and relieved. Whenever my patrem would make a request, there was always a debate from my three matrons. Inevitably he was overruled.” He frowned, but then his expression brightened. “You are different. Our conclave will be different.” He grabbed two more discs from the box.

“Sounds like your three moms ganged up on your dad.” She frowned, understanding by debate Scala really meant argue.

She still remembered the arguments her parents had before they split up. The house was like a war zone. Her heart went out to Scala. To feel like your family is falling apart is terribly painful.

Oh, no. Her stomach dropped, realizing she too had barreled right over Scala when she insisted on coming. Nothing would’ve kept her from this mission, but she could’ve heard him out.

“I know I’m stubborn, but I will try to be considerate of what your needs and wants are,” she promised as Scala rounded the table.

“And I will, too. Since it is only the two of us making decisions, I think it will be easier. I want you to always know I value your needs and desires. They are my needs and desires,” he said reverently as he got down on his knees.

Again, her stomach did a little flip. The serious nature of the relationship they were embarking on and the way Scala knelt at her feet, it felt like he was about to propose.

“What are you doing?” She grinned at him then bit her lip.

“This.” He stuck the discs to her shins.

“Oh,” she giggled.

It was ridiculous she thought he was going to propose. He had no clue about the custom and they were already hitched.

“Is there something else you’d like while I’m down here?” Scala’s bony brow wagged suggestively as his very long tongue snaked out and wiggled.

Oh, holy hell! Scala was half a foot away and he could’ve easily taken a swipe at her pussy.

“Later.” She booped his nose and giggled.

He rose and stepped behind her. Scala then brushed her hair away from her back as he leaned close to her ear.

“I will take that as a promise,” he rasped with his sexy deep voice.

Ava sucked in a sharp breath and shivered as he touched the base of her neck, then realized he was putting another disc on her.

“I think you are a tease!” She whirled around and eyed him.

“I am not a tease. I don’t go around with my quick bared all the time.” He ran a finger down her chest between her breasts.

“Well, I don’t have a shell, yet, because someone keeps getting distracted,” she saucily countered.

“Mmm. True.” Scala grabbed her hand and lifted it to his mouth. “My apologies.”

He adjusted something on her wrist while he placed open-mouth kisses on her palm, his tongue peeking out to tease her skin. A frisson of desire shot to her nipples, hardening them instantly. Scala grinned knowingly, his gaze darting to her nipples, before releasing her hand.

She was about to comment that he was definitely the tease in this relationship, when the sensation sliding over her skin distracted her entirely. Ava gaped at her forearm as the cream-colored thin armor slid down her hand and up to her elbow.

“It will feel strange at first. Just flex your fingers naturally,” Scala coached in a calm voice.

“It’s a bit like dipping into a pool.” Ava took his advice, wiggling her fingers and arms, as she looked down at the shell sliding around her midriff. “It’s really amazing.”

Scala grimaced at her.

“What?” She suddenly got worried.

“The shell is a bit clumsy with hair,” he commented.

“Oh.” She relaxed.

He stepped around her and gently gathered her hair. “I’m going to twist it into a coil. Tell me if I am tugging too hard.”

A rowdy grin tipped her lips. “You know, some people consider hair pulling to be erotic.”

Scala gripped her hair tighter and pulled, urging her head to tip back.

“Just like that.” Unrepentant, she smiled straight up at the giant man looming over her.

“Weakness, I am beginning to see the trouble I will have with you. I will remember about the hair pulling when I need to get a rein on you,” he warned, his voice husky as his eyes narrowed on her.

“Good luck,” she taunted.

With a chuckle, Scala released her hair and the combat shell slid over the back of her head. Her eyes widened, feeling it get closer to her eyes, nose and mouth.

“Okay, now it’s getting weird.” Her heart sped up.

“Relax. Just breathe normally,” he encouraged.

That was easier said than done. She squeezed her eyes closed as the sensation spread over them, then the oily sensation slid over her lips and nose. She pulled in a deep breath and was surprised to discover she could breathe fine. It wasn’t like scuba diving or breathing through a mask of any kind. Her eyes flicked open and she blinked for a moment at the red hue covering everything.

“The room is pink,” she declared.

“It’s the shielding protecting your eyes. You’ll adjust to it shortly.” Scala grinned at her. “Come.” He took her hand.

Besides a bit of pressure, she could barely feel his fingers as he led her to the washroom. It was also odd walking. Her steps had an unexpected bounce.

“You’ll get used to that, too. If you need to run or jump it will be augmented by the shell,” he added.

Scala turned her to face the mirror and she gasped at her reflection.

“I look like a mini you!”

It was wild seeing what she’d look like as an Osivoire. She took in her bald head and bony limbs, while making silly faces and bodybuilding poses.

“I thought you’d be amused by that,” Scala laughed at her antics. “This is the standard setting. The Jurou Biljana disguise is already programmed.” He fiddled with her wrist and the suit morphed, turning her into one of the nasty lizards, tail and all.

“Ew. Now I feel dirty.” She stuck out her tongue and was stunned to see the lizard cleft tongue in the mirror. Swiftly she pulled it back into her mouth. The suit was just a little too convincing.

“Agreed. It’s also time to eat.” Scala again tapped on her wrist.

The shell changed back to the Osivoire setting and then the helmet receded.

“Is this your idea of clothing?” She gestured to the combat shell as they went back into the sleeping lounge. She now looked like a mannequin, too.

“I can program it to mimic clothes. Right now it is still scanning you, since we’ll need to mimic you once we reach the Vicarius’ ship.”

“Ah.” She nodded. That seemed logical. “I don’t mind this being my uniform. I think once I get used to it, I’ll barely notice it.”

“Good.” Scala paused as he reached into the replicator. “I don’t know if this is right.” He pulled out the platter and set it on the table.

“Lasagna!” she declared. That’s what Ras Gana was. “You chose well!”

Whoever said food was the quickest way to a man’s heart hadn’t met a woman who’d gone two years without pasta.

Scala

Scala grinned at Ava ravenously eating the strange gooey, red layered dish. The food wasn't bad, but her reaction was far more enjoyable. Seeing she was eating properly also soothed him. She wouldn't know a day of hunger ever again, that was a promise.

“So, you're a captain. That's what you do?” Ava asked between bites, drawing his attention.

“Aye, officially it's First Commander of the Osivoire Nation Paladin.” He gave her his full title.

“Ooh. That's fancy.” Her brows wagged at him.

“It's a lot of words. Captain is much easier,” he chuckled.

“It is.” She nodded. “Basically, you're the boss.”

“To a point. I answer to Aculus and the Conclave.”

“And you travel around rescuing people and thwarting evil?” she followed up.

Scala was ready to try to summarize his duties, then a grin formed as he processed the way she phrased her question.

“I supposed I do,” he beamed at her. Maybe it was prideful, but he liked that she saw him that way. “What about you?”

“Well, for the last few years, I've been the domestic servant of a violent tyrant, but I'm looking for a career change,” she replied earnestly.

He paused for a moment and studied her flat expression. The glimmer in her eyes said she was making a joke. His mate

had a very twisted sense of humor.

“I don’t think I can laugh at that.” Scala adamantly shook his head.

He instantly regretted it when her face dropped.

“Handsome, I have to joke about it or cry.” She shrugged.

Anger at himself and what she’d been subjected to burned through his veins. Except this wasn’t the time or place for his emotions. He reached across the table and took her hand.

“You do whatever you feel like doing and I will laugh at your depressing jokes if that helps,” he amended with a gentle squeeze.

“It does help.” Glossy-eyed, Ava smiled at him then blinked away the moisture. “Anyway, I was a real estate agent. I had pretty good sales, too.”

“Real estate agent?” Scala tipped his head, not recognizing the occupation.

“I helped find people places to live.”

“Ah, a dwelling purveyor.” He nodded in understanding.

“It’s not what I imagined I’d be doing when I was a kid, but unicorn trainer wasn’t an option.” She took another bite.

“Did you lose interest in unicorn training or was it too complicated?” he asked, grabbing another mouthful of his own food.

Ava choked and covered her mouth. His eyes widened in concern then he realized she was laughing.

“What?” His brow furrowed.

“Unicorns aren’t real,” she giggled behind her hand.

“Ah,” he laughed. “Then that makes it very complicated.” He nodded with a grin.

He thought a unicorn was one of the many animals the humans raised, but it was apparently fictitious like the winged *joval*.

“It was a definite disappointment when I learned that.” She pursed her lips, sticking them out in an exaggerated frown, making him chuckle. “Real estate agent was second best.” She sighed in mock resignation. “For some reason getting to look inside all those houses fascinated me,” she added earnestly.

Scala grinned at how gregarious she was as he considered what she’d shared.

“Perhaps it’s the mystery of getting to look behind a closed door,” he surmised. “I enjoy traveling for a similar reason, the curiosity of seeing what’s waiting in the cosmos.”

“I think so. Each time I went to a house it was a little adventure.” Ava nodded in agreement. “Although not nearly as exciting as what you do.” She took another bite of her food.

Scala turned pensive as they ate. This discussion brought up an important subject he hadn’t considered, though he certainly should have. What would he do now that he’d found his weakness?

“What’s that face about?” Ava pointed her utensil at him.

“I guess I need a career change, too.” He sat back in his chair as it sank in.

“Why?” Ava frowned.

“It’s not safe for you. I can’t knowingly take you into combat.” He shook his head adamantly.

“You are not quitting because of me! Nuh uh.” Ava crossed her arms over her chest. “I’m a lot tougher than I look. I’m sure there’s tons of jobs I can do on your ship,” she informed him, her gaze narrowing.

Scala’s eyes widened at the way she challenged him. Except the sides they’d taken in this debate weren’t what he would’ve expected. Was this the way it had been with his conclave?

“I’m starting to think I misunderstood some things as I matured,” he let out an incredulous laugh.

Ava tilted her head, confused by the seemingly abrupt change of subject.

“My patrem met my matrons while traveling, he was an ore trader and they ran a processor. I thought he hated settling in Groysta, but now I wonder. Running ore between systems was dangerous then.”

Scala considered it as he took another bite. He loved what he did, but did he love it more than knowing Ava was safe, in a good dwelling, with food and friends? No.

“And you’re now thinking he gave it up to protect your mothers like you want to protect me.”

“Aye.” He nodded. “I don’t have the best relationship with my conclave, but finding you is giving me a new perspective on things I may have misinterpreted.” Scala ran a hand over his face as a dozen memories scrolled through his mind that he now questioned.

“I sympathize. My parents’ relationship confuses me. They are so different I don’t know how they ever got together in the first place. I guess it’s because they were young and they

didn't know themselves well enough yet. Sadly, it didn't work out well for them." She shook her head.

Scala's heart raced and he suddenly felt sick as he recalled what Ava had shared about human marriages.

"Osivoire mate for life. You will always be my weakness!" he frantically blurt.

Except, Ava was human, so she *could* choose to leave him if they couldn't make their relationship work.

Ava's brow furrowed and she instantly got out of her seat.

She didn't like what I said about her always being mine. I shouldn't have said it so forcefully. What is she doing?

He was confused as she rounded the table.

"I understand." Ava unexpectedly sat in his lap and started rubbing his chest. It was disappointing she was wearing the combat gear because her hand had no effect on his shell, and he really wanted to feel her soothing fingers on his quirk. "We'll figure it out, our relationship, the jobs, all of it. Just relax." Her gray eyes were gentle.

"I'm sorry." He took a deep breath, reeling in the spiral of panic.

"Nope. Don't be." She shook her head.

"Yes. I am sorry," he gently disagreed. "I never wanted to find my weakness. I had these notions that tainted my view. I have much to reconsider." His brow furrowed.

"You want to talk about it?" she urged, leaning into him to listen.

He took a deep breath, trying to gather his thoughts.

“My sobrus Adius formed an emotional bond with a female.” He squeezed Ava tighter. He hadn’t spoken of his brother in a long time. “Cala turned out to be someone else’s weakness. I found Adius’ body in the estuary,” he managed to say past the lump in his throat.

“Oh no!” Ava rose on his lap and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Scala, I’m so sorry.”

Her bare cheek touched his and his shell receded. He blew out a deep breath, the sensation of her skin bringing him comfort.

“They don’t know if Adius did it on purpose or if he drank too much and was careless. I don’t want to think he took his own life, and yet it’s somehow worse if it was an accident.” Scala shook his head, the never-ending debate of which was worse again spinning in his head, taunting him, when in the end, Adius was still gone.

“God, that’s terrible. I am so, so very sorry that happened and you found him. I can’t even imagine.” Ava peppered kisses on his cheek as she held him.

“I was twelve and relationships with females were taking on a new meaning, then I witnessed how wrong they could go. I started noticing the way my patrem was treated. He always gave in to my matrons. It made me sad and angry with him, with all of them.” Scala shook his head, his chest tight. “And then it was just easier to send me to the academy, or so I thought.”

He’d been so hurt and angry, letting the pain of losing his sobrus tinge his view of relationships. He’d been utterly clueless.

“Oh, handsome.” Ava cupped his cheeks. There were tears in her eyes as she stared into his. “I don’t know what else to say besides I’m sorry.”

She had no clue how much simply holding him and listening meant. He pressed his forehead to hers.

“Ava, I don’t deserve you, but I need you.”

He cupped the back of her head and kissed her, pouring out all the adoration and love he felt for her.

ELEVEN



A WHOLE NEW WORLD

Ava

“I feel like my world is shifting,” Scala said thoughtfully as they finished dinner. “It’s good,” he quickly added, focused on her and smiled, appearing happy but also gobsmacked. “It’s a bit intense, though.”

“And if you don’t hold on tight, you might spin off this wild ride.” Ava nodded in agreement. Her life had done a total one-eighty in the span of a few days.

“That is why I gave you that combat shell,” Scala chuckled.

“Oh good, it protects against emotional whiplash, too,” she laughed. “Well, you better put yours on, since this ride is just getting started.”

“And you don’t think this shell will be enough?” He grinned as he smoothed a hand over his fine armored chest.

“No. I am a handful.” She shook her head.

She giggled when Scala dramatically grabbed the case and put on the combat shell discs, engaging the armor.

“Oh, I already feel better,” he let out an exaggerated sigh of relief, then grinned.

“You’re a goof,” she snorted while admiring the silly man.

She’d seen Scala serious and she’d seen him sweet, but now that they’d overcome the big hurdle between them, his playful side had emerged and she loved it. His teasing smile was positively captivating.

“I don’t know this word, but you are probably correct. Here, let me show you some things.” He took her hand, his

expression sobering. “I should explain how the shell works. The panel appears if you keep your finger on the sensor.”

She paid close attention as Scala demonstrated how to engage the shell’s various levels of coverage, then moved on to the disguise settings.

“Now, instead of tapping, swipe,” he instructed.

She swiped the panel and suddenly she was scaly all over. “Oh, not the lizard!”

“Swipe it again,” Scala laughed.

She did and the shell disappeared, revealing her bare skin.

“I swiped, but I think I did something wrong.” Ava frowned.

The shell didn’t recede the way it normally did when it was shutting off, it simply vanished.

“No. It’s working perfectly.” Scala wore a randy grin as he leaned across the table and tapped on her left breast.

Her eyes widened at the plunking sound, not feeling a thing.

“It’s not me, it’s the armor!” she declared and stood up from the table to check herself out.

She’d grown so used to the armor that she didn’t feel it on her skin unless she concentrated. The shell replicated everything from her painted nails to her newly trimmed bush. She was about to comment how crazy it was when she caught Scala’s wicked grin as he appraised her.

“You are rotten!” She eyed him, cupping her armored pussy and breasts.

“I am!” he chuckled, then snagged her arm and pulled her hand away from her pussy.

She gaped at him, wondering what naughty business he was up to.

“What are you doing now?” Ava smirked when Scala started fiddling with the controls on her arm, slightly disappointed that was his only intent.

After their sex marathon, she should’ve been satiated for a while. Clearly, she wasn’t.

“Giving you clothing, something similar to what you had on when we met. This is the setting we’ll use when we board the Vicarius’ vessel. This way you’ll be protected. We did this with Elena when we went into the outpost,” he explained.

“Oh. That’s a good idea.” She nodded in approval.

Scala’s brow furrowed, appearing confused. She was about to repeat what she’d said, thinking he’d misheard, when he swiftly pivoted and left the room.

“What’s wrong?” she asked as she jogged to catch up with him already halfway across the middle bay.

“We changed velocity,” he replied, reaching the cockpit.

The expression on his face wasn’t encouraging. His jaw was clenched as his hands flew over the controls. The cruiser viewscreen flickered on, and she had trouble making out what it revealed. It looked like rocky red mountains. That couldn’t be right. They were in space.

“Ava!” Scala roared as he suddenly tackled her, frantically pinning her to the seat.

Sheer terror filled her when she realized what was happening and then the sudden impact threw them, the force of

it ripping the seat free of the metal floor. Ava blacked out before they hit the other side of the cabin, her last thoughts of the man wrapped around her.

Scala

The cruiser struck the red planet, tossing them end over end inside the cabin. Curled around Ava, Scala desperately attempted to take the brunt of the damage as they slammed into the rear wall, denting it, only to be instantly flung forward into the cockpit again, crushing the ship controls. Despite his combat shell, the blow to his head made stars burst in his vision. There was another violent explosion and the side of the cabin tore open.

“No!” Scala roared when Ava was ripped from his arms.

Out of sheer desperation, he managed to maintain the grip on her arm as they were flung from the wreckage. Agony tore through him when they impacted on unforgiving red rock. His pain mattered little, though. He kept a death grip on Ava, trying to pull her closer so he could shield her as they tumbled over and over then came to a sliding halt.

“Ava!” he rasped.

His frantic gaze fell on his weakness sprawled nearby. He blinked, trying to dispel the double vision but it refused to clear. Her delicate body was still, too still, her eyes closed.

“Oh, goddess!” he stammered.

Her combat shell was intact, but it flickered between disguises, clearly damaged in some way. The armor was good but there was only so much it could do. He knew his injuries were grave and if that was the case then Ava’s...

“No!” he choked past the rattle in his lungs and the lump in his throat.

Anguish shredded him. He fought off the dizziness as he crawled, desperate to reach her side. He'd just found his weakness. He'd just discovered what it meant to truly feel. Life couldn't possibly be so cruel to show him all that he'd been missing just to snatch it away.

“Ava, my weakness, wake up for me,” he pleaded, frantically feeling her chest then cupping her cheek.

Except life was cruel, because Ava didn't open her eyes. Soul-deep torment and the physical agony claimed him. Scala collapsed with his arm draped across his Ava, his one weakness and the only reason he breathed.

Ava

Ava gasped, the memory of the crash making her bolt upright.

“Scala!”

She froze where she sat on the mattress. Horror filled her as she stared at the metal walls of her tiny outpost bedroom. Her gaze swung left and right looking for Scala, but she was alone.

This can't be right. They were just plummeting toward a barren rocky red planet. How did she get back here?

She scanned the five-by-seven room. She'd sadly memorized the crusty yellow corrosive pattern on the walls, from hours of staring at them. This was definitely her old bedroom. If that wasn't enough to convince her of where she was, the familiar musty stench of the ratty mattress beneath her cemented it.

“It couldn't have been a dream!” The hysterical sob caught in her throat, tears instantly blinding her as she stumbled to her feet.

Meeting Scala had all been a dream and the rescue as well. Something inside her snapped as she was thrust back into her brutal reality. She'd had dreams before of being rescued from the lizards, but none so realistic, none featuring her own personal hero. She rapidly gasped, unable to catch her breath. Having her hope and freedom savagely dashed paled next to the loss of Scala, the loss of love.

He's gone!

The staggering pain in her chest made her double over and she gripped a nearby wall. She'd held on for so long to the

fragments of herself, willing herself to fight and go on each day, but this, this had finally broken her.

Blinded by her tears, Ava stumbled through the door into Yitu's room. The scaly youth wasn't asleep in his bed, nor was Lucas on his mattress in the corner. She needed to find her brother and the bit of solace he could provide.

The door leading to the main room opened and she spun around. In marched Vicarius Kur with one of his lieutenants. She should've cowered and dropped her eyes from his cruel yellow gaze, except she no longer cared about the repercussions of angering him.

"This flesh-bearer is agitated as well," the lieutenant hissed.

Flesh-bearer was a new insult coming from the scaly bastard, but that wasn't what caught her attention.

Who else is agitated? Her thoughts swiftly returned to her brother. Her panic spiked and she opened her mouth to demand what was wrong with Lucas.

"Resume your calm," the Vicarius insisted. "Your system is under stress. It is detrimental."

The fuck?

Her brow furrowed at the uncharacteristic comment. Vicarius Kur never cared if her 'system was under stress.' Kur only ever cared if she was so injured he had to deal with his own son. Now she really was worried. Ava started to hyperventilate. Not only did she have an earth-shattering dream, but she'd awoken to find something had clearly happened to Lucas.

"What..." she began to ask but was cut off.

“I don’t understand the preoccupation with this pair. They are like all the other flesh-bearers.” The lieutenant looked at her with disgust before turning back to the Vicarius.

It was the same old excuse. None of the lizards let her forget she and Lucas were treated better than their fellow captives. She shuddered to think what the last two years would have been like if Yitu didn’t demand Lucas for a playmate.

“I assure you, this pair is different.” Vicarius Kur studied her.

She didn’t like the way he gazed at her like she was some sort of science experiment. Then again, he’d always perversely enjoyed forcing her to do his bidding, whatever demeaning task he could conjure. Thank god, it was never anything sexual.

“Not as far as I have observed. The other flesh-bearer is enacting destruction,” the lieutenant scoffed.

She cringed, expecting Kur to lash out at his lieutenant for the insolence, but instead the pair whirled and exited into the main apartment.

Enacting destruction? What is Lucas doing? She sucked in a sharp breath.

Desperately afraid for her brother, she followed in time to see a trio of Jurou Biljana rush into Kur’s apartment.

An inhuman roar from the hallway sent her staggering backward. A scream burst out when a bloody, limp, scaly body flew through the open door, smashing into the trio who just entered. Her eyes widened when Scala stormed in.

He is real! She hadn’t dreamt him. Her devastation turned into elation.

Scala brutally set upon the trio he'd chased into the apartment. He grabbed the closest one by the neck and twisted, snapping the lizard's spine as his elongated claws cut into the scaly flesh, spraying blood on the nearby wall. Scala then savagely lashed out at the next one without a backward glance for the fallen foe.

As his forearm slashed into the lizard's gut, she noticed the nodules lining Scala's arms and legs had grown into elongated spikes. Even the bony spikes atop his head had grown, making him appear wild. Stories of berserkers had her wondering if the Osivoire changed during battle, while Scala mercilessly gutted the second lizard then made quick work of the third. If anything could set him off, being recaptured by the Jurou Biljana would do it. She almost felt sorry for the pair as Scala turned on the Vicarius and his lieutenant.

"I told you these flesh-bearers are as destructive as the rest!" the lieutenant hissed to Kur, backing away as Scala stalked toward them.

"Resume the symbiosis!" Vicarius Kur insisted.

The lieutenant was about to say more but Scala punched him in the chest, sending him flying. The lizard struck the far wall then went limp. From the odd angle of his neck, it was clear the lieutenant was dead. She knew Scala was strong, but the savage display of power was staggering.

"Regain your calm!" Vicarius Kur insisted when Scala turned on him. The demand was far too relaxed for the Jurou Biljana given the situation.

Scala launched at the scaly bastard, taking him to the floor. Ava shielded her eyes but could still hear bones crunching while Scala pummeled Kur's face. When she pulled her hand away, Scala was silently staring directly at her.

“Scala!” she sobbed in relief.

With the enemy dead, she wanted to run to him, but the feral look in his red eyes and the total absence of recognition froze her to the spot. Something was very wrong with him. Her momentary relief turned to fear. What if his spikes and savagery weren't some Osivoire natural physical response to a fight?

What if those scaly sons of bitches did something to him?

Her heart rate jumped when Scala stalked toward her, rage flashing in his red eyes.

Oh god! She took in his menacing stance which was more terrifying given his immense size and the new frightening spikes projecting from his shell. Something was so, so, so wrong. The Scala she knew would never look at her this way.

“Scala, it's me!” Tears sprang from her eyes.

She held out her hand, part pleading, part warding him off, and her eyes widened upon seeing herself. Her arm was a tannish-green and scaly. The combat shell was set to the lizard disguise.

“Oh, god,” she gasped.

Ava backed up, keeping one eye on Scala as she frantically tapped at her wrist to change the disguise.

“Shit!” she stammered when she managed to disengage the armor altogether. It shrank back, revealing her natural and very vulnerable flesh.

Her gaze swiftly swung toward Scala. He was only a few yards away and she was trapped in a corner.

“Please, Scala, it's me,” she sobbed, desperately hoping Scala was in there somewhere as he took another determined

stride, bringing him within arm's reach. "Please," she begged, closed her eyes and tucked her head, cowering against the wall.

Scala

Anger burned through Scala's veins along with lingering pain. The scaly bodies of his enemy lay all around. Only one remained standing. They'd stolen something from him. Scala blinked, trying to recall what that was. He growled, unable to conjure what was missing. It didn't matter. He shook his head. He knew they took it.

His gaze refocused on the scaly enemy and the confusion doubled. It wasn't his enemy, it was a small, pale-skinned creature cowering in front of him. Instinctively he knew her milky flesh was soft. Scala turned his head, searching for the remaining reptile, when her scent reached him. He salivated at the sweet perfume and his gaze swung back to the female.

"Please, Scala," the female whispered. Her voice was soothing.

There was something familiar about her. He took another step forward, his rival forgotten. His nostrils flared as he took in her scent again.

Mine! The voice roared in his mind. She was who'd been taken from him.

Ava

Ava prayed for a miracle as she waited for Scala to attack. Tears streamed down her cheeks imagining what horrific things the Jurou Biljana had done to alter him and turn him against her.

“Scala!”

Her cry burst out when two thick arms banded around her. His grip was tight but not crushing. The spikes lining the outside of his forearms didn’t stab into her stomach or ribs, like she feared. His face burrowed through her disheveled hair, finding her shoulder, though he didn’t bite.

“Weakness,” he rasped, his voice rough and deep.

“Yes! It’s me,” she sobbed, her arms wrapping around his waist, desperately clutching him back.

Scala abruptly shifted, his large hands palming her rear as he quickly pulled her off her feet. It startled her for a moment then he cradled her against his bare chest. She melted further into him, reveling in his familiar scent. Somehow, she’d gotten through to him and he recognized her.

“Danger.” The single word came out half growl, half grunt, like a caveman, as Scala warily panned the room of dead lizards.

He was right. They were in big danger. The Vicarius had recaptured them after the crash and brought them back to the outpost. Kur, the slaving asshole, was dead on the floor but there were a lot more lizards outside those doors.

Though that fear wasn’t what had her frowning as she studied Scala’s face. He scowled at the bodies then looked

between the various exits while clutching her like a prized possession. There was an animalistic quality to his movements when he stalked to the nearby closed door, repeatedly sniffed the air and listened. Whatever was wrong with him was serious.

“Scala.” She attempted to get his attention.

He halted before entering Yitu’s room and swung his head down to look at her. His angry, serious expression softened and she smiled in relief. This was her Scala, except he clearly wasn’t operating at full capacity. It broke her heart and frightened the shit out of her, but now wasn’t the time to lose her head.

“That’s the only way out, but there’s more danger.” She pointed toward the opposite door. “I know the way.” She attempted to keep it simple.

Scala jerked his gaze toward the door he’d entered from and ran toward it, leaping over the scaly bodies littering the floor. She was relieved he understood. He stopped rather than barreling into the corridor and again sniffed while listening. She was quiet and didn’t move to distract him. Her exotic man was operating on pure instinct, his senses undoubtedly better than hers, so she’d happily let him do his job. He grunted in approval then darted into the empty hallway.

“That way.” She pointed. The fastest way out would be the garbage passage where she’d released her fellow captives.

Scala followed her directions, running to the right. Fortunately, the corridor remained clear. It was odd since she assumed the evacuation had been canceled, but she wasn’t about to second guess fate. Soon they neared the entrance to the maintenance passage.

“Stop.”

Scala gripped her tight as he came to an abrupt halt. He nervously looked around for the lizards.

“We need to go there.”

Scala took them toward the door. She was about to reach for the access panel, but the door opened without having to input the code.

That's not right. She instantly tensed, questioning if this was a trap. Had the lizards discovered her exit route after her last stunt?

Scala's arm adjusted, cradling her tighter against his chest. He sniffed at the entrance then grimaced, his nose scrunching.

“It's garbage,” she said, sympathizing.

Scala grunted in acknowledgment then ventured into the maintenance passage. Her eyes adjusted to the dimmer lights and she was relieved to find it empty.

“That way.” She pointed.

Ava relaxed as Scala started running again. Scala may not be himself but he inherently must trust her if he was following her directions. That made warmth spread through her chest, numbing some of her worry for him.

Scala slowed when they reached a handful of garbage wagons taking up the tunnel. The exit was just on the other side. They were so close. Her heart rate spiked again, anxious to get out of the outpost as Scala slipped past the large containers. The moment they came close to the exit, the massive metal doors automatically parted. Again she flinched, expecting the Jurou Biljana to be on the other side, but that's not what awaited them.

“Fuck!” she whispered as dread and confusion battled for dominance. This wasn’t the volcano planet.

Where the hell are we?

TWELVE



WHERE IN THE WORLDS

Ava

Ava gaped at the landscape in front of her. This definitely wasn't the volcano planet where the outpost was stationed. The blue tint of the sky reminded her of Earth, except the raging sun was much too large. Her gaze panned from the sky to the landscape just beyond the exit. The outpost was situated near a desert oasis with lush plants hugging a meandering stream and sandy dunes on the horizon.

Did those bastards take us to another outpost?

Then why was the Vicarius' apartment here a replica of the other one? That didn't seem right. Ava blinked in confusion and shook her head.

Maybe Kur had it furnished exactly the same. It was the only thing that made any sense.

As she was trying to figure out what was going on, Scala's grip tightened on her and he darted out of the outpost, racing toward the stream. He didn't slow when he reached the bank, splashing into the shallow water, then headed down stream, hiding their tracks as he put distance between them and the Jurou Biljana base. She felt a little bit like a football as he carried her against his chest, but wasn't about to complain. The moment the lizards discovered Vicarius Kur was dead, the hunt would be on.

Scala was tireless as he ran. Even though she was being carried, she was the first to grow weary, her arms and legs aching from the constant jostle and awkward cramped position. The heat of the sun was also starting to get to her. It didn't help that she was naked without the protection of the combat shell, her skin totally exposed to the punishing rays.

Scala's shell probably protected him, but his skin was also exposed where she was pressed against him. That couldn't be good for him either.

"Scala, stop, I need a drink." She looked longingly at the stream.

Scala grunted and instantly came to a halt then eased her down onto the rocky bank.

"Thank you," she groaned as she stretched, her muscles protesting.

Scala studied her for a moment, seemingly assuring himself she was okay. He then looked back the way they'd come, scrutinizing the landscape. His motions were jarring as his head jerked, listening and smelling.

"Hopefully they don't know we escaped yet." She looked, but didn't see anyone following them.

Ava turned her attention to the stream and was grateful there were no alien fish, so she waded deeper and knelt. The cool water felt glorious. She splashed it on herself to cool down then scooped up a giant gulp.

"I also hope we don't get some weird water parasite," she commented, while gathering up another mouthful.

Scala made a gruff sound in agreement then knelt on all four and drank directly from the stream. Her eyes widened at the unexpected pose. She shook her head and scooped up more water. As she was taking a drink something else occurred to her.

"Food. Shit! We left without thinking about food, or even shelter for that matter. We're fucked." She panned the veritable desert beyond the sparse vegetation lining the stream,

and dread started to sink in. They'd gone from the frying pan into the fire.

Scala nodded and got up. He didn't appear concerned by what she said as he plucked her out of the stream and cradled her in his arms. She questioned if he truly understood their plight when he started to run again.

"Seriously, Scala, we need to find food and shelter," she insisted, putting a hand on his cheek, attempting to get his attention.

"Danger," he rasped, his gaze remaining forward.

Okay. He was clearly determined to get them away from the outpost, despite the fact that was probably the only place with what they needed.

She glanced at the disc adhered to her wrist and started messing with the combat shell controls. If she could get it to cover her that would alleviate the being naked and exposed to the elements issue. She tapped the sensor and the cream-colored shell started to slide over her skin, but then it flickered and retreated back into the discs.

Dammit. It must've broken in the wreck.

As disappointing as that was, she counted herself lucky. She didn't have any lingering aches or pains from the wreck so the armor clearly did its job.

"We'll just need to rest in the shade once we get far enough away." She sighed in resignation, trying to ignore the growing list of worries.

Scala kept up the steady rapid pace, insisting on carrying her the whole time. This version of him was just as protective and doting, but she worried he was wearing himself out. Thankfully when he paused for brief water breaks, he was also

drinking sufficiently, so she didn't have to worry about him getting dehydrated. That would only add to whatever was wrong with him.

After a while, the stream widened into a proper river, giving rise to even more vegetation. The grass and shrubs turned into trees, blessedly offering more cover now that the bloated sun was high overhead. It was encouraging, though through the thicker growth, not more than a hundred yards away, lay the arid baked hills. It was here that Scala again came to a stop.

“Oh my god, I'm tired for you,” she declared when he set her down. Grateful, she squeezed his shoulder then stretched. “Let me walk and give you a break,” she attempted to suggest again, wiping the sweat off her brow.

Scala smiled at her, but his expression didn't reveal if he planned to let her walk or not. Instead, he silently scanned the area as was his routine. Even if he had answered her, it would've only been a word or two. Her brow furrowed as she studied his profile, his condition again worrying her. After they broke the tension having sex, Scala had become downright chatty, sharing things that made her love him even more. Granted she'd been starved of meaningful conversation, but even before her abduction, there hadn't been a man who bore himself the way Scala did. She missed that part of him.

Please god, let this be fixable.

She rubbed away the stinging in her eyes, refusing to cry. Falling apart wouldn't help their situation. She turned toward the river to get a drink, not because she needed it but to distract herself.

Except, who's going to fix him? the inner voice nagged as she knelt by the water.

There wasn't hide nor hair of anything that looked like civilization. She again panned the thickening alien trees and riverbank for anything that indicated people traveled this route. Sadly, there was nothing as far as she could tell.

Ava sucked in a breath when it occurred to her that anyone they might come across would probably be a lizard. On the volcano planet, the lizards only inhabited the outpost, but this could be the Jurou Biljana home world for all she knew.

Fuck!

She stood from the riverbank and turned to find Scala, only he was standing right behind her, not a few yards away.

“Oh!” She barely managed to stop before slamming into him. Her eyes focused on the middle of Scala's chest, then she tipped her head all the way back to see his face.

Shit, he's quiet. The man needed a bell.

She blinked up at him, trying to shake off the surprise. With Scala standing imposingly close, his primitive demeanor and intense stare sent a shiver coursing through her. Being naked didn't help. His shell was absent where her breasts pressed against him, revealing the stacked muscles of his abdomen. She was painfully aware of how little it would take to expose other parts of his daunting anatomy. The exotic man made her nervous and needy at the same time.

God, this is not the time to be thinking like this!

“Time to go again already?” She took a step back, while shoving aside the physical response she was having to him.

The idea of Scala scooping her up and being cradled against his chest was suddenly way too distracting. His shell would recede over those pecs and she'd be tempted to touch

them, which just felt wrong at the moment. Maybe she could delay him.

“Food.” Scala thumped his chest then gestured to the thicket of trees spreading out along the river. “Food,” he repeated.

“You’re going to go hunt food?” she asked.

Scala grunted and nodded. He then reached out and poked her breast.

“Hey!” She staggered back a little and rubbed her boob. He hadn’t tried to hurt her but the man had no clue how strong he was. “What?” her voice softened, wondering what he was trying to communicate.

Scala’s brow furrowed at her and he tapped the shell covering his pec, before poking her breast again while pointedly staring at her. She frowned back at him, still not understanding.

“Danger.” He rapped his knuckles harder against his armored chest.

Her eyes widened in understanding.

“I don’t have a shell.” She poked her soft boob and shook her head. “I’m human.”

She could try to explain her combat shell was broken, but it would probably go over his head.

Scala’s scowl deepened as he stared at her, like he was still waiting for her shell to slide in place. After a moment he huffed then thoughtfully scanned the bank.

What is he looking for? Again, she wished he had more than a five-word vocabulary.

Ava gasped when Scala abruptly gripped her waist, lifted her over his head and plunked her on a tree branch.

“Uh.” She quickly grabbed a nearby limb to steady herself as Scala released her. “I guess this is one way to keep me out of danger since I don’t have a shell.”

Instinctively he was trying to keep her safe, but this was awkward. She felt a little like a china doll put on a shelf.

“Food.” Scala patted himself then headed into the growth of trees before she could object.

“Be safe,” she worriedly called after him.

Ava glanced down. The branch was easily eight feet off the ground, guaranteeing she’d break her ankle if she jumped.

“Dammit,” she cursed, not liking that Scala just struck out on his own. “Don’t get lost. Fuck!”

She looked skyward in a silent prayer then her gaze shifted to the canopy. The trees were like umbrellas, the dome of growth offering shade. Amidst the greenery she spotted a creature flitting from twig to twig. It reminded her of a scaly bird as it chirped at her then scurried into the depth of the foliage.

“Sorry if I invaded your home. I didn’t put myself here, so please don’t attack me.”

Something told her it wasn’t the little critters above she had to worry about as she panned the ground below. They may not have come across anything yet, but lush vegetation around a stream was bound to attract wildlife, especially with how barren the landscape was beyond the water’s reach.

“Ugh.” She groaned, hating that she was naked in a tree with god knows what lurking below.

Ava continued studying the strange new world as she anxiously waited for Scala to return. The occasional fly would dive bomb her and she'd bat it away, unsure if the alien bug stung or not. Her ass eventually got sore. Gingerly, she scooted closer to the trunk, trying not to scrape her lady bits on the bark. She clasped the body of the tree when she reached it, leaning to the side, taking some of the pressure off her butt. Through a break in the leaves, there was a good view of the rolling sunbaked earth beyond the river. Her brow furrowed and she blinked, spotting a figure coming over the rocky ridge.

How did Scala get there?

She glanced back toward the thicket where he disappeared, wondering if he'd made a large circle. The figure continued to approach and she pulled in a sharp breath realizing the silhouette was all wrong.

It's not Scala. The figure wasn't nearly broad enough and there were no spikes on their arms or legs.

She hugged the trunk tighter and remained quiet, watching the person. As they came closer, she squinted, trying to see past the glare from the sun.

Is that a tail? Is this one of the Jurou Biljana from the outpost?

What would she do if it was one of the lizards? *Pray that they don't spot me or find Scala.* What else could she do, naked and stuck in a tree?

But why are they coming directly here? How do they know where we are?

Her mouth dropped open when the figure became clear, stepping between some overgrown grass.

"Human," she whispered, utterly stunned.

Scala

Scala stalked through the underbrush, following the flightless avian. The *perdix* paused at the water's edge. He did the same, waiting for the avian to dip its head toward the water then lunged. The *perdix* screeched, its wings beating the air in an attempt to flee. His fingers encircled its long neck and shook, quickly ending the fight.

His brow furrowed as he held up the avian. The *perdix* was fat, but would it be big enough to feed his female?

“More.” He should catch more.

Scala hunkered down on the bank, split the avian open with a claw and quickly gutted the *perdix*. After a good rinse of his hands and the carcass, he rose to take in his surroundings. There was something familiar about this place, the creatures, and scents, though he wasn't sure how. A memory of a trip as a youth surfaced but it was hazy. It was hard to think past the task at hand. The only thing he knew for sure was that he needed to catch game to feed his female and quickly get back to her. She was entirely vulnerable and it set his teeth on edge.

With a huff, Scala continued down the game trail that followed the river. He kept a wary eye out for more *perdix* along with the enemy.

The wind shifted and the scent of a *tigora* had him freezing. He swung his gaze and spotted the leathery beast hiding in the reedy grass. Its head lowered, the long tusks nearly brushing the ground, readying for a charge. Scala stayed rooted to the spot, not a muscle twitching as he stared down the *tigora*.

It is going to kill the creature, something said in the back of his mind.

Was he going to kill the *tigora*? That was a good question. He was capable of it. The beast was large, standing waist high, its tusks and claws lethal, but he could take it. *Tigora* were territorial, and currently he and his female occupied the beast's domain. That was a problem, considering there was something wrong with his female's shell. He would wait for the *tigora* to charge, grab one tusk, swing its head to the side and stab it in the neck with his arm barbs. As he settled on the plan three small sets of eyes peered out from the grass beneath the beast.

“Young!” The *tigora* was protecting its young.

The moment his gaze landed on the young the beast bellowed and charged. In a split-second decision he'd probably regret, Scala turned and darted across the river, rather than attack. A *tigora* protecting young was a very different challenge, they were infinitely more dangerous. Except it was the idea of a female guarding her young that gave him pause, hitting close to home. He had no desire to orphan any little beasts today. With the *perdix* slung over his shoulder, Scala took off to retrieve his female. They needed to get out of the *tigora's* territory.

Ava

What in the fuck?! What is a human doing out here?

Ava frowned in confusion as the blond man continued scanning the riverbank. He didn't seem to see her hiding up in the tree, but he was still heading right for her. A dozen thoughts cascaded through her head. Were there human captives at this outpost, too? Did the lizards send this guy to recapture them?

“Greetings,” the man called out, coming closer.

Maybe we were injected with trackers! That would explain how he found us.

The man stopped at the base of the tree then looked up, instantly spotting her. She was again reminded that she was naked as the day she was born, and leaned into the tree to shield her bare breasts, but the man didn't seem to notice.

“Greetings,” he repeated.

“Hello.” She searched his red and gray jumpsuit for weapons. There didn't appear to be any, but she also didn't see any stains or tears in the fabric. That was odd for a captive.

“I am here to give you aid. Follow.” The man gestured and started to back away.

“Seriously?” Her brow furrowed. Maybe years of captivity made her horribly untrusting but this felt off. “Who are you? Where did you come from?”

“I've come to assist you,” he replied.

“Are you with Scala's people?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Oh, thank god.” She blew out a sigh of relief. Scala’s people learned about the crash and were searching for them.

“Come.” The man continued to move away.

“Wait.” She waved to him. “Scala went to find us food. He’ll be back and then we can go.”

“Unfortunately, we must go now,” the man insisted.

“Are the Jurou Biljana coming?” she asked, a shot of fear coursing through her as she quickly searched the landscape.

“Yes. Follow.” The man again impatiently gestured the way he came.

“Shit!” She tried to not panic, but her worry was mostly for Scala. “Look, I’m sort of trapped up here, but even if I wasn’t I wouldn’t leave Scala behind.”

If this guy was sent by Scala’s people it didn’t make sense they’d leave before he got back.

Unless the danger is close and someone else is finding him.

She was about to ask but the man was already heading through the trees.

“What the fuck!” she mumbled in disbelief.

Her gaze darted to the ground, again debating if she could make the leap to go after him, but something halted her. The man was too strange. She had a sinking feeling her first suspicion was true, the Jurou Biljana had sent him.

Fuck!

Ava leaned around the trunk trying to spot where the man went, but wasn’t able to spot him. The sudden rustling brush

behind her sounded loud and felt like it was right at her back.

“Oh!” Ava squealed and her head swiveled, certain she’d find the Jurou Biljana descending on her. “Thank god!” she cried, seeing Scala emerging from the brush.

“Danger!” he roared.

She nodded in agreement and reached out to him as he stormed toward the tree. Scala plucked her off the branch, tossed her over his shoulder, and took off running.

THIRTEEN



SANCTUARY

Thorac

“What is it that you need?” Payim asked, entering the control room with Elena by his side.

Thorac stopped pacing. “Good, you’re all here.” He panned from Payim and Elena to Faktil and Cartil.

“What is wrong?” Cartil asked. The old physician knew him too well.

“Scala and Ava’s vessel went missing. We were tracking it, but lost the signal,” he explained.

“Oh no!” Elena looked worriedly up at her red-skinned mate.

“I shouldn’t have let them go alone.” Thorac shook his head.

“Why? Scala is First Commander. He was more than capable,” Cartil pressed.

“Ava is Scala’s weakness.” Thorac tossed up his hands. “I learned of it right before they left. He was clearly distracted and something has now happened.”

“Ah. I understand.” Cartil grimly nodded.

There was no judgment in Cartil’s eyes but Thorac still felt guilty for not stopping Scala.

“You gathered us for a reason. What can we do?” Payim asked.

Thorac straightened, remembering his duty. It was hard facing that he’d just lost a good friend, a loss that might not have happened if he’d chosen differently. Unfortunately, his

feelings and wishes didn't matter. It was now his job to complete the mission.

"I did." He nodded to Payim. "We know Scala's last location but also his trajectory. I am taking a cruiser to see what happened and give the fleet a heading to follow. Cartil, as the ranking paladin aboard, I need you to take control of the frigate. Payim," Thorac turned to the Cadi warrior, "you are the best pilot on board, please aid Cartil."

He trusted the pair to get the frigate currently filled beyond capacity with humans to safety.

"It's an honor. We'll take care of the ship." Payim bowed.

"Aye." Cartil nodded.

"Thank you." Thorac smiled in appreciation. "Under the authority of the Osivoire Nation, I convey the title of co-captain on you both."

"And me?" Faktil asked.

"I need you to join me to see if we can salvage this mess," Thorac replied.

"Let's go!" Faktil's tail eagerly thumped the floor.

Ava

Scala eventually paused to shift her off his shoulder, but then he was running again. He continued with the punishing pace even as the landscape turned into a forest and the sun dipped low on the horizon. They rounded a bend in the river and Ava gasped. Nestled amidst the break in the trees was a stepped temple that looked like it had been plucked from Central America.

Scala slowed and started sniffing the air as he cautiously approached the ruin. Her gaze went to the small plume of smoke drifting up from the ancient building. She followed it to the stone pit in the middle of the second tier, just in front of a massive arched entrance.

“There’s a fire.” She pointed. Someone had obviously set it.

Scala grunted in acknowledgment and they both warily looked around. After a minute he proceeded toward the rocky stairs running up the middle of the temple.

“You think it’s safe?” she nervously asked as he headed up to the second tier.

Ava held her breath, expecting someone to burst out of the shadowy entrance leading into the temple, but no one was lying in wait for them. Scala paused at the firepit and nodded in approval. There wasn’t a campfire in the pit, just a central flame that looked like it was fed by a gas line.

I guess it would make sense that a temple would have a perpetual flame burning out front. Still, it was peculiar. This

place seemed like it was in the middle of nowhere, but perhaps whoever inhabited the planet made pilgrimages to the temple.

Scala set her down and dropped the bird he'd caught on one of the stone benches encircling the firepit. She held back when he went to the massive archway.

"Be careful," she urged as he disappeared into the shadows.

After a moment there was a groan as rock moved against rock. Curious, though still worried, she hesitantly followed, and was surprised to see Scala pushing open a large stone door. Scala stepped into the darkened interior then quickly returned to the portico. He walked past her holding a pottery bowl. Her brow furrowed in confusion as he dipped the bowl into the firepit. When he stood again there was a flame dancing up from the ceramic vessel.

"Oh. It's a lamp." She nodded in understanding.

Scala smiled, grabbed her hand and led her into the temple. The flickering glow from the ceramic lamp cast light on the lone room with a vaulted ceiling. Geometric patterns were carved into the rock, decorating the walls. Four massive altars took up the bulk of the room.

That's not creepy at all. She grimaced, wondering what horrible sacrifices occurred on the disturbing platforms, then forced her gaze elsewhere.

Notched into the nearby wall were shelves laden with supplies. Seemingly right at home and not the least bit concerned, Scala grabbed a blanket off the shelves and passed it to her.

"Thanks." She gave it a sniff and was pleased to find it wasn't musty.

Scala nodded as she unfurled it and wrapped it around her. She wasn't cold, but it would be good to cover herself to protect her from getting any more sun. Scala then fetched a pitcher, a platter, and a knife.

“What is this place?”

“Sanctuary,” Scala replied, depositing the lamp back on its ledge by the door before they returned to the firepit.

Well, I got that. But what kind of sanctuary? This place conveniently had all the supplies they needed to camp out. Hopefully no one would take offense to them raiding the place.

Scala patted one of the stone benches and she sat. He went to the wood pile near the temple wall and grabbed some logs.

“Oh. Let me help.” She stood.

Scala grunted and made a gesture for her to stay, before finishing loading his arms.

“Okay.” She sat back down. She shouldn't have been surprised he didn't want her help after the way he coddled her all day.

Her man might not be very vocal, but he did know how to build a fire. He quickly had it roaring.

“So, I guess we're staying here for a bit,” she commented, adjusting the blanket around her.

Scala nodded as he stood up from the fire. He grabbed the pitcher and headed down the steps of the temple. Her gaze followed him to the water's edge where he filled the pitcher. Scala's stance was more relaxed than he'd been all day. Hopefully his instincts were right and they were in the clear.

She looked upriver, the way they came, praying they'd put enough distance between them and the Jurou Biljana outpost. She thought they had last time, but then the weird guy found her in the tree.

"We're going to be okay. We're going to be okay," she quietly repeated in an attempt to manifest what she wanted to happen.

Scala returned and set the water pitcher next to her with a slight grunt and a tilt of his jaw, indicating to drink.

"I'm good for now. Thanks." She smiled at him.

Scala proceeded to butcher the bird on the far side of the bench. He didn't bother to pluck it as he cut off its legs, wings, and quartered the body. Then he skewered several pieces on one of the long sticks he brought to the pit. Scala scooted close and extended the stick to her, pointing toward the fire.

"You want me to cook it? Sure. I can do that." She took the stick from him and held it over the flames, glad to have a job. "This isn't so different from cooking hotdogs at camp." She smiled at him.

Scala returned the smile and made another stick of skewered meat then joined her. She was surprised to see that the fire made quick work of the bird's feathers. She rotated her stick, making sure to singe off all the yellow plumes. Soon the skin was crisping up and the bird was giving off a delicious smell. Her stomach growled in response.

"Food," Scala grunted with a grin, one of his fingers gently poking her noisy belly.

"Yeah. I guess I am hungry," she chuckled.

"Hungry." He nodded in agreement.

Before long, the bird was done and he took the skewer from her. Scala cleaned the knife in the flames and cut the bird into smaller pieces. That done, he jabbed the heaping platter at her. The gesture appeared brusque, but all his motions had that rough, insistent quality.

“For me?” Her eyes widened and she took the outstretched platter.

He grunted, putting his hand to his mouth, gesturing for her to eat, but he didn't make an attempt to grab a piece for himself. His expression was encouraging, his gaze going from her face to the heaping platter of alien chicken. She smiled softly at her sweet man. He wasn't at his best, yet he was taking care of her, the way he had all day. If she didn't know how he felt about her before, she certainly did now.

“I won't be able to eat all this.” And there was no way she'd let him go hungry even if she could eat it all. This is where she drew the line with his doting.

Ava grabbed both of the legs, handing him one. She had to practically shove it in his hand, before he accepted with a grunt. She took a bite and was pleased to discover it did taste a lot like chicken.

“It's good,” she mumbled over her mouthful, nodding at him.

Scala grinned and sank his teeth into the leg she'd given him, making satisfied noises as he ate. Happy he was eating, she finished her piece embarrassingly fast and looked up to see Scala was already done with his. He'd been watching her with a pleased expression, clearly unconcerned by her piss poor table manners. With an embarrassed laugh, she wiped her greasy mouth with the back of her hand.

“Heh.” Scala gestured to the platter.

She took another piece, expecting him to do the same, but he didn't.

This again? She snorted.

“Here.” She grabbed a section of the breast and held it up to him.

Scala captured her hand. His red eyes were filled with adoration as he lowered her hand back to the platter. The sentiment remained as he shook his head, and lightly squeezed, forcing her to release the piece of meat she'd tried to give him.

“You want me to eat first, huh?” It was apparently very important to him. Maybe this was a custom among his people or maybe he was just too damn sweet.

Scala nodded, then without breaking eye contact he lifted her fingers to his lips and sucked two of them into his mouth. She pulled in a breath and nearly dropped the piece of meat in her other hand. His gaze turned heated as his tongue circled her digits, then dipped between them, catching any lingering juices. The sensual act was reminiscent of other things he'd done to her with that wicked tongue. She couldn't suppress the blush that heated her cheeks. Even the tips of her ears got warm. This was quite the thank you for her attempt to share.

When Scala released her hand, food was the farthest thing from her mind, but she managed to eat the piece of meat she'd taken. It was distracting with the way Scala watched her, his rapt gaze hungry, though seemingly not for food.

“I'm full.” Ava cast Scala a demure smile and pushed the platter toward him once she'd finished the second piece.

His eyes widened at how much was left, looking comically large. He shook his head, pushing the platter back toward her.

“No. I told you I can’t eat that much.” She shook her head more vigorously, again pushing the plate his way.

He eyed her dubiously, one bony brow arched.

“I’m full.” A smile tickled her lips, enjoying this little game.

Scala sighed with an incredulous shake of his head and proceeded to finish the rest of the meal, which took no time at all considering how huge he was. The moment they were done, Scala stood with the dirty platter and grabbed the knife. He gestured toward the river.

“Oh. I can help refill this.” She grabbed the pitcher and followed him down the temple steps to the river’s edge.

As Scala started rinsing the dishes she quickly set the pitcher on a rock and snuck behind a nearby tree, taking the opportunity to do her business. She had the blanket hiked up and was mid squat, when a shadow fell across her. Her gaze shot up to find Scala with his head cocked to one side, curiously staring at her.

Jesus, he’s quiet!

He turned and stared at the ground where she’d been aimlessly gazing, obviously thinking there must be something there worth her attention.

No, just trying to pee.

“I need a minute.” She waved her hands, attempting to shoo him off.

“Danger.” Scala grimaced. He then brought his hand level with his chest while pointedly looking at her. “Danger.” He

then waved at the woods.

“Are you trying to tell me it’s dangerous for me since I’m so small?”

His grunt and the slight eyeroll could’ve been translated into, “obviously, woman.”

“Okay.” She tried not to laugh, because she really did need to pee.

Scala grabbed her wrist and escorted her back to the river. He probably had a point. She had absolutely zero survival skills.

I suppose I’ll figure out some other way to take care of my business. Since it was clear she wasn’t going to get any privacy. Her gaze landed on the water.

Ava tossed her blanket over a nearby bush and waded into the river. She made sure she was downstream from where Scala continued washing the dishes before she relaxed.

Oh, thank God! She sighed in relief, emptying her bladder.

Her business done, she moved to what she hoped was a cleaner section and rinsed off the salty sweat from her skin. She was scooping up another handful of water when Scala approached.

“I figured I’d get clean before bed.” She glanced toward the sun now kissing the horizon.

Scala got down on his knees in front of her, bringing him a little closer to her height. Again, he wore an expression that was a mix of intrigue, affection, and desire as he also rinsed off his shell. His intense appraisal and the way he didn’t bother to guard or temper his emotions was unnerving. She wasn’t

used to being cosseted or cared for, much less looked at like the world revolved around her.

“Thank you for everything.” She averted her gaze. “Dinner was great.” She trailed her hand in the water.

She had fully expected them to be hungry, sleeping on the bare ground if they hadn’t already been captured yet. This was a big improvement and Scala was responsible for all of it.

Scala hooked an arm around her back and reeled her in. His other hand smoothed the water down her chest then cupped her left breast, testing the weight of it. The cool water already had her nipples standing at attention, but they pebbled further as he drew his thumb across her areola. She wanted him, except it felt wrong given his current condition.

“Maybe we should get some rest.” She tried to pull away.

Scala’s hand coiled in her hair, gripping it at the base of her neck, halting her retreat and forcing her to look up at him. Goosebumps broke out all over, wondering if a part of him recalled what she’d said about pulling her hair. His face dipped down, getting a breath from hers.

“Hungry,” he demanded.

The deep, sultry tone made her toes curl all by itself, but his free hand also drifted down her stomach and beneath the water to cup her crotch.

“Oh.” She let out a stuttering breath. There was no doubt what he was hungry for, and he wasn’t taking no for an answer.

Her heartbeat picked up when warm fingers dipped between her labia. In his gaze she saw the host of tawdry acts they’d already committed and the promise of those yet to come. Ava licked her lips in anticipation, and the heat flared in

Scala's eyes. Before she could pull in a breath or brace herself, his hand tightened in her hair, and his lips slammed against hers. The kiss was instantly searing, his talented tongue spearing into her mouth.

Scala's fingers drove into her already slick pussy. He wasted no time fucking her fast and deep while his palm ground against her clit. She shuddered from the pleasure, gasping into his mouth, another flood of desire squeezing from her core. Scala growled, his kiss more demanding, as his fingers slid to her ass. Three fingers pressed into the puckered opening, stretching the resistant ring of muscles the deeper they delved. Scala's palm continued to rub her swollen clit, sending waves of pleasure coursing through her, while repeatedly plunging into her ass.

"Oh fuck!" she cried against his mouth when the orgasm struck, her knees buckling.

Scala quickly released her hair and caught her before she fell. The world shifted when he swung her over his broad shoulder and stalked out of the river. The brutish move and her lingering orgasm had her panting while he swiftly mounted the steps. His large palm massaged her ass as he bypassed the firepit, taking her directly into the temple. The large room spun when he tipped her off his shoulder, depositing her onto one of the altars. It was a surprise to discover the surface was padded. The large platforms were beds not altars, though she still felt like she was about to be sacrificed.

The flickering light from the oil lamp cast shadows, making Scala's silhouette appear even larger as he loomed over her. He gripped her ankles, splayed her legs wide then dove for her pussy.

“Scala!” she gasped when his tongue plunged into her still quaking vagina.

Her pussy instantly spasmed, clamping down on the strong, thick tongue that started undulating inside her, while his nose ground against her clit. The man was the master of oral.

“Fuck,” she groaned, her back arching, the orgasm reigniting and ratcheting to a ten. Desire squeezed from her needy core with nearly painful spasms.

“Mm,” Scala groaned, making disturbingly sexy, feral noises as he feasted on her.

“Oh god!” She tried to shove his face away, desperate for just a tiny reprieve. He was going to kill her with that wicked mouth.

Scala growled and gripped her wrists in one hand, trapping them between her breasts, his intense glowing eyes pinning her. She stilled. Scala wasn't entirely himself, more animal than man, vibrating with barely restrained power. It was equally exciting and frightening.

His thumb found her slick swollen clit and started strumming the bundle of nerves, then his tongue shifted lower.

“No!” she gasped in shock when his tongue breached her ass.

It was one thing to play with her rear but a whole other thing to tongue fuck it. Her cheeks grew hotter. The sensation was so foreign and nothing like his fingers. This was less of a demanding pressure, more coaxing, as he burrowed deeper, hitting untried nerves.

No, no, no.

She didn't want to like the taboo act and yet with each panted breath and hungry stroke of his tongue, she found herself falling further down the rabbit hole. It didn't help that he also tormented her clit.

Ava jerked when the second orgasm slammed into her. Scala snarled, his tongue vibrating as he frantically fucked her ass, while pinching her clit. The climax twisted, lashing her harder.

Scala released her wrists and pulled free of her legs clamped around his head. His hand slid from her clit, swiping through the desire flowing out of her spasming pussy. He smoothed the slick hand down the stacked muscles of his abdomen. She licked her lips as his shell disappeared in the wake of her hormone laden release, enraptured by the exotic strip tease.

The man's a god. Her breath hitched when his cocks sprang free.

He fistfisted his cocks and pressed the engorged crowns against both her entrances. Instead of pushing forward he continued to stroke himself, coating his arousals in her desire. The heat of them and the subtle jerking throb had her muscles quivering around the broad tips. Savage male lust was etched on Scala's face as he stared down at her sex. Her heart raced at the erotic picture it painted. She felt worshiped and it was a heady sensation. She nearly came again when his cocks spurt, his stunning stomach muscles flexing while the warm viscous precum filled her holes.

Scala clasped her inner thighs, shoving them wider, while his crowns pressed harder against the mouth of her pussy and constricted ass. She panted, knowing what was coming.

“Oh god,” she murmured, then bit her lips, trying to brace herself. Scala had given her a reprieve during their last encounter. This time he’d take his pleasure.

Abruptly Scala’s grip went lax and he staggered.

“Scala!” she screamed when he slumped to the floor.

FOURTEEN



THE DREMIN

Ava

“Oh god, *oh god, oh god!*” Ava scrambled off the platform bed and crouched beside Scala on the floor. “Please, baby, wake up!” She shook his shoulders, tears springing to her eyes.

He refused to open his eyes or make a noise. His shell didn’t even slide reflexively back into place to protect him. Something was very wrong with Scala. Whatever had been done to him was finally catching up.

“Help!” she wailed, frantically stroking his cheeks.

“Resume the symbiosis,” a voice said, eerily reminiscent of the lizards in the outpost.

She startled, not truly expecting to be heard or answered.

“Whoever you are, please, we need help,” she pleaded, looking around the temple for the source. The place looked primitive, but perhaps there was some emergency communication system.

Her eyes widened when the light flared in the temple and it suddenly looked like the living room of her dad’s house.

“What the fuck is going on?” she gasped, clutching Scala’s shoulders.

“The flesh-bearer is in distress. You must resume the symbiosis,” a female paramedic said to her companion as they entered the living room.

The pair were familiar along with the setting and she had a flashback to the night her dad had a heart attack. Her fear for Scala was equal to that terrible night.

“It is destructive. It was about to enact harm to this smaller one, like it did to the flightless feathered being.” The male paramedic waved from Scala to her.

“Take my assurance this pair is different to the others we have engaged. The large one will cease function if you don’t resume symbiosis,” the woman insisted.

Ava was beyond confused and terrified, but it did sink in that they were debating about helping, at least that’s what she hoped. It didn’t matter what was going on or who they were if they could help.

“Please, please, help Scala,” she begged, her hands clasping together in supplication to the man scowling at them.

The man studied her for what felt like forever. She didn’t look away or attempt to hide her tears and fear for Scala. Finally, the paramedic looked at the woman and gave a curt nod. She cried out in relief as the pair loaded Scala onto their gurney. She followed them outside, clutching his arm. She was so focused on Scala, she almost didn’t notice that the river oasis had turned into the cul-de-sac back home with an ambulance waiting. As they neared the flashing vehicle, Scala, the paramedics, and even the ambulance abruptly vanished.

“No!” she screamed, dropping into the grass.

“Resume your calm,” the voice of the woman echoed. “My companion is completing the symbiosis with your companion.”

“I don’t know what’s going on.” She looked around, not finding the woman. “Please just take me to wherever Scala is.”

“The simulation is no longer aiding. Do not grow distressed,” the disembodied voice stated.

“Don’t grow distressed?” she was in the middle of saying, when everything started to waver.

The cul-de-sac and houses melted, like some strange picture filter morphing in front of her eyes. The familiar landscape was replaced by barren, red mountain peaks, and a hazy, yellow sky overhead. Instead of standing, she was lying, the unforgiving rocky ground digging into her back. In her periphery was tattered wreckage from the Jurou Biljana cruiser, though she couldn’t see where the rest of the ship was.

We’re still on the planet where we crashed. She pulled in a sharp breath, her heart speeding up, as she turned her head to look for Scala.

“Maintain calm,” the voice said.

At the same time the weight on her chest registered and she saw her sweet, precious man sprawled over her. He was still unconscious, but he was here, and his body looked normal, the giant spikes now back to their normal size. Her panic eased slightly.

“We are providing aid. You will not cease function. Be calm,” the odd voice attempted to soothe.

“I hear your voice but where are you? What is happening?” she demanded, trying to maintain calm as the voice insisted.

Something brushed her outstretched arm and her gaze swiveled that way. Her eyes widened, finding a wispy vine wrapped around her forearm. It was reminiscent of a large feather, with hundreds of small tendrils branching off the central shaft, but looked like it was made of sand. Her gaze followed the small tendrils undulating along her arm, and saw that the tips were embedded in her skin.

“What are you doing?” She tried to tug her arm away but it wouldn’t budge.

“Do not attempt to break the symbiosis. Flesh-bearers aren’t adapted for this environment. The others ceased to function,” the voice informed her.

She stilled, her gaze shifting to the strange Mars-like landscape, realizing that like Mars she probably couldn’t breathe on this planet.

Okay, it’s somehow keeping me alive.

The idea that some strange alien was infecting her was creepy as shit, but she’d have to cope if she wanted to live.

I should count myself damn lucky something came along to help. Except that fact was taking time to process and accept. What was this thing latched to her arm that spoke with an eerie disembodied voice?

She followed the feathery appendage back to its source, a strange yellow bubble or nucleus with over a dozen more wispy tentacles branching out from it. The creature looked a bit like a fried egg sitting on the red gravel, or some alien terrestrial octopus, except it was made of crystal, though not brittle like she’d expect.

A silica creature. That seemed to be the best description.

Suddenly the moniker ‘flesh-bearer’ made sense. Compared to this creature, she was a flesh-bearer.

“Lucky,” the being said. “The concept hints at statistical improbability. That is not accurate. I was in the vessel that brought you to this planet.”

It read my mind. That added another disconcerting level to this mind fuck of changing scenery and physical alterations.

“You made all those images happen, didn’t you?” she blurted, realizing the being could do more than read her mind.

“The simulation? Correct. I derived that being in a familiar setting would bring you calm. I was incorrect.”

Being back at the outpost then running for their lives certainly wasn’t calming, and neither was having her mind read to recreate her parents’ old house on one of the worst nights of her life.

“Wait. The planet with the river wasn’t familiar at all,” she countered, trying to understand this obviously sentient but oh so foreign being.

“Those images were derived from your companion’s memories before their status deteriorated.”

This thing can tap into memories and make them seem real. The notion was staggering, but then she latched onto the last comment.

“Scala will be okay, right?” Her gaze spun to Scala, finding another silica being latched onto his back. “Your friend is helping him, right?”

“Yes. It will take some time. I was willing to aid you. My companion was unwilling, and required coercion. Flesh-bearers are deemed destructive and a blight, however, I took notice that there are variations among you flesh-bearers. That requires more observation. I brought you here to relay this development. I underestimated how fragile you are and you were damaged on arrival. So, I chose to aid you, however, I required assistance for your companion, the one you designate Scala.”

Most of what was said sounded freaky as hell, like they were now the subjects of some strange experiment, but the

important part was that the silica beings were helping Scala. Her unencumbered hand went to his head and started stroking him.

“Thank you,” she sobbed. They’d deal with everything else after he was better.

Scala

Ava's sweet voice and the sensation of her small hand gently stroking his back roused him. He relaxed, loving the cushion of her breasts and the steady, lulling sound of her heartbeat. Then he realized he was draped over and undoubtedly crushing her.

"Oh, stay where you are, handsome." Ava's hand tightened on him when he tried to pull away.

He turned his face from her breasts and focused his bleary eyes on her face.

"Hi," she smiled with tears leaking from the corners of her eyes.

Suddenly the crash came flooding back, along with strange memories of escaping the Jurou Biljana outpost followed by a hunting trek from his youth. Except it was different, Ava was with him rather than his patrem. That must have been a dream, but this wasn't, it better not be.

"Weakness," he rasped the endearment, his throat tight as relief filled him at seeing her conscious. He thought surely he'd lost her.

It registered that Ava's combat shell was down, and horror filled him as his gaze shot to the landscape beyond her. They crashed on a beta class planet, devoid of vegetation or any life. There was nothing but red rock. Did it even have an atmosphere?

"Not devoid of life, supercilious flesh-bearer," a voice said, interrupting his mounting panic.

Scala growled and tried to lift off Ava, ready to attack. He hadn't realized someone else was here.

"Scala, stop." Ava clasped his neck tighter, halting him. "I heard that comment and it wasn't entirely nice. Am I supposed to hear your companion?" she asked, but clearly was no longer talking to him.

"We are in contact, making it possible," came the reply from a different gentler voice, though it was still very monotone. "My companion is offended as we are the life on this planet."

"I understand," Ava calmly replied. "Scala."

He focused on her face, trying to comprehend what was happening.

"Scala, we're being helped by beings from this planet," Ava said, giving him a reassuring smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

He glanced around but saw no one.

"I performed the symbiosis on you, because your small companion is not destructive and is different according to my companion," the terse voice said to him, which was disconcerting since he couldn't find the speaker.

Performed the symbiosis on me? Because of Ava? What?!
Scala's face contorted, feeling utterly lost.

"And I appreciate it, thank you," Ava replied to the invisible speaker. "Can we come up with names? Scala and I are not like you and this conversation is becoming confusing."

"Designations," the gentle voice said thoughtfully.

"Yes. A name can be anything that you enjoy," Ava added.

Scala blinked at the surreal conversation.

“I have found my travels rewarding,” the gentle one replied.

“Traveler has a nice ring.” Ava smiled.

“I will refer to the large flesh-bearer as Destructive,” the aggressive voice interjected.

“He was destructive to protect me, and his name is Scala.” Ava scowled.

His heart warmed at the way his mate defended him. He’d clearly angered one of the entities claiming to help them.

“Choose a designation,” the more agreeable being, Traveler, insisted.

“My name is Ava. It means life,” Ava shared, in an attempt to get the truculent being to cooperate.

It was an appropriate name, because she was most definitely his life and reason for being.

“Consider it an experiment,” Traveler added when the other being didn’t reply.

“How about Mercy,” Ava offered. “It means...”

“I comprehend the meaning,” the brusque being interjected. “I will accept the designation,” the voice softened.

It was wise the being amended its attitude. Scala didn’t care how he was treated but Ava was a different matter.

“Wonderful. Thank you for trying this,” Ava sighed in appreciation.

Hearing the name, it sank in that Ava somehow managed to earn him mercy from these beings. She’d saved her fellow

captives and now she'd saved his shell as well. She was utterly amazing and more than he deserved.

“Weakness, what have I missed?” he asked, still very confused. He needed to get up to speed fast if he was going to be of any use.

Ava gave him an understanding nod and a sympathetic smile. “Traveler was on the cruiser and brought us here. Traveler believes we are different from other flesh-bearing races and is curious about us. Crashing and hurting us was unintentional. Traveler formed a sort of connection with me, helping me survive.” Her gaze darted to her outstretched arm.

Scala followed her gaze and stilled. *The Dremin security system!*

That's what the thing was, there was no mistaking it, though the Dremin was no longer embedded in the cruiser. From the bulbous central mass, he followed a tentacle covered in cilia to where it entwined with Ava's arm. Alarm made his heart beat faster as he noticed hundreds of the veiny tendrils were piercing her skin, working their way through her like it had the cruiser. His breath sped up at the implication. The Dremin was affecting them down to the molecular level, how else were they breathing, hearing voices, and generally not dead? He didn't care what happened to himself, but it was doing things to Ava that may not be reversible.

“It's okay.” Ava's hand stroked his shoulder, drawing his attention to her face. She smiled sweetly.

Could she see that he was spiraling?

No. Well, she probably could see he was losing it, but no, he refused to crack. Scala pulled in a breath. She'd been telling

him the Dremin chose to help. They were alive and whatever it took to make that happen they'd cope with.

“Mercy was a little more reluctant to help you,” Ava gently continued. “Mercy is at your back.”

He felt the weight on his lower right, but he'd thought it was rocky debris.

“Reluctant is apt,” Mercy interjected, despite the altruistic name the being latched to his back was still surly.

“I talked with Traveler while you were out. From what I can gather their kind have only interacted with people like the Jurou Biljana.” Ava grimaced.

“We are distributed mostly among the flesh-bearers with the tails and dermal plates,” Traveler confirmed.

Scala tensed at the implication. “No wonder they don't have a good opinion about flesh-bearers,” he groaned. “Thank you, Mercy, for assisting me. I hope to change your opinion about flesh-bearers,” he conveyed, now that he had a better understanding.

“You committed much destruction in the simulation,” Mercy commented, unwavering by his sincere pledge.

“Mercy, I told you he was protecting me,” Ava sighed, sounding exasperated. “After the crash we were in this shared dream state and you killed the Jurou Biljana,” she explained to him.

He nodded. The images were hazy but he recalled. From the Dremin's perspective the defensive act made him no better than the scaly reptiles.

“Scala did spare the being with progeny in the simulation,” Traveler pointed out to Mercy, sounding smug.

The way it was said, Scala had the strange feeling the incident had been a test.

“True,” Mercy replied, then was quiet.

“When did that happen?” Ava asked.

“I was hunting and came across a *tigora* with young.”

“You’re a softy.” She smiled at him.

His eyes widened at the comment. Her voice and gaze wasn’t derisive. It was the exact opposite. “I don’t believe that phrase translates the same in our languages.”

“You’re hard on the outside, marshmallow cream on the inside.” Ava grinned.

He didn’t know what a marshmallow was, but with that gorgeous grin, he’d agree to anything Ava said.

“This interaction is also different from what I have previously observed,” Traveler piped up, reminding him the Dremin were present.

His and Ava’s relationship probably was very different to anything witnessed while the Dremin were among the reptiles, but that examination would have to wait.

“I will gladly discuss anything you wish, however, can we sit up first, please?” he requested.

“I am getting a little sore on this rocky ground,” Ava agreed.

“Move slowly. I must remain connected to you to maintain the symbiosis,” Mercy instructed, its central mass shifting more to the middle of his lower back.

Gingerly, Scala eased his upper body off Ava’s chest. He was able to ignore the sensation of his own passenger, but

watching Traveler move along Ava's arm then slither onto her back as she sat up was harder to bear.

Please, let her be all right, he prayed. A part of him feared Traveler might suddenly fall, instantly killing Ava, while still worrying if the symbiosis was causing her damage.

"We aren't destructive like your kind. We gave you aid. Traveler has repaired Ava's damaged systems, and I have repaired yours," Mercy's voice echoed, after clearly reading his mind.

"Thank you, truly." Scala didn't want the Dremin to feel like he wasn't appreciative just because he feared what had been done to keep them alive. He also needed to address Mercy's less than favorable view of him. "My relationship with Ava is special. I don't know if I can explain the deep emotions I feel for her. I love her. I care more about what happens to her than to myself. It may not be right, but I'd destroy all of the Jurou Biljana to protect her." He hoped that didn't make Mercy hate him more.

"I love you!" Ava grabbed his hand. "When I thought I lost you..." Ava's words trailed off, and she shook her head as tears fell from her eyes.

He eased her onto his lap and wrapped his arms around her, making sure to not accidentally squeeze Traveler in the process.

"I am here, my weakness. We are both here together." His face burrowed into her neck, pulling in her sweet comforting scent.

"Do you understand now?" Traveler said to Mercy.

"I am beginning to," Mercy replied.

FIFTEEN



TRAVELERS

Scala

“Scala is not just any companion. He is my mate. We pledged to stay together in good times and bad until death shall part us.” Ava smiled wistfully up at him, her love shining in her stormy eyes as she caressed his cheek.

“Even beyond death,” he vowed and brushed his lips against hers.

“I understand the drive to connect with companions,” Traveler commented, killing their moment. “It was good to make a connection with Mercy after so long off world. However, there is an element to your interaction that eludes me.”

Ava tipped her head and he could almost read her thoughts. Was the Dremin asking about love and affection? Was that a concept they understood? Traveler spoke of missing Mercy. That was in some way a reflection of affection.

Scala shook off the questions. The Dremin were a new race and there would be an infinite number of questions to come. First, he needed to secure Ava’s safety.

“I appreciate your curiosity,” Scala said to Traveler. “I am curious about you as well, but I am more concerned with getting Ava safely off this planet. We have needs I don’t believe you do.” He glanced around the barren planet. It lacked food, water, shelter, or anything but rock.

“We have assured that your needs are met,” Mercy dryly replied.

The two Dremin might look synthetic, but they were nothing like artificial intelligence. They also had their own

widely varying personalities despite being indistinguishable. Mercy was best described as hot blooded, which was as intriguing as it was frustrating.

“We are capable of pulling the elements you require from this environment. You can exist here,” Traveler explained.

“We can’t stay here,” Ava insisted. “We were on our way to rescue my brother.”

“And prevent the scaly beings from spreading more destruction,” he added.

“You were following one of the scaly beings’ vessels,” Traveler confirmed. “Brother, that is a genetic association.”

“Yes, and I’m worried my brother is in danger.” Ava’s expression twisted and he rubbed her back comfortingly.

“The scaly beings are known for stealing other beings from their home, selling, killing and forcing those beings to do hard labor,” he tried to explain why it was so important to catch the Jurou Biljana.

Though, I don’t know how we’re going to get off this planet. He grimaced at the mangled bits of the cruiser. *Vasta!*

“The vessel can be fixed,” Mercy commented, yet again reading his thoughts. In this case, he didn’t mind.

“We are able to repair it. I have knowledge of all of the systems,” Traveler confirmed.

“So, you’ll fix the ship?” Ava eagerly asked, excitement entering her eyes.

“We were stolen off our planet. I am intrigued with you, but I would not hold you here. We are not like the scaly flesh-bearers,” Traveler replied.

“Thank you,” Scala let out with a massive sigh, his shoulders easing.

Ava

Scala held her hand as they hiked to the wrecked cruiser. Feeling his fingers entwined with hers brought her comfort, but also made it possible for her to hear anything Mercy, Scala's symbiote, communicated. This whole scenario was so odd. She thought the Jurou Biljana and the Osivoire were as different as you could get from being human, but she was wrong. These beings were infinitely more unique, and not just physically. They had abilities that were downright amazing.

"You keep thinking about Ava's dermis," Mercy said to Scala.

"She is bare and delicate. Her feet probably hurt walking on these rocks." Scala scowled down at her feet.

Now that he mentioned it, her bare feet probably should be hurting. She lifted one and looked at her sole.

"They're fine." She smiled at Scala, relief and love leaping inside her, like they had since he awoke.

Scala was sounding and acting like himself. Their strange new friends had healed him. That wiped away any reticence about being connected to Traveler.

"Your dermis is being protected," Traveler assured her. "The artificial covering you possess has been repaired if you wish to be covered. Most flesh-bearers wear artificial coverings."

"Understood," Mercy replied to the bit of information.

"We wear clothes for protection but also as a custom or preference," she added, knowing they were curious about her and Scala.

“If I engage her shell, will it interfere with your connection?” Scala asked Traveler.

“It will not.”

Scala lifted her wrist and swiped on the combat shell controls. She didn't really feel awkward being naked after all they'd been through, but she didn't object to him engaging the shell. The armor slid into place, and from the appearance of the jumpsuit, he'd selected the setting that mimicked her.

“Thank you, handsome.” She squeezed his hand. His sweet concern would never get old.

Scala smiled and nodded before focusing again on the cruiser up ahead. “My people, the Osivoire, have come across your people before on other Jurou Biljana vessels. We believed you were a new type of fully integrated security system. We named you Dremin, after the sector we first discovered you in,” he explained as they walked.

“We only knew of this world and then a flesh-bearer came and took several of us off world. It was not one of the scaly beings,” Traveler relayed. “We were damaged until we performed the functions demanded of us. We were placed in the scaly beings' vessels. It was distressing, but we also learned what exists beyond our world.”

Her heart went out to Traveler, recognizing the pain she heard in their voice.

“Others, like Traveler, have returned to share what they learned. It was agreed that flesh-bearers are a threat,” Mercy added.

Ava cringed at the summary.

“You were enslaved by some unscrupulous race,” Scala huffed angrily. “When my people traced your origins, we

learned you were being sold at what we consider to be a disreputable auction. Only dangerous races buy technology and slaves from these auctions. You have been exposed to the worst flesh-bearers in the universe.”

“Not everyone is like the Jurou Biljana,” she added. “My people, like yours, haven’t left our planet by our own technology. I was stolen off my world, like you were. Scala saved me. His people are trying to stop the Jurou Biljana from hurting people like you and me.” She needed them to know they were not alone.

“I am piecing together the things you have shared with information I gathered while integrated with the vessel,” Traveler said thoughtfully.

It was vital the Dremin understood that not every humanoid was bad. They had amazing capabilities, and though they had barely traveled off world, once they did, they would be formidable. The last thing she or Scala needed was to make enemies of them.

They walked for several more yards in silence.

“I will return to the outworld and aid you with the scaly beings,” Traveler stated when they finally neared the wrecked cruiser.

She looked in surprise at Scala. He appeared equally stunned. They hadn’t intended to recruit help in their fight.

“That would be helpful. I was hoping you retained the coordinates of the ship we were tracking,” Scala quickly recovered.

Her eyes widened. She hadn’t considered that.

“I can locate the vessel,” Traveler confirmed.

“Oh,” Ava gasped in surprise, seeing movement swarming over the cruiser.

“I conveyed to others that we need aid,” Traveler answered her unspoken question.

She realized that as she focused on the ship. The Dremin looked like hundreds of large starfish swarming a reef as they crawled over the ship hull.

Scala squeezed her hand and she grinned at him. It looked like they really were going to get off the planet to rescue Lucas.

Scala

“They’re quick,” Ava commented in awe as they stood beside the cruiser.

Scala nodded in agreement. One of the Dremmin stroked the edge of the damaged hull, mending a gash. It appeared that the Dremmin were using the fine cilia on their feathery appendages to knit the metal together on a microscopic level. Before the Dremmin sealed the hole shut, another emerged, having fixed the thruster inside.

“You have all of the elements needed readily nearby?” Scala asked while staring in fascination.

“We are scavenging from the components that were scattered during the crash,” Mercy replied.

Scala had noticed that new Dremmin would move in and take over, while the one who’d been working would slither off. He didn’t see them carrying any wreckage.

They must be breaking the scrap down to its bare elements before bringing it.

“Would it be easier on you if I carried some of the cruiser pieces closer?” he asked, wanting to be of some use.

“It would,” Mercy replied.

“I can help, too,” Ava chimed in.

“I need to remain close. I am conveying repair details,” Traveler responded.

Occasionally Dremmin drifted around Ava’s ankles, touching one of Traveler’s outstretched arms.

So that's what they're doing.

“Are you all right with staying here? I think it's safe.” He caressed Ava's cheek.

“I'll be fine.” She nodded.

“I would like to learn more about how Ava was taken,” Traveler added.

“You help and I'll talk with Traveler.” She smiled encouragingly at him.

“Good. Lead the way, Mercy.”

He felt the urge to turn his head and then pictured the route he needed to travel.

“Understood,” Scala said and started walking.

“I am not pleased that Traveler has chosen to leave with you,” Mercy conveyed after he'd walked for a bit.

“Ah.” Scala nodded. “Have you been off world?”

“No. I only know the shared memories of those who have returned,” Mercy replied.

“I was young, still a youth really when I went on my first off world mission for my people. We were tracking a Jurou Biljana slaving ship. When we reached the vessel, the Jurou Biljana had fled. One of my tasks was going through the ship cell by cell to release the prisoners. Sadly, not all of them were alive anymore.” He blanched at the memory. “That was when I decided that I needed to help stop them. Sometimes you experience things that alter your purpose.”

“And Traveler's purpose has changed in their time away,” Mercy seemed to sigh.

They reached a large hunk of salvage and Scala picked it up.

“When I return to my people, I can ask them to protect your world, but that is not a permanent solution. You will still need to learn about the universe beyond your planet, who will aid you, and who will not.” Scala turned, heading back toward the cruiser.

“Traveler is making that sacrifice for us. Am I wrong for believing that it is a task that is too large for one being?”

Mercy’s morose tone had him sympathizing with the Dremmin.

“No. I think you are correct. It has taken thousands of my people traveling the universe to meet and understand a fraction of what is out there. We are still learning, obviously, considering I just met you.”

“Until our people began returning, we did not understand how much we had to learn about off world. You are presenting a kinder version of flesh-bearers than what we had, but that further emphasizes our lack of knowledge. Until you arrived, we hadn’t considered repairing one of the vessels to travel off world. Now, some may try to repair one of the other wrecks or build one...”

Mercy sent a barrage of thoughts that really didn’t translate individually, just a cascade of what-ifs.

“Times change, sometimes faster than we want them to.” Scala nodded in understanding.

Ava

“For a long while I performed the functions in the vessel without conscious effort, hurt by my separation from my kind,” Traveler sighed.

“I understand. You work blindly, while trying to cope with reality. I did that with the Jurou Biljana.” Ava nodded.

“Eventually I began to observe my surroundings. I did not approve of the scaly beings’ violent interactions, but I did enjoy the cosmos and the new worlds I witnessed. When you and Scala boarded my vessel, I experienced the same excited wonder.”

“Ah.” Ava reached down and patted Traveler’s arm, extending down her leg. “I am glad we met, too. You and Scala are the good things that have happened to me. And strangely I can almost say getting abducted wasn’t so bad because of it.”

“Yes. That is a strange paradox, isn’t it?”

They grew quiet and observed the Dremin working on the cruiser, thinking about the things they’d experienced and how similar they truly were. Once upon a time she’d cursed fate, but perhaps there was a deeper purpose for it all.

“Were you the blond man who tried to get me to leave without Scala during the simulation?” she asked after a bit.

“I was curious,” Traveler replied.

“You were testing us,” she chuckled. “I don’t blame you.”

“It is my experience the scaly beings only save themselves. I knew you were different, but Mercy was reluctant to believe

and I was curious.”

The Dremin were hesitant, trying to feel them out, that was understandable.

“Well, I think this is all that I can carry.” Scala returned from another trip, adding several pieces of scrap to the pile by the cruiser.

“That’s good. It’s starting to get dark.” Ava glanced at the sun dipping low on the horizon.

Scala sat down beside her and wrapped his arm around her. “How are you?”

“Good. Eager to get back out there, but good.” She kissed his cheek as she leaned into him.

“Soon, Ava. I feel your concern for your relation.” One of Traveler’s arms rubbed hers, the way she’d comforted them earlier.

Scala squeezed her and she smiled, sucking up the comfort from both of them. She was a little impatient to be reunited with Lucas, but when she did, she wouldn’t be all alone. She’d have Scala with his fleet and now the miraculous Traveler.

Scala

“It is time to test the vessel,” Traveler roused them with the announcement.

Scala smiled at Ava curled up against his chest before he focused on the cruiser. He wasn't sure how long they'd dozed, but the ship was done and it was an exact replica of what it had been before.

“That is very impressive work.” He shook his head in disbelief.

“Wow.” Ava blinked as she sat up.

“How are we testing the cruiser?” Scala asked while helping Ava to her feet.

“Circumnavigating the planet will be sufficient,” Traveler replied.

“And if something is wrong you can bring it down better than the last time?” he probed.

“Valid question,” Mercy interjected.

It was nice not being the subject of the Dremin's snarky attitude for once. Perhaps their conversation had earned him a little more consideration.

“Yes,” Traveler replied in amusement with a hint of exasperation.

“Sounds good.” Ava tugged his hand, pulling him toward the cruiser.

The Dremin who had worked on the ship were all gathered as they reached the short ramp leading up to the hatch. Their

arms with their feathery projections reached out, grazing their ankles. A host of well wishes and farewells transmitted through the brief touch.

“Thank you, all,” Scala said as they boarded the cruiser. “Your kindness won’t be forgotten.”

“Goodbye. Thank you. It was an honor meeting you,” Ava added.

“Mercy, once the test is complete, we will bring you back.” Traveler extended a tentacle and with a simple touch of the hull sealed the door then brought the engines online.

Mercy was quiet, but so were the rest of them as they sat in the pilot seats. The cruiser lifted off the ground and then shot forward. They whipped over the ruddy mountainous region and then over a sandy plain. They weren’t going top speed, but faster than he’d run a test. Ava looked from the viewscreen to him, excitement and anxiety filling her wide gray eyes.

“It was a good take-off and the cruiser is holding. The systems are performing well,” he commented for her benefit and his own, while surveying the readings on the console.

The cruiser traveled higher in the atmosphere and the cabin pressure held. There was a sense of weightlessness before the artificial gravity came online.

“The environmental systems are performing acceptably,” Traveler announced.

“Good,” Scala sighed in relief.

“I’ll never get over that sight.” Ava gazed at the arc of the red planet onscreen.

“It is captivating,” Mercy wistfully agreed.

Scala held Ava's hand and they watched the planet as they orbited. It truly was a sight. The seemingly barren world wasn't their final resting place, thank the goddess, and it held a secret, a fascinating new race. He'd never be able to overlook or underestimate the worlds he came in contact with from here on.

"We will descend now, Mercy." Traveler began to bring the cruiser back into the atmosphere.

"No. Proceed. I have made a choice about my purpose," Mercy solemnly replied.

Scala's eyes widened.

You have decided to go with us? he silently asked his symbiote.

I have. Traveler cannot undertake this journey alone, Mercy replied. *I am also reticent about separating from you. You flesh-bearers are frail. You may need further aid.*

True. Scala smiled.

It seemed he'd gained more than a little consideration; he'd gained a friend.

SIXTEEN



BACK ON TRACK

Ava

“I have adjusted the course to intercept the vessel you seek,” Traveler stated. “We are moving at the top velocity for this vessel.”

“Thank you,” Ava said with a sigh, relief filling her.

“Aye, thank you. I don’t want to lose Vicarius or the Jurou Biljana fleet,” Scala agreed, his gaze raking the ship’s console and appearing pleased by what he saw.

His expertise was appreciated. She had no clue what was normal or not for a spaceship. She smiled, still in awe that he was hers.

While we travel, I have other questions, Traveler stated through their private connection.

Oh, she mentally replied, intrigued.

My question is about your interactions with Scala, Traveler began. *While on this vessel he was repeatedly physically aggressive with you. He embedded himself in you, in a form of rough symbiosis. I gave you an opportunity to leave him and you didn’t. In spite of this treatment, you gravitate toward him with deep feelings. Love you called it. So, I assume there is something I don’t understand about your interaction.*

Ava’s cheeks heated knowing exactly what Traveler was asking about, a furtive gaze darting back to Scala. His eyes widened, then he grinned, clearly reading where her thoughts were.

It’s called sex. It’s meant to reproduce new people, but it’s also very pleasurable, she informed Traveler, while winking at

Scala.

“Traveler, Mercy, I think it’s time we separated. I need alone time with my weakness.” Scala abruptly stood.

She grinned up at him. The Dremin weren’t the only ones capable of sending subliminal messages.

Scala

Does this sudden desire to separate have something to do with sex? Mercy asked so only he could hear.

Very perceptive. Scala was slightly surprised Mercy picked up on that. Apparently, the Dremin *had* been studying them.

No. Traveler and Ava were discussing it. It was private, but Traveler gets energetic and projects things, Mercy admitted.

Really?! He smiled in amusement, wondering how that conversation went. No wonder Ava looked at him with that playful light dancing in her eyes.

You require two individuals for creating progeny? Mercy asked, rather than elaborating on what had been overheard.

“We do. Now, about the separation thing,” he said aloud, hoping to speed things up.

Ava nodded with a flat smile, and he had a feeling she was also getting an earful.

“Patience, flesh-bearer, we’re retracting our ramus,” Mercy countered flatly. “We don’t require another individual to create progeny.”

“Fascinating,” Ava chimed in. “How about we discuss this later. Don’t you need to concentrate, so you don’t scramble our brains or something?”

Scala stilled, again reminded of the unknown consequences of bonding with the Dremin.

“No, I won’t scramble your brain,” Traveler replied in amusement. “I have severed the connection already.” Traveler moved down Ava’s leg to the floor.

Scala felt Mercy crawl down his leg, but he was busy scanning Ava for any adverse reactions, like a twitch, or something with her coloring.

“We have severed the connection as requested. Make progeny,” Mercy urged.

“I think we’ll wait to do that in private,” Ava giggled and he couldn’t help also grin, but then his brow furrowed as something occurred to him.

“How are we still hearing you?” Scala asked.

“You both have communication technology implanted. If we revert the alterations to that implant, we won’t be able to communicate now that we’re physically disconnected,” Traveler explained.

“No. That’s fine. It’s like a language upgrade,” Scala reasoned.

“Come on.” Ava tugged his hand toward the small quarters at the rear of the cruiser.

“Thank you, Mercy, Traveler, we’ll see you...later.” He scooped Ava up.

Much later.

“I will acquaint Mercy with this vessel while you sex,” Traveler replied.

“Oh my goodness,” Ava giggled as he shut the door on the lounge.

“So, you were discussing sex with Traveler.” Scala’s brow arched in amusement.

“Traveler had been observing your aggressive symbiosis with me,” she snorted. “I had to explain.”

“Hmm. Aggressive like this?” He shifted Ava, wrapping her legs around his waist, palming her rear as he pressed her against the wall.

“Maybe.” Ava sobered.

The way she gazed at him through her long eyelashes was undeniably sexy. Then she licked her ruddy lips with that pink tongue. He couldn't resist her any longer. His lips slammed against hers, his tongue hungrily exploring.

He captured Ava's wrist and pressed them over her head. She moaned into his mouth, shoving her breasts against his chest. He felt around her wrist until he disengaged her combat shell. The instant Ava's bare skin touched him, his shell eagerly receded.

“Yes.” Ava wiggled, his spurs grazing the wet heat at the apex of her thighs.

Pleasure arced up his spine and he locked his knees before they buckled. Ava unraveled him in an instant.

“I may be very aggressive,” he growled, hungrily capturing her lips again.

Ava

She gasped as Scala's scorching kisses moved over neck and along her chest. Her hands roved his body, reveling in the warm, muscular skin her touch revealed. Scala's scent, masculine with a hint of spiced oranges, made her salivate as he pinned her to the wall. He was aggressive, but she was equally needy. She needed to feel this connection.

"Bed," she demanded, grinding against his cocks, rubbing him through her slick folds, as she dug her heels into his tight ass.

Scala released a sexy growl, vibrating the top of her breast, making the nipple harden further. With the impressive deft moves of a soldier, he whipped the mattress off the nearby bunk, then brought her down to the now padded floor. She stared up at her exotic man, loving the feeling of his body covering hers. His lips reclaimed hers and his hand wedged between their bodies, finding her clit.

Yes, very aggressive. She moaned into his mouth as his fingers worked her.

Faktil

“I don’t understand how we are suddenly detecting them.” Faktil frowned in disbelief at the readings on the console. The signal was definitely from Scala and Ava’s cruiser.

“How did they get so far off the original course?” Thorac shook his head, equally perplexed.

“I have no clue. Hopefully this is good news.”

It was well into the third day tracking Scala’s original course. There had been no debris where the cruiser signal disappeared, which was a good sign, so he and Thorac continued on the projected course. After another day of nothing, the brief bit of hope faded and they’d resigned themselves to the worst. At this point their job was to continue tracking the Jurou Biljana. Then Scala’s signal lit up on the console.

“I’m hailing them now.” Thorac swiped the controls.

The comm request pinged repeatedly, and Faktil looked worriedly at Thorac while they waited for a response. There’d obviously been a maintenance issue. He hoped Scala had been able to salvage life support but that was looking doubtful with each unanswered ping. Faktil shoved down a frustrated, sad growl.

There was a click and suddenly breathy pants came through the comm speakers. His first frantic thought was that Scala and Ava were suffocating. Then rapid, slick sounds met his ears, the kind of sounds made by working intimate flesh.

Faktil’s eyes widened as he glanced at Thorac, who looked equally surprised. Moments ago, they thought Scala and Ava

were dead. This was the last thing he expected.

He quickly covered the microphone. “You weren’t joking about Scala being distracted by this mating.”

“She’s his weakness. The Osivoire don’t call it that just because our mate weakens our shell. It affects us here.” Thorac tapped his head and grimaced, feeling responsible for part of this situation.

“Well, we know they are alive.” Faktil couldn’t help the rotten grin that spread across his face.

“Scala, it still won’t fit,” Ava’s gasping voice echoed through the speaker.

“Not even just the tip?” Scala groaned.

Faktil’s eyes grew larger and he had to suppress the laugh bubbling in his chest. This was one detail they’d leave out of the official report.

“Enough!” Thorac barked before the couple could say more.

This whole incident wasn’t really a surprise. There was something about human females; every one of his friends who got close to one ended up mated.

Ava

“Oh my god!” Ava screamed in surprise, hearing the voice.

“Thorac?!” Scala barked, abruptly pulling back from her.

Thorac?! Like Scala's co-captain? How long was he listening?

“Oh!” She wanted to crawl into a hole but instead curled into a ball on the mattress.

“I'm almost certain the Dremin are responsible for this little surprise,” Scala whispered to her.

“Mmm hmm.” She frowned. Knowing the Dremin, they hadn't intentionally cock blocked them, but it happened just the same.

“Scala, Ava, I can assume you are safe and well?” Thorac asked, sounding out of joint.

“We are well,” Scala replied, equally perturbed. The poor guy. This was the second time they were interrupted. He then sighed. “We had an unexpected detour.”

“Detour is saying it mildly. It's good to hear you,” another male voice chimed in, sounding amused.

How many more people were listening to us?! Ava's cheeks heated. She looked in horror at Scala.

Scala grimaced. “Faktil. It's good to hear from you as well.” He took her hand and helped her stand. “The short version of this is that we were redirected to a planet and are now back on course.”

“Redirected?” Thorac dubiously asked.

“Yes, and it would be best to show you by who.”

Scala took her wrist and engaged her combat shell, the version with the jumpsuit, then did the same, giving himself a pair of pants as he led her out of the small quarters.

“All right,” Faktil said, his voice more serious than before.

“Traveler, could you bring this communication up on the viewscreen, please,” Scala requested.

It was hard to tell which of the Dremin sprawled across the console was Traveler until their feathery arm moved.

A moment later Thorac and one of the red-skinned aliens appeared. Thank God, they were alone in a cruiser instead of on a giant bridge with lots of other people. Thorac and Faktil’s eyes instantly swiveled to the Dremin.

“Let me introduce you to what we previously believed to be the Dremin security system.” Scala gestured to the pair on the console.

“We agreed on the names Mercy and Traveler to make it easier, since they don’t seem to use names,” Ava added as Thorac and Faktil continued studying the pair.

“Greetings,” Traveler stated.

Neither Thorac nor Faktil’s expressions changed.

“You will need to translate for them,” Mercy reminded them.

“Aye.” Scala nodded. “Traveler extends greetings. They are a silica-based sentient life form. From what we understand, they were originally enslaved to act as security in vessels, and sold to the highest bidder.”

“The Jurou Biljana,” she spat.

Understanding shifted in the other men's eyes.

“Traveler needed to make a detour to their home. Their people are only familiar with the cruel humanoid flesh-bearers. Traveler wanted to share us with the rest of the Dremin.”

Scala didn't mention the crash, strange matrix dream world, or how the Dremin healed them. That was probably for the best. Thorac's eyes were wide. This was clearly enough for them to process for the moment.

“And they are now joining the mission?” Thorac slowly asked, obviously reticent.

“Trust that Ava and I owe our lives to them. They keenly understand, from their own adverse experience with the Jurou Biljana, how important this mission is,” Scala reassured him.

“We do. We also understand the importance of making more connections with beneficial races,” Traveler added.

“Traveler said they understand and feel it's important to meet decent people, too,” she translated.

“On behalf of myself and the Cadi, it is an honor to meet you.” Faktil bowed on screen.

“This is a surprise, but I too extend greetings,” Thorac said, sounding more at ease after Scala's assurance. “Thank you for any assistance you've given my friends and will give us.”

“It is very good to hear from you both and although I'm sure you have more questions about the Dremin, we should discuss the mission,” Scala suggested.

Ava suppressed a grin at Scala's demeanor. He was sexy when he assumed charge.

“Aye.” Thorac nodded.

“What are you doing in a cruiser and not on the frigate?” Scala asked.

“Looking for you,” Faktil replied.

“And assuming the mission if we didn’t find you,” Thorac added. “Hoping the Vicarius stayed on the original course we had for you.”

“Hmf.” Scala nodded. “And the frigate with all the rescued humans?”

“Cartil and Payim are manning it. They already made contact with the fleet.”

She listened as Thorac reported how part of the fleet was helping with her people on the frigate, and taking care of the lizard outpost, while the rest of the squadron was headed this way. It gave her comfort knowing her people were safe. It also soothed her need for revenge, picturing the Osivoire blasting the lizard outpost into smithereens.

“I assume the plan hasn’t really changed,” Thorac said. “We’ll stay well out of range when you catch up with the Vicarius. You retrieve Ava’s sobrus and secure the location of the reptile fleet. The big difference being, if you get into trouble we’re a lot closer and can actually help without putting the whole frigate at risk.”

“True,” Scala agreed, liking that fact. “And with the help of our Dremin friends we may have an advantage.” He grinned.

“Really?” Thorac tilted his head.

“The Dremin have gifts I would rather not share.” Scala shook his head.

Thorac’s brow furrowed.

“You may convey our interactions,” Traveler interjected.

“The Dremin have capabilities that put them at risk and they are new to off world interactions,” Scala explained. “The things that Ava and I have experienced, in the wrong hands, would be devastating. They have already been subjugated by the reptiles, though those bastards have no clue who the Dremin truly are. If they did...” Scala shook his head grimly. “It is not my place to share what I know about them.”

“I understand,” Mercy spoke.

“Thank you for your consideration. This type of interaction is new for us,” Traveler added.

Looking out for the Dremin, Scala was even sexier than before. The things they could do, from healing and building, to creating connected dreamscapes was all absolutely stunning and had big implications.

Scala nodded. “For now, be assured the Dremin are as we believed, great with security and ships’ systems.”

“Of course. Is there any way we can relay the Vicarius’ transponder code back to the fleet?” Thorac inquired.

“It would be helpful for us to have it, too,” Faktil said.

“Traveler?” Scala asked.

“One of our kind is integrated with the scaly being’s vessel instead of a simple tracking mechanism, like the secondary beacon your kind placed on this vessel. We are capable of homing in on them, however, that is not a signal we are able to convey to a ship not containing one of our kind,” Traveler explained.

“Simply put, no,” Scala translated. “We will send the fleet our heading, same as before, and update them as it changes.”

“That’s disappointing, but we’ll make it work.” Thorac nodded.

“I do appreciate you coming to look for us,” Scala commented to the men. “But it’s been a long few days for Ava and me.” His gaze shifted to her.

“Understood. We’ll speak later,” Faktil said with a chuckle and the viewscreen went blank.

“The communication has ended,” Traveler stated the obvious.

“About that. Next time there’s an incoming message, let me know before opening the channel.” Scala’s brow arched as he panned between the two Dremin.

“We believed you would wish to communicate with your kind,” Traveler explained.

“It’s more of a custom to make sure everyone is ready to talk first,” she tried to clarify.

“I believe I understand,” Mercy chimed in.

“Do you?” Traveler asked.

“They asked for privacy to do sex. They did not simply require this privacy from us, but from all others. The privacy is part of the sex,” Mercy explained to Traveler.

“Exactly,” Ava snorted.

Scala groaned incredulously, his eyes rolling to the ceiling. There was one thing for certain, this mission wasn’t boring.

SEVENTEEN



REUNION

Ava

“It will be all right.” Scala rubbed her arms as the cruiser set down in the loading bay of Vicarius Kur’s ship.

He was trying to be comforting but she noticed him double-checking her combat shell. Apparently, she wasn’t the only one needing reassurance.

It had only taken a day to catch up with the lizards and she was eager to find Lucas, but now that they were here, she was nervous, or maybe it was adrenaline. She’d grown used to not being around the vile scaly assholes, now they were walking back into the viper’s den. She hardly felt prepared, even though they’d discussed the rough plan. She and Scala hadn’t picked up where they left off in the private quarters, and she wished she’d gotten in a hundred more kisses.

“I really hate this disguise.” Ava scowled at the combat shell making Scala look like one of the lizards.

“I know.” He urged her toward the cruiser exit.

“And I hate what it does to your voice.” The hiss made her skin crawl.

“I know.” He paused before opening the door, cupped her belly and pulled her against his chest, his chin resting on her shoulder. “We can alter the plan. You can stay on the cruiser.”

Ava wanted to snort. That ship had sailed. They already relayed the message that Vicarius Kur’s slave was aboard before they were brought into the massive hangar.

“I’m worried about you.” She nuzzled the side of his face, ignoring the fake scaly texture and elongated snout. She complained about the disguise but it protected him. Still, there

was a chance things could go bad. Nearly losing Scala once was more than enough.

“We are worried as well,” Traveler interjected. “You flesh-bearers are frail.”

“It will be all right,” Scala repeated with a gentle squeeze.

“Okay. Let’s go.” She nodded, summoning her courage.

Scala reached for the door controls and they began to open. She instantly missed his presence when he stepped to her side. Ava tensed when she spotted the pair of Jurou Biljana waiting with their weapons drawn.

“The Vicarius wants to see you now.” One of the lizards glared at her.

“I will escort her.” Scala placed a possessive hand on her shoulder.

“Kur didn’t ask for you,” the pale-green asshole sneered.

“I have things to report. Lead the way,” Scala firmly insisted, ignoring their weapons as they descended the short ramp.

The lizards bristled, the spines on their heads sticking straight out in agitation as they glared at Scala. Scala was nearly a head taller than the average Jurou Biljana, and with the lizards, the big dog usually won these dick measuring contests. Plus, Scala wasn’t just posturing. He truly was a badass, and his swagger down the ramp screamed it. It was still a relief when the pair brusquely turned, leading the way past a handful of other cruisers parked in the hangar.

We’re officially aboard. One hurdle down.

She took deep breaths as they moved through the corridors, but it was hard to calm her heart while surrounded

by the bastards who'd made her life miserable. It helped knowing Scala was nearby. Finally, they went through a set of doors and she found herself standing on the bridge, her nemesis sitting cavalierly in a giant seat, like it was a throne.

Kur's gaze swung to her and he stood. "What took you so long?" he hissed at her.

He was angry and yet a hint of something she couldn't name crossed his scaly face.

What took me so long?! Her eyes widened, unsure of how to reply. He asked the question as if she'd been dragging her feet coming from her quarters on the ship, rather than having been left behind on the volcano planet. What could she say to that insane logic?!

"Where is Yitu's bag?!" Kur demanded, aggressively stepping toward her.

She cringed, picturing the bag of toys still on Scala's frigate.

Scala's hand tightened on her shoulder. She could sense he was ready to yank her out of the way at any moment. His presence bolstered her courage.

"There was an attack on Fuzyre," she stated, remembering to avert her gaze so Kur didn't smack her for being impertinent.

Scala wouldn't allow that, and things would quickly go to shit.

"I am aware," Kur scoffed, then balefully eyed Scala. "And you, what are you doing here?"

"Vicarius, I believed you would want your human back," Scala replied, doing his best to mimic the lizards' subservient

manner. It had to be killing him.

“The male insisted he had information for you,” one of their scaly escorts added.

Crap. Scala did say that.

“Aye. I managed to detect a foreign vessel when I was leaving the outpost. I believe it was Topus,” Scala swiftly said, which was clearly a lie.

“Fool, it wasn’t the Topus. Get out of my sight!” Kur spat in annoyance then focused his yellow eyes on her again. “Go deal with Yitu. If I have to see to another of that male’s frivolous demands, I’ll sever his tail myself.”

She suddenly realized what Kur’s cryptic expression had been...relief.

The asshole is sick of dealing with his own kid. That was why she’d gotten off easy. Kur was actually relieved to see her. *Well, I’m not touched and the feeling isn’t mutual.*

“Of course, Vicarius.” She bowed her head, mostly to hide her disgust.

“I’ll take her to your quarters, Vicarius Kur,” one of the escorts said as she backed away from Kur.

Scala made sure to follow as she was escorted from the bridge. One of the lizards peeled off, but Scala continued to follow her, staying a few paces back. They rounded a corner and her lizard escort came to an abrupt halt, focusing on Scala.

Shit! She cringed.

“Don’t you have somewhere to be?” her escort tersely demanded.

“I have some questions for you, after you are done dealing with the human,” Scala replied.

“Fine,” the lizard huffed and they continued walking.

Good save, handsome. Ava hid her smile from the Jurou Biljana. Scala wasn't going to leave her until he absolutely had to.

After going up an elevator and traversing another hall, they stopped in front of a set of doors.

“Here.” The lizard jabbed his clawed hand toward the open door into Kur's quarters.

She cast a glance over the lizard's shoulder and Scala gave her a nod of encouragement. She was finally here. None of this would've been possible without him.

“Thank you,” she said to her escort, though it was really intended for Scala, then entered the living space.

“Lucas, Yitu!” she called for the boys the second the doors shut.

There was a commotion to the right as the boys rushed into the main room. Her breath froze in her chest when her gaze landed on Lucas. She practically tripped over her own feet as she ran to him. Both boys clasped her and she hugged them back.

“I thought you were gone forever!” Lucas squeezed her tight.

The tremor in his voice broke her composure and tears welled up in her eyes.

“Don't tell my sire,” Yitu demanded, as he too hugged her. He may not be able to admit it, but he missed her.

“I won’t.” She rubbed Yitu’s back. “I am so glad to see you.” The tears spilled down her cheeks.

As she hugged the pair, she noticed the smell. The boys clearly hadn’t bathed while she was absent. She focused on Lucas and was horrified to see bruises on one arm and scratches on his other. Even Yitu had marks on him. Her tears dried up, burned away by her anger. Kur had taken out his temper on the boys while she was away.

You’re going to get what’s coming to you, she vowed.

Scala

Scala hated watching the door shut on Ava. His only consolation was that the Vicarius was currently in the control room.

“What did you want?” their scaly escort demanded as he started to walk away from Kur’s quarters.

“You are the hangar master,” Scala noted the markings on the male’s suit, “and I want to be assigned there.” With a parting glance at the door, he forced himself to follow the reptile down the corridor.

“No! The Vicarius doesn’t think much of you and neither do I,” the reptile scoffed. “You didn’t spot the Topus, we have an arrangement with them,” the male muttered.

“An *arrangement*, my tail!” Scala’s laugh came out a hiss.

The hangar master ignored his comment and stalked off. He didn’t care if the reptiles believed him or not. Everything he’d said was a lie, his question for the hangar master just an excuse to see where Ava would be. Then again, he couldn’t help blaming the attack on the Topus. The reptiles’ association with the cephalopod race was well known. The Topus ran the black-market auctions where the Jurou Biljana sold their goods. He saw the opportunity to spread doubt, to weaken that alliance, and took it. Though, if everything worked out and his fleet took this vessel, his little lie wouldn’t go far.

Glad to be rid of the reptile, Scala looked back down the hall, where Ava was. The urge to go back to her rode him hard, but instead he forced himself to leave. She was safe for the moment and he needed to learn the layout of the ship. When it

was time to get Ava and her sobrus off the vessel, he wanted to know every route to the hangar.

He memorized the level, which was mostly crew quarters, then circled back to the Vicarius' suite. Scala glanced both ways, then pinged the door. It quickly opened, and there stood Ava. He wanted to hug her but resisted. Ava glanced around him, assuring the corridor was empty and smiled.

"It took you a bit," she whispered, gesturing behind her.

His gaze went to the youths eating at the table. The human male, Lucas, was smaller than expected. Ava spoke of their age difference and yet this little male could easily be her own young. In essence, Ava was his matron. Relief filled him that the little male was safe. His gaze shifted to the Jurou Biljana youth. The male was a little taller than Lucas, but was likely even younger than the human. Despite being so young, Yitu was still old enough to repeat what he heard.

"Vicarius Kur sent me to assure you have everything you need," Scala said, just in case, as he entered.

"Ah." Ava nodded. "Boys, go play in Yitu's room. It'll be bath time soon."

Lucas studied him as he got down from the table. His eyes were brighter blue than Ava's, but the worry in them matched Ava when she made that hesitant expression.

"Let's go." Yitu grabbed Lucas's hand and tugged him out of the room.

"Your sobrus looks like you and he doesn't trust me," he commented once the little males were gone.

"Don't be offended," Ava said as she wistfully looked toward the door.

“I’m not.” Scala shook his head.

He hated what the little male had witnessed to make him wary and was proud Lucas was protective of Ava. He was about to say as much when Ava faced him, her expression angry.

“That bastard has been abusing them. They have bruises all over them. They haven’t been fed a decent meal or bathed. I’m pretty sure those are the same clothes they were wearing when we were separated,” she spat, her cheeks flushed red.

“Does Lucas have any major injuries?” he asked, equally angered. He hadn’t noticed any wounds but perhaps Ava had treated the male already.

“No.” Ava shook her head.

Her anger swiftly waned and was replaced by heartache. He knew she was blaming herself for anything done to the youth in her absence. He wished he’d entered the quarters with her. They were lucky Lucas was all right, but Ava could’ve blindly walked into much worse.

“I’m sorry. I would’ve returned sooner, but I was surveying the ship layout.” He pulled her into his arms. He wanted to drop the disguise as he held her, but didn’t dare, in case someone walked in. Finding them hugging would probably be difficult enough to explain.

“It’s okay.” Ava melded against him. “I’m so glad we got here before anything worse could happen,” she sobbed.

He hugged her tighter while nodding in agreement.

“I think we need to change our plans,” Ava whispered against his chest.

His brow furrowed in confusion as she stared up at him with tear-filled gray eyes.

“We can’t leave Yitu here with Kur. Not after what I found,” she pleaded, her chin quivering.

Ava was too sweet for her own good. She’d freed her people, put herself at risk to rescue her sobrus, and now she wanted to save the Jurou Biljana youth, despite what the reptiles had done to her. A part of him rebelled at the idea. This would complicate things. Except he was no match for her beseeching gray eyes.

“You have grown to care for him, too,” he acknowledged.

Ava nodded.

He’d fought the Jurou Biljana too long. The suffering he’d witnessed made him jaded and prejudiced against the reptiles. Except, Yitu was a youth, and as all youth, their future accomplishments were unknown. If he left the youth aboard this ship, that future would undoubtedly be cut short once the Osivoire fleet arrived.

“Then we will bring him with us,” he agreed.

“Thank you.” Ava let out a whooshing, relieved breath, and squeezed him tight.

“Don’t thank me, weakness.” He nuzzled her hair. “Do you have any idea just what I’d do for you?”

He held Ava until she stopped shaking and pulled back in his arms.

“We better act our parts,” she sighed.

“Of course.” He nodded, forcing himself to release her.

“How do you think Traveler and Mercy are doing?” she asked.

“There were only two of my kind occupying the small vessels in the hangar,” Mercy replied, having apparently heard their names.

Mercy’s voice didn’t come through the speaker used for communicating from one area of the ship to another. It echoed in his ear, like it was being broadcast straight to his implant. He glanced around, but didn’t see Mercy. The Dremin must’ve been embedded in the ship. The Dremin’s capabilities continually astounded him.

“They are willing to assist us,” Mercy added.

“Wonderful.” Ava nodded.

“Do they know our final destination? And can they confirm the Jurou Biljana fleet will be there?” Scala asked.

“Our companion embedded in this vessel is not sharing that information,” Traveler answered instead. “I am in the process of explaining how imperative our goal is, however, they’re reticent like Mercy.”

“I needed to see proof myself,” Mercy reminded Traveler.

“Shit. Will your companion report that we’re here to the Jurou Biljana?” Ava asked, her worried gaze meeting his.

“Their connection is not like our connection. They are not sharing information the way we do. Recall that before the crash we did not interact. I performed a function and observed you in the background. I didn’t even comprehend how to communicate with you until the symbiosis,” Traveler explained.

“That’s a relief,” Ava sighed.

It was. It meant the Dremin couldn't betray them if Traveler failed to convince them to help.

"Please keep trying to sway your new friend," Scala urged, hoping persistence would pay off like it had with Mercy. "In the meantime, I will work on getting back into the control room to see what I can learn. I can mimic one of the crew already assigned there."

"That may not be so easy." Ava grimaced.

"My combat shell should be able to manage the disguise."

"You're tall for a lizard, so that'll limit your options, if there are any your height. Also, what happens if the person actually shows up for duty?" she replied.

"Valid points." He smirked.

"I believe I have a solution," Traveler spoke up.

"What is that?" he asked the Dremin.

"I am blocked from several key systems, however, I do have access to the list of the flesh-bearers aboard and their duties. I should be able to alter it," Traveler suggested.

"Yes. Do it," Scala agreed. He then focused on Ava. "Two days. If we don't get the location on the reptile fleet by then, we go. Can you do this for that long?"

"Yes." She nodded.

The question was, could he?

"I don't want to go, but the sooner we get the information..." He grabbed Ava again.

"I know." She hugged him. "I should tend to the boys. Be safe, please. I love you and I've gotten rather attached to you."

His heart stuttered in his chest. “I love you. Be safe, weakness.” His arms tightened farther, rebelling against letting her go.

Ava pulled back way too soon. “You better go, handsome.” She smiled.

Scala nodded and headed for the door. He spun, faced her, and gave her a low bow before backing out the door.

Ava

“Did you wash all your parts?” Ava demanded, hearing the boys playing in the bathroom.

“Yes,” the duo chimed.

“Good. You both were so dirty, you were going to sprout vegetables.” She shook her head as the pair came rushing into Yitu’s room. “Put on clean clothes!” she reminded them with an amused snort, and ducked into the bathroom to tidy up.

Ava shook her head, finding water all over the floor, then smiled. She didn’t mind cleaning up after the rambunctious pair. She was just happy having the boys back and all their messes. She really could kiss Scala for agreeing to bring Yitu, too. Ava sang as she mopped up the floor and tossed the towels into the recycler.

The boys were jumping on Yitu’s bed when she emerged from the bathroom. She couldn’t blame them, she’d left their toys on Scala’s ship, and besides the table and chairs, the room was bare.

She blinked when Lucas’s little butt mooned her through the slit in the back of his pants.

“Lucas, what are you wearing?” She noticed the rest of the ill-fitting jumpsuit.

“I gave him some of my clothing.” Yitu hopped down, his tail thumping the floor.

“Mine was dirty.” Lucas landed next to Yitu.

“That explains the slit in the butt.” She shook her head. “Okay, bedtime.”

She realized when the boys piled back into Yitu's bed that Lucas didn't have a mattress on the floor, like he had at the outpost.

Kur didn't do shit for them. She got angry again. The Vicarius didn't even have one of his men see that the boys were cared for.

She shoved down the anger and smiled at the boys sharing the bed. They'd made do and survived until she arrived.

"I am so glad to see you two." She plopped down on the end of the bed and wiggled their toes.

"We were worried." Lucas frowned.

"My sire said you were gone." The way Yitu's spines drooped, she knew he thought she was dead.

"Well, I'm here now, so no more worries." She rubbed the boys' knees, wanting to soothe any lingering fears. "Tomorrow, I think we need to get out of this suite and get some exercise," she changed the subject.

She'd taken the boys on walks through the outpost using the excuse, so it wouldn't be odd to do the same on the ship. In truth she wanted people to see them in the corridors. It would make it less questionable when it came time for them to escape.

"My sire said not to leave." Yitu grimaced.

"I will make sure it's fine," she reassured him.

"What is fine?" Kur hissed as he entered the room. "What is the human doing in your bed?!" the Vicarius boomed as he stormed in, his angry gaze focused on Lucas.

Before she could react, Kur knocked her off the bed. If it wasn't for her armor, she would've slammed against the floor

rather than land in a crouch. Ava recovered fast when the boys screamed and scrambled off the other side of the bed to get away from Kur.

“This attachment ends now!” Kur bellowed, yanking the bed aside.

The Vicarius had threatened before to kill Lucas, to force Yitu to grow up. The way his claws were extended, spines bristling, it looked like he was going to make good on the threat. There was no goddamn way she was allowing that!

“No!” Ava roared, grabbed a chair and charged the Vicarius.

Kur let out a garbled scream as a leg of the chair stabbed into his back, sinking in just below his ribs. She stared in shock and horror at the blood that started to flow like a waterfall from the wound. She’d forgotten just how strong the combat shell made her.

Kur staggered as he turned, angry, accusing, yellow eyes focused on her. He hissed something unintelligible, but assuredly not nice, then dropped to the floor.

“Oh my god!” she gasped.

Her gaze swung to the boys huddled together, terror etched on their faces.

“Okay, okay, everything is going to be okay.” She rushed to the pair, wrapped her arms around them and shielded them from the terrible sight as she hurried them out of the room.

We’re fucked! Kur needed to die, but this wasn’t how it was supposed to happen.

“You hurt my sire,” Yitu gasped.

“He was going to hurt us,” Lucas defended as they crossed the sitting room to Kur’s bedroom.

“Stay in here. I’m going to get help,” she urged, pushing the boys through the door once it opened.

It wasn’t a total lie, the help was for her, though, not Kur.

“Mercy, Traveler, I need help!” she called out to the Dremin the second the door closed.

EIGHTEEN



BEST LAID PLANS

Scala

Scala sat at the navigation console, but it was pointless, the Dremin occupying the ship encrypted the heading even from the control room crew. It was more than a little annoying how efficient the unusual beings were.

I hope Traveler can sway the stubborn Dremin embedded in this ship.

To add to his frustration, the conversations among the crew so far hadn't confirmed their heading either. There'd been a lot of talk about some fighting match and last meal, but nothing about their fleet.

"Scala, there has been an incident," Mercy said.

On reflex, Scala looked around to see if the Jurou Biljana heard Mercy. They hadn't.

"Ava needs your aid," Mercy urgently added.

That was all he needed to hear. Scala was instantly on his feet.

"What are you doing?" the reptile in the next seat hissed.

Scala glared at the male. He didn't have time for this shit.

"I'm going to go drop a load," he crudely countered and walked out of the control room before anyone else had something to say.

"What happened?" he whispered under his breath once in the corridor.

"There has been an injury," Mercy replied.

Ava! Scala's chest tightened and he ran.

“Move!” he barked, shoving past a pair of reptiles.

He dodged around the corner and only slowed when he reached the lift, taking it to the next level.

“Tell me she’s all right,” he demanded as he jogged off the lift.

“She is all right,” Mercy replied, but it was hard to tell if that was the truth or if the Dremin was literally repeating what he asked.

He reached the door to the Vicarius’ quarters and it instantly opened.

“Get in here.” Ava waved him inside. Mercy must have relayed he was coming.

It was such a relief to see her, after fearing the worst, then he noticed she was shaking.

“Weakness, what happened?” He grabbed her and started checking her over.

Her combat shell was in place and working, so if she had injuries, they had to be minor.

“I killed Kur,” she whispered. “He snapped and tried to hurt the boys.”

A dozen emotions moved through Scala. Anger at the Vicarius, fear for Ava, followed by pride she’d defended herself. It made the adrenalin already pumping through him spike.

“You are all right, though?” He cupped her cheeks.

“Fine.” She squeezed him tighter. “The boys are, too. I forgot how strong this armor makes me. I stabbed him with a

chair.” She pointed to a closed door on the other side of the sitting room.

“You are sure he’s dead?” Scala asked as his brain started to work on this unexpected wrinkle.

“I shoved a chair leg into his chest,” Ava stammered.

That would do it.

“There was nothing else you could do if he was violent. You did good.” He rubbed her back. “We need to go. Get the males. Traveler, Mercy, get back to the cruiser!”

Ava

Shit, shit, shit. Everything was fucked.

They were aboard the Jurou Biljana vessel three hours at best and she'd fouled it all up. Scala didn't blame her, but she could've got between the boys and Kur, drawn his ire as she had in the past. The combat shell would've protected her. It wasn't just Lucas's rescue she'd screwed up. She'd fucked with the Osivoire's entire mission. There was no way Scala or Traveler got the location of the Jurou Biljana fleet yet.

Pull it together, she screamed at herself.

Ava gathered her composure and entered Kur's bedroom. Her heart sank, finding the boys huddled quietly on the bed. They didn't deserve to be mixed up in any of this craziness.

"Everything is going to be fine," she said as much for herself as for them. "Remember I said we were going to get some exercise. We're going to go for a little field trip to see the hangar." She wrapped an arm around each of the boys, urged them off the bed and led them into the other room.

Lucas and Yitu looked nervously at Scala in disguise. They probably believed he was there to drag her off for punishment.

"This is our escort to the hangar," she said, hoping to ease them.

"If you are good. I'll show you how to pilot a cruiser," Scala added, helping her sell the fib.

"Won't that be fun." She forced a smile.

The boys nodded half-heartedly, still in shock and unsure.

“Everything is fine. I always take care of you guys, don’t I?” She rubbed their backs as she ushered the boys through the sitting room.

Yitu might hate her for what she did to his shitty dad, but he would survive.

Scala adopted a slight sneer, playing the annoyed lizard, when he exited the suite. She tried to convey the same confident demeanor as she followed with the boys.

Just fake it until you make it, she mentally chanted as they headed toward the elevator. That’s what she’d always done when she was sneaking around the lizards.

“Am I understanding correctly that the desire is to urgently leave,” Mercy said, startling her. She almost tripped but recovered.

“Yes,” Scala replied under his breath.

“I will assure our vessel is ready,” Mercy added.

Good.

As they got off the elevator a trio of lizards were waiting, with another pair farther down the hall. Her heart stuttered midbeat, thinking the Jurou Biljana were waiting for them. Then she noticed they weren’t security and their weapons weren’t drawn.

Without a word Scala brusquely pushed past them. The lizards eyed their procession. She didn’t recognize any of them but they all knew who she and the boys were.

“Yitu, Lucas, remember, ask permission before touching any of the equipment or we won’t be able to go on any more tours,” she said as she passed the crewmen, though Scala leading the way probably did more to cement this ruse.

She sighed in relief when they made it down the corridor and no one stopped them. They passed more lizards, thankfully most didn't pay them much attention. Still, by the time they were within sight of the hangar doors, her anxiety was through the roof.

"I will be staying on this vessel," Traveler suddenly announced.

She almost barked in surprise, but muffled it so it sounded like a cough.

They need to stop doing that. She rubbed her chest, then what Traveler said sank in and the knot in her stomach twisted tighter.

Scala was several paces ahead, so she couldn't hear what he mumbled.

"I understand the risk. I will find a way to convey the information you require," Traveler replied, and she understood what Scala must have explained. If Traveler was still on this ship when the Osivoire fleet arrived, the Dremin would die.

No! The sadness threatened to overwhelm her. This was yet another horrible consequence of her rash act. Traveler saved her life. Leaving the Dremin behind wasn't right. This wasn't the plan.

"Traveler?" she murmured, her voice quivering.

"I understand your sentiment and return it. I am choosing this purpose," Traveler softly replied.

"Thank you," she whispered, trying not to tear up. A few words were hardly enough after what the Dremin had done for her. Sadly, the situation didn't allow for more than that.

Scala stopped in front of the hangar doors and glanced back at her. She gave him a slight nod that she was ready, and he entered.

“This is the hangar,” Scala announced with a wave of his hand once they were inside.

“What is this?!” the Jurou Biljana who’d originally been their escort barked.

“What does it look like?” Scala brazenly countered then turned to her. “The young can look in that cruiser. Don’t touch anything,” he said as the annoying lizard approached them.

“Okay. Come on, boys.” She quickly led Lucas and Yitu, past a pair of cruisers to the one that had its ramp lowered, like it was waiting for them. “Thank you, Mercy,” she whispered.

Come on, Scala, she prayed, hoping he could bullshit the Jurou Biljana just long enough for them to get the hell off this ship.

Scala

“You know who that is, right?” Scala curtly gestured toward Yitu as the hangar master neared.

“I know who the Vicarius’ young is. What are all of you doing here?” the reptile hissed.

“A tour.” Scala steadily headed toward the cruiser Ava and the little ones disappeared into.

“A tour?!” the scaly male scoffed. “The Vicarius called you an imbecile, but now he has you leading his young on a *tour*?”

The reptile was suspicious. Scala’s fingers itched to grab his weapon, but the other two males stationed in the hangar would notice if he shot the hangar master.

“Apparently this is my punishment, tending to young and annoying humans. You can wake the Vicarius and ask,” Scala angrily snapped, sounding annoyed by the assignment.

The reptile looked hesitant to hail the Vicarius, as he’d intended. Scala didn’t wait for the male to say more, turned and headed to the open cruiser. He reached the ramp when he heard the footsteps behind him. The hangar master obviously wasn’t done yet.

“If anything is damaged, you’ll go on report,” the Jurou Biljana informed him.

Is that all? Good!

Scala didn’t bother to stop until he was at the top of the ramp. He spun and again faced the reptile.

“Then I will make sure Kur knows who interfered so I couldn’t do my duty,” he snarled back at the male, meanwhile his hand rested on the wall, near the panel that controlled the cruiser doors.

The reptile glared at him suspiciously then abruptly spun and stalked away, his tail lashing. The instant the hangar master rounded one of the other cruisers, Scala hit the sensor, closing the doors.

“Ava, get the males seated,” he instructed as he headed through the small bay to the cockpit.

“What is going on?” Yitu asked while Ava got the youths strapped into the second row of seats.

“We get to go on a ride,” Ava answered.

Scala took one of the seats at the controls and Ava joined him. She cast him an anxious look as she fastened her harness.

“Shit!” Ava pointed at the viewscreen and the security rushing into the hangar.

“I think they found Kur,” he mumbled so only Ava could hear. “Mercy, we need to get the hangar bay open!” He engaged the cruiser controls. This situation was going soft fast.

“I am working on the task,” Mercy replied. The Dremin wasn’t in the cabin, so they had to be embedded inside the cruiser systems.

Lucas and Yitu started screaming when the reptiles began firing on the cruiser. Their sidearms did little to the hull, but that could quickly change. One of the reptiles would get smart and grab something with more firepower at any moment.

“Mercy!” he urged the Dremin to hurry when more Jurou Biljana spilled into the hangar.

Scala pulled the cruiser off the floor, sending the reptiles scattering. He said a little prayer and aimed for the bay doors. His eyes widened when two other cruisers did the same, gearing up for launch. For a moment he thought the Jurou Biljana manned the vessels, but the reptiles started firing on those cruisers as well.

A loud alarm sounded in the hangar, and Ava barked in surprise as the youths' cries turned more strident. Except this was good news.

“Yes!” His gaze shot to the opening bay doors. Mercy had done it.

The Jurou Biljana scrambled to exit as the hangar rapidly depressurized, but few of the scaly bastards made it out in time. As he moved toward the bay doors, scaly bodies flew past the cruiser and were sucked into cold, dark space. He had no sympathy for a single one of them.

“Let me take navigation. I am coordinating with my two companions,” Mercy said.

“Of course.” Scala pulled his hands away from the controls.

Mercy instantly took over, and the cruiser picked up speed in the hangar.

“We won't crash, will we?” Ava frantically looked from the slowly opening doors to him for assurance.

He grimaced, hoping Mercy had it timed right. He held his breath as they neared. Mercy was cutting it close. Abruptly the cruiser tipped starboard, squeezing through the opening, then they were hurtling into space. The pair of cruisers manned by the Dremin swiftly followed.

Ava

“We’re out!” Ava gasped.

“Mercy, at any moment, they’re going to fire on us with *big* weapons that *will* do damage. Do not plot a straight course,” Scala coached Mercy.

Mercy took the advice and the cruiser dodged to the left.

Shit! Her stomach jumped into her throat. They were free of the giant ship but not free of danger.

“Ava?!” Lucas voiced in confusion and fear.

“What is happening?” Yitu wailed.

She couldn’t deny it any longer. The boys knew something was wrong the moment the lizards filled the hangar and started firing.

Ava turned in her seat and focused on the frightened pair. “Boys, I need you to calm down. We’re escaping. Yitu, I am sorry about your sire, but I couldn’t let Kur hurt you any longer. He has been doing bad things to you and other people.” It wasn’t as kind or gentle as she wanted but she was a little on edge at the moment.

“No!” Yitu cried, pain twisting his face.

Her heart broke. Vicarius Kur was one evil bastard, but he was still Yitu’s father and the boy had feelings for him.

“I’m sorry, sweetie.” She winced.

“It will be okay.” Lucas reached out and took Yitu’s hand.

She wanly smiled at how her brother comforted his friend. His time in captivity hadn’t dulled his empathy.

God, I hope all will be okay. Anxiously, she turned back to the viewscreen.

“Break me!” Scala cursed. “With the Vicarius out, I was hoping it would take them longer to change course,” he mumbled. “Mercy, we need to get more distance, fast.”

The Jurou Biljana ship was big as day on the viewscreen and was shifting course. Hopefully it was the opposite of rearview mirrors in cars—objects in spaceship screens are farther than they appear. Except she had the sinking suspicion that wasn’t the case.

“I’m making alterations to the drive to increase speed,” Mercy responded. “Why did we faithfully replicate this vessel rather than make improvements?” the Dremmin grumbled.

Because hindsight was always a hundred percent.

“File that lesson away for another day and concentrate on flying and the drive improvements,” Scala calmly but firmly instructed, reminding her of why he was captain.

She had faith Mercy could make them go faster, but would it be in time?

Fuck.

Her gaze drifted to another display showing little blips blinking around their cruiser.

“Is that what I think it is?” She pointed at the smaller screen.

Scala’s grim glance and lack of response said, ‘Yes, Ava, that’s weapons fire.’

Come on, Mercy, you can do this, she silently chanted, to drown out the other internal voice that was freaking the fuck out.

Suddenly the cruiser shuddered, the oh-shit display lighting up like a Christmas tree. The children screamed and she nearly joined them, biting on her lips to hold it in. They'd been hit!

“Making hull repairs,” Mercy said, sounding harried.

Panic swamped her. She and Scala wore combat shells, but not the boys. She studied the pair, despite their sobs, they seemed to be breathing fine. She wanted to scream at the Jurou Biljana ship. Didn't they know firing on them could kill Yitu? Clearly the scaly bastards didn't care, though.

“Mercy, can you reconnect with me, but still make repairs and drive upgrades?” Scala asked. “I know some evasive maneuvers, but I'll need you to communicate to the other Dremin for it to work. You don't have the training I do, so I'll need you to read my thoughts.” He reached for the controls.

The answer must have been yes because a spindly arm emerged from the console and latched onto Scala's forearm.

Scala became hyper-focused, which seemed impossible because he was already pretty intense. His fingers flew over the controls and their cruiser started weaving in and out along with the other two, like they were creating an invisible braid. Mercy had been piloting great but the movements felt more confident and fluid with Scala at the helm. It was all miraculous, considering he and Mercy were coordinating this with the other two Dremin.

Her brow furrowed when she noticed the weaving maneuver seemed to make their trio one big target. She trusted Scala with her life, but that seemed like a bad thing. Her gaze went to the oh-shit screen. Sure enough, the lizards were firing directly at them, the line of blips getting closer. Ava gripped her seat, bracing for another hit. Suddenly their cruiser darted

downward, while the other two cruisers with the Dremmin went their own direction. The weapon's fire zipped right past them.

“Wow!” she burst, in awe. She'd never question him again.

Scala continued piloting the cruiser, performing various wild maneuvers with the Dremmin to draw then avoid fire. Still, the Jurou Biljana vessel followed them.

“Have they completely forgotten their mission?” she angrily spat. The lizards weren't trying to rescue Yitu. This was purely revenge for killing the Vicarius.

Scala merely grunted in agreement, concentrating on piloting.

“Thorac and Faktil are within range,” Mercy announced.

Her heart leapt. That had to be good news—right? She looked at Scala. His expression was hard to read.

“Stay cloaked,” Scala curtly instructed.

“Understood,” Thorac answered through the speaker.

“Mercy, can we contact Traveler? We need to shut down the Jurou Biljana's outgoing communication,” Scala said. “If they detect Thorac and Faktil, they'll know they've been followed and we can't have them contacting the rest of their fleet.”

“Traveler doesn't have access to those systems on the Jurou Biljana vessel,” Mercy replied.

Ava grimaced. That meant Traveler still had no luck reaching the Dremmin embedded in the enemy ship. That wasn't good news.

“Correction. One of our companions has a suggestion,” Mercy continued. “Flooding their systems with messages on

all frequencies will block their ability to send communications.”

“Good.” Scala nodded. “Thorac, the two cruisers flanking me are on our side.”

“I got that,” Thorac replied.

“Come round behind us and lay down some mines.” Scala glanced at her. “The mines will attract the fire or impact with the reptile’s ship,” he explained to her. “If that doesn’t convince them to give up the chase, I’ll need you to get more aggressive, Thorac.”

“Aye. But will that be enough? Break me, I wish our fleet was closer,” Thorac growled.

The Osivoire cruiser Thorac and Faktil were piloting had better weapons than the vessels they stole from the lizards, but apparently not enough compared to the spaceship ten-times their size. Scala’s grim expression and clenched jaw confirmed that fact.

Come on. Come on. Come on, she silently resumed her chant, cheering them on.

Fate didn’t let them come this far just to pull the rug out now.

NINETEEN



RUN

Scala

Being connected to Mercy while piloting the cruiser was exhilarating. The cruiser response time was improved along with a dozen other details. All he had to do was think and his plans were transmitted to the other two Dremin. The unusual beings were perfectly suited for piloting, but he knew the applications from years of practicing tactical maneuvers. Together, they made quite a team. If they weren't running to save their shells, this might be fun.

Scala glanced at Ava. She was sitting forward in her seat, her eyes glued to the viewscreen. She was handling this well, while also trying to keep the little males calm. It wasn't an easy task. It killed him that she and the youth were here. This was the exact scenario he hadn't wanted her involved in.

A thousand clicks. That's when they'd intersect with Thorac.

Another incendiary went off nearby, rocking their cruiser, but it wasn't a direct hit.

"Hull status?" he asked Mercy.

"Acceptable. I repaired the hull damage and upgrades to the drive are almost complete," Mercy replied.

Good. He nodded. Hopefully Thorac's help would be all they needed to cover their tails until Mercy was done with the upgrade.

"Thorac, on my mark." Scala watched as their paths crossed. "Drop!"

Thorac's cruiser swung behind them, then laid down the minefield.

“Whoa!” Thorac barked when he barely dodged one of the reptile’s incendiaries in the process.

“Really?!” Scala smirked. The Osivoire cruiser could withstand that and more, meanwhile they’d been putting up with worse...much worse.

They didn’t have to wait long to see the mines in action. The next incendiary veered straight toward a mine and erupted, rather than hitting their stern.

“That’s better,” Mercy stated, sounding relieved.

“Agreed!” Ava relaxed in her seat, her shoulders slumping.

The Jurou Biljana fired several more rounds then ceased, realizing it was pointless with the mines in place. Yet still, the bastards continued to follow them.

“Break me!” Scala bit out, grinding his molars.

The reptiles hit the field and the remaining mines erupted upon contact with their hull, except it didn’t do nearly enough damage to the large starship.

“Laying down another minefield,” Thorac reported, just as the Jurou Biljana started firing again.

They repeated the move again with the same results.

“I only have one more round,” Thorac barked as the reptiles plowed through the last array of mines he dropped.

“Hold them,” Scala said, toiling over their next move.

He knew what needed to be done, they needed to turn and fight. The disrupter on their cruiser wouldn’t put more than a dent in the reptile’s hull, but a few key hits to the armaments mounted on the scaly bastards’ starship and they could take it

out. The reptiles could still follow but wouldn't be able to fire on them.

Assuming we can get close enough. Thorac could lay down cover fire, while he and the Dremin moved in for a unified strike.

Scala glanced at Ava and growled. It was too risky with her aboard. Except it was just as risky if he didn't act. The fear for Ava stabbed at him as he warred over what to do. He'd nearly lost her once, he couldn't go through that again.

"Complete!" Mercy announced, startling him.

Abruptly their velocity increased, Mercy's improved drive kicking into gear.

"Thorac, drop the last round," Scala quickly barked as the plan changed.

Thorac laid the mine field as their cruiser shot forward. The mines drew the reptile's fire, but soon it didn't matter.

"We are out of range," Scala whooped.

Ava

The annoying lizards continued following them but thankfully they were now out of range of their weapons.

“Mercy, I could kiss you,” Ava sighed in relief. Finally, she could relax, at least a bit.

“What about me?” Scala asked, wearing a pout, which was disturbing with the scaly disguise.

“You, too, but not with that face.” She smiled at him.

“Ava?” Lucas asked, his little brow creased.

“Boys, this is Scala.” She felt bad she hadn’t introduced him yet. “He’s not Jurou Biljana. He’s Osivoire.”

Scala adjusted his combat shell to the setting showing what he looked like.

“They’re our enemy!” Yitu insisted, his eyes wide with horror.

Her heart went out to the little Jurou Biljana boy. Yitu would have a lot of adjustments to make. For now, he was alive, and that’s all that mattered.

“Yitu, sweetie, I know you don’t understand. Lucas and I were being kept as slaves. It was hurting us. Scala and his people rescued us. They’re good people.” She didn’t want to go into more detail for fear of shaming the Jurou Biljana and Yitu, because he was one. The child would learn soon enough all the terrible things his people were responsible for.

“You have nothing to fear from me,” Scala reassured Yitu with a gentle smile.

“Boys, Scala and I are married,” she started to explain their relationship as she squeezed Scala’s arm.

“What?! You had a wedding without me?!” Lucas declared, looking hurt.

“No! We didn’t have a ceremony without you.” Ava cringed.

“We didn’t?” Scala whispered, one brow sardonically arched.

“Stop!” She slapped him, then grinned, picturing the *ceremony* he was referring to. “Pervert,” she muttered. There was no way Lucas would be attending that *ceremony*—ever.

Scala chuckled before again focusing on piloting the cruiser.

“We’ll figure out some sort of ceremony you both can be part of. We’re a family,” she reassured the boys.

She smiled realizing that the idea of family no longer made her sad. Whenever she thought about family, she had felt the loss of her home, her parents, and the strain of taking care of Lucas under impossible circumstances. That had changed. The concept filled her with hope and warmth. Her affectionate gaze went from her Osivoire man, to her human brother, and her Jurou Biljana boy. They were one strange family, and she loved them with all her heart.

“Break me!” Scala spat, drawing her attention.

Her stomach twisted at the reminder they weren’t out of hot water yet.

“What?” She studied the viewscreen, trying to discern what had him riled.

“The Jurou Biljana must have detected our fleet. They’re turning back.” Scala’s jaw clenched.

“And that’s not good news?” She frowned in confusion. The cavalry was coming, that should be good news.

“Not exactly.” Scala shook his head. “Mercy, do we still have the reptiles’ communications jammed?”

“We do, but our counterpart aboard their vessel is attempting to circumvent our efforts,” Mercy reported.

“If they regain communications, our fleet will have to take out their vessel. That means we’ll lose the intel on where their fleet is,” Scala snarled.

“Who knows if we’ll find them if that happens. The rift drives will be lost,” Thorac’s frustrated voice came through the comm.

“We really need Traveler to get through to their Dremin, don’t we?” Ava frowned.

“Aye.” Scala nodded.

“Please help us,” she whispered the plea, wishing her prayer would somehow reach the unnamed Dremin.

If the Jurou Biljana escape with the engines, they’ll be able to hurt more people like us. She replayed the beatings she’d experienced and the death she’d witnessed at the hands of the lizards. She then imagined them invading her defenseless planet. The death and destruction would be unimaginable. Multiply that by countless other worlds the lizards might encounter. She wanted to vomit. It was just too much to bear. *Please!* she silently begged the Dremin.

Scala

“Relay for our fleet to move in before we lose control of their comms.” Scala made up his mind. “Remind them we have a friend aboard the Jurou Biljana vessel.”

“Aye,” Thorac responded.

Less than a moment later he detected the Osivoire fleet moving faster. Raptly he watched the display, hoping they’d catch up with the reptiles in time.

“There’s still a chance we can capture rather than destroy the vessel,” he said to Ava, taking her hand.

She nodded and they continued watching.

The Osivoire fleet zipped past their location, but the reptiles already had a head start and were nearly out of range.

“Faster!” he urged his fellow captains.

Abruptly the Jurou Biljana starship stopped. Scala tapped the display screen, certain it had malfunctioned.

“Traveler did it!” Mercy announced triumphantly.

“Traveler reached the Dremin?!” Ava asked in excited disbelief.

“Yes! And we know where their vessels are gathered,” Mercy confirmed.

“Thank Osegrin!” Scala barked in relief.

“We did it.” Ava tugged off her harness and was suddenly in his lap, her arms wrapped around his neck. “You did it!” She frantically kissed his face.

He squeezed Ava tight and claimed her mouth. Thank the goddess, they had made it!

TWENTY



SAFE

Ava

“I don’t want you to be afraid,” Ava said as they docked in the hangar on one of the Osivoire ships. She got up from her seat and helped the boys out of theirs. “You can hang on to me,” she encouraged.

Yitu brusquely pulled away from her.

“He’s angry and sad,” Lucas whispered to her.

“I know, sweetie, and that’s okay. I’m sorry he’s hurting. Be his friend. That will help.” She smiled at her baby brother. She turned to Scala standing beside her. “You lead the way off the cruiser.”

She glanced around to assure she had everything, then chuckled, realizing they didn’t have anything to take with them. She didn’t have a purse or bag, nothing at all. Any other time that would’ve scared the shit out of her, but as she smiled at Scala, she wasn’t worried.

Abruptly, both boys latched onto her waist.

“Whoa!” She clasped them and steadied herself.

She followed their terrified gazes to the console. Mercy was oozing out from between two of the panels.

“Ah. You might have remembered us talking to Mercy. This is Mercy. Don’t be afraid.” Ava gestured to the Dremin.

“Greetings, Yitu, Lucas,” Mercy said, waving one feathery arm.

“Mercy said greetings, Yitu, Lucas,” Scala relayed.

“Hi.” Lucas waved back, his grip on her easing slightly. “I didn’t hear anything,” he whispered to her.

“It’s a long story. I’ll tell you later.” She rubbed the boys’ backs.

“Mercy is safe.” Scala noticed Yitu was still reticent. He extended his hand and Mercy climbed up it. “Ready?”

“Yep.” She nodded.

Scala headed for the cruiser doors. It wasn’t too hard to get the boys to follow, both were staring in morbid curiosity at the Dremin perched on Scala’s shoulder.

“You did it!” Thorac happily shouted, already waiting at the bottom of the ramp as they exited the ship.

Faktil and several other Osivoire were there, too. She rubbed the boys’ backs as they bravely descended the ramp. She remembered when Scala led her onto his ship. Her first taste of freedom had been daunting. Strange how that felt like a lifetime ago. So much had changed in just a handful of days. She pulled in a deep breath of clean air, like she had the first time. The scent smelled sweeter somehow, now that she had family by her side. Life was going to be better now.

“We all did it. They would’ve handed me my shell if you weren’t there.” Scala clasped Thorac then Faktil’s hand. “And thank you, Captain Radus, for bringing us aboard.”

The Osivoire captain gaped at Mercy. He wasn’t the only one. The rest of the crew were staring, too.

“Meet Mercy.” Scala pointed to his shoulder. “The Dremin security is actually a sentient race. I’ll give you my full report once we get settled. This is Ava, my weakness.” He smiled at her.

“And these are my boys, Lucas and Yitu.” She rubbed the children’s shoulders as they huddled close to her.

Radus pulled his gaze away from Mercy to focus on them. “I imagine you are all exhausted. Let’s show you to a suite.” The captain gestured for someone to assist them.

“I’ll find you shortly.” Scala nodded to the captain.

They followed the crewman out of the hangar and through the ship to a suite.

“Will this work? There’s one bed chamber here and one here.” The crewman pointed to the doors on either side of a central sitting and dining room.

“There’s a pool!” Lucas declared, spotting the oversized hot tub sunk into the corner of the main room.

Ava snorted, recalling the original intent of the pools. As long as the boys were around there’d be no mating in that pool. Scala grinned, reading her thoughts, as he let Mercy crawl onto the nearby wall.

“No playing in the pool without an adult, understood?” Her hand tightened on the boys’ shoulders.

“Yes.” They chimed together.

“I think this will be fine. Thank you,” Scala said and the crewman left with a nod.

“Why don’t you boys go check out that room.” She urged them toward one of the bedrooms.

Lucas headed that way, but Yitu lingered, his expression wary.

“What’s up, sweetie?” she asked him.

“I’m staying with you? They aren’t taking me away?” Yitu’s gaze darted to Scala.

“Oh, Yitu.” She hugged the child. “Yes, you’re staying with us. I hope that’s okay.” She kissed the top of his head, careful his spines didn’t poke her in the eyes.

Yitu nodded, then just as quickly pulled away and ran after Lucas. Once they were out of sight, she turned to Scala and wrapped her arms around his waist. His large hands stroked her back as he nuzzled her hair.

“We made it,” she pressed her face to his chest.

“We did.” His grip on her tightened.

Her eyes burned as she suppressed the tears threatening to flow. The weight that had lifted from her shoulders felt immense. The sheer relief was enough to make her physically lightheaded.

“Thank you,” she sobbed.

“No, no, weakness, don’t cry, beautiful.” Scala picked her up and sat in one of the chairs.

“I’m okay.” She gave him a watery smile as he caressed her cheeks.

“I’ll tell everyone I’ll meet with them tomorrow. It’s been a long day.” He continued gently stroking her and she leaned into his touch.

She’d love it if he stayed, but shook her head. As they spoke, the Osivoire fleet was taking over the incapacitated Jurou Biljana ship. Scala had business to tend to.

“Go. It’s important. I’ll get the boys settled.” She tipped her head up and he kissed her lips.

Scala lingered and she soaked in his affection, but finally he pulled away from her mouth with a petulant groan.

“Go,” she chuckled.

“Fine. Come on, Mercy. You are officially an ambassador for your people now, and that means going to meetings when you could be kissing instead.” Scala reached for Mercy.

“I do recall I was to receive a kiss,” Mercy replied while climbing onto Scala’s arm.

“You are going to have to get your kisses elsewhere. Ava’s kisses are all mine.” Scala headed toward the door.

“Incorrect, I witnessed her performing kisses on Lucas and Yitu,” Mercy countered with their usual sarcastic wit.

Scala snorted, heading out of the suite, and she laughed at them. Her eyes widened when a pair of naked boys ran out of the bedroom and leapt into the pool.

“Gentlemen!” she shouted as water splashed everywhere.

“You’re an adult and you’re here,” Lucas declared.

“True,” she chuckled, then grinned, watching the boys play.

Life had changed.

Scala

“Thank you, First Commander. Have a safe and successful journey,” the last captain bowed and cut transmission.

The briefing with the fleet captains had gone well. Scala turned away from the viewscreen and headed out of the meeting room connected to the hangar.

“I will converse with my companions.” Mercy climbed down and slithered across the floor to greet the two Dremin who helped them flee the Jurou Biljana.

The trio met and their feathery arms intertwined in some sort of tangled embrace. Scala smiled as relief again washed over him. Everyone he cared about was safe, they were in the process of securing the Jurou Biljana vessel and plans to go after the reptile fleet were underway. Things couldn't have gone better.

Thank you! He sent up a prayer.

“I wish I knew what they were saying,” Captain Radus commented as they stood in the hangar.

Hearing the male's concern, Scala focused on the captain.

“Mercy is going to work on updating the language translator aboard your vessel,” he replied, since connecting with the crew individually wasn't a good idea.

He understood the captain's reticence. During the meeting he'd been vague when introducing the Dremin, and that included the physical alterations that made it possible for them to communicate. If the enemy ever learned what the Dremin were capable of, it would be devastating. After all the Dremin had done for them, he needed to do right by them.

“We’ve got the Jurou Biljana crew subdued aboard the Vicarius’ vessel,” Thorac reported as he and Faktil joined them.

“Good. I’d like Vicarius Kur’s body, so Yitu can mourn,” Scala requested. The youth deserved the opportunity to say goodbye.

“That is honorable of you,” Faktil commented.

“I will relay that when Faktil and I board the ship.” Thorac nodded.

“Thank you for taking on the next leg of this mission.” Scala clasped Thorac and Faktil’s forearms.

The males had saved his shell, but instead of resting and accepting accolades, they were heading right back into the thick of it.

“You have other concerns, now.” Faktil grinned, reminding him of the embarrassing incident heard over the comms.

“I’m not even disappointed,” Scala chuckled. “I wouldn’t trade Ava for all the exciting missions in the cosmos.”

He truly meant that. Being with Ava was exhilarating. Adventure surrounded her, and life with her would never be dull.

“I’m happy for you,” Thorac said earnestly. “If Ava and the young males don’t keep you busy, the Dremis certainly will.” Thorac gestured to the Dremis approaching them.

“Ah. True,” Scala chuckled.

He’d teased Mercy about being an ambassador, but it seemed that he’d also been thrust into that role.

“My companions are willing to return to the scaly beings’ vessel. They will spread our message to the rest of our kind embedded in the Jurou Biljana fleet,” Mercy conveyed what they’d discussed.

Scala quickly translated for the others before focusing on Mercy again. “I hope you relayed our deep appreciation.”

“I did. The pair are eager to aid us. They have witnessed the scaly beings stealing other flesh-bearers and would like to prevent that in the future.” A shiver worked through Mercy. Whatever had been shared must have been awful. “Traveler will be staying on the Jurou Biljana vessel, however, the Dremin of that ship wishes to join me here. They desire respite.”

“That is fine. Please convey that we will deeply miss Traveler,” he said to Mercy.

It was the truth. He owed Traveler a debt. Traveler had faith in them and saved Ava, then convinced Mercy to have mercy on him. Without the Dremin, who knows if they would have succeeded today. It was hard to say if or when their paths would cross again, and that saddened him.

“As will I,” Mercy agreed wistfully.

Scala turned to Captain Radus. “The Dremin that was imbedded in the reptile ship will be joining us.”

“So, the one called Mercy will be remaining aboard, and the unnamed one who controlled the enemy ship will also join us,” Radus clarified.

“Aye.” Scala nodded.

“We can’t communicate. I don’t know if we should assign them quarters. What food do they prefer?” Radus asked in

quick succession, clearly uncertain of what the Dremin required.

He sympathized with the captain. They'd never come across a silica-based lifeform before. The captain obviously didn't want to damage relations by being a poor host.

"Don't worry. They can reside in our quarters for now. I'm certain Mercy will let me know their needs and we'll work on the communication," he reassured Radus.

"We don't require sustenance the same as you. Although, my own space may be appealing in the future," Mercy replied, clearly considering the idea for the first time.

"Unless anyone needs more from me, I'd like to go check on Ava." Scala surveyed the group.

"I will wait here for the newcomer," Mercy said.

"Mercy will await the Dremin here in the hangar," Scala relayed then looked to his friends. "Thorac, Faktil, you have a safe and successful journey." He again clasped his friends' shoulders.

"And you, my friend." Thorac smiled, while Faktil gave him a bow.

With pride and honor, he took in the moment. He was passing the reins and taking a step in a new direction. That was never a small thing, but he was okay with it. His comrades would succeed in the next leg of this mission.

Scala gave them a final solemn nod and left. Every step away from the hangar, his elation grew, until he found himself jogging to reach Ava. This new chapter of his life was an unexpected adventure, and he welcomed it with every atom in his being.

Ava

Ava smiled wistfully at the sleeping boys as she quietly backed out of the room. Their heads barely hit the bed and they were out like a light. Happily, she hummed as she cleaned up the remnants of their snack then moved on to deal with the pool.

“I like this view.” Scala suddenly gripped her hips as she was bent grabbing a discarded towel.

Ava gasped in surprise. *God dammit, the man is quiet!* She hadn't even heard him enter. One day he was going to give her a heart attack.

“And I like that sound,” he growled, grinding his pelvis against her ass.

The deep hungry rumble made her heart leap and her nipples harden. She sucked in another stunned breath when Scala snatched her off her feet. Maybe she didn't mind him sneaking up on her.

“Where are the young?” Scala demanded, shifting her in his arms.

“Asleep.” She glanced toward the boys' room.

“Good,” he grunted.

He swiped her wrist, disengaging her combat shell, while taking long, determined strides to their bedroom, and she was naked by the time he walked through the door.

“A real bed,” Scala rasped in approval and set her down on the luxurious plush mattress.

She was confused when he stood up, rather than stretch out on top of her.

“Are you going to be joining me in this bed?” She ran a hand over her stomach to her bare breasts, then gave one a squeeze.

The lust in Scala’s red eyes sparked, burning hotter as he considered her. She licked her lips and slowly bent one knee, giving him a little peek at her pussy.

“You know you are my weakness, don’t taunt me,” he rumbled the warning then pivoted and disappeared into the connected bathroom.

She tried to see what Scala was doing, since she knew he wasn’t using the toilet. Just as abruptly he reemerged with a container in hand.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“I plan to show you.” Scala placed a knee on the mattress and it dipped under his weight.

Her stomach fluttered in anticipation. She leaned back as Scala crawled up her, until she was pinned beneath the massive man. Just enough of his weight pressed into her, to remind her just how powerful he was. It added to her mounting desire. She stroked his shoulders and his chest, reveling in the colorful, muscular flesh her touch revealed as his shell receded.

Scala sucked in a sharp breath and closed his eyes. It was a heady feeling knowing just how she affected him.

“You are mine, weakness,” he groaned, then opened his eyes and focused on her. “And I’m going to take all of you.”

The ardent threat barely registered, when his lips claimed hers and his tongue speared into her mouth. She met him with her own urgent need, her tongue tangling with his. While he kissed her senseless, his hand roved, stroking her side and stomach, before kneading her breast. He rolled one nipple, teasing it into an aching hard point. When he gently pinched it, the sensation shot straight to her pussy. She moaned into his mouth and arched against him.

“Goddess, I adore you,” Scala husked against her mouth. “I love how you taste.”

He kissed a trail down her neck and chest, his long, wet tongue darting out to sample her skin. He reached her right nipple and painted a circle around the erect bead. Scala cast her a rakish grin then blew on her nipple. The puff of air made goosebumps erupt all over and her areola tighten further.

“Yes,” he purred with satisfaction then attacked, sucking her nipple into his mouth.

Each strong pull of his mouth sent more jolts to her pussy. She squirmed beneath him as moisture squeezed from her aching core. She could feel his hot and heavy cocks buried between her knees, way too far away from where they should be. She tried to wrap her legs around him, but they were frustratingly trapped. She arched her hips against him and clutched his muscular biceps, needing more.

Scala released her breast with a pop and looked up at her. “Impatient?”

His sardonic question had her smirking. Before she could answer, he reached lower, his fingers spearing between her swollen labia to find her soaking wet.

“Yes, very impatient,” he confirmed with a hungry growl.

Scala reared back, grabbed her knees, and tugged her hips up off the bed, his face diving for her exposed pussy.

“Scala!” she gasped when his tongue shoved into her vagina with the same enthusiasm as he’d just kissed her mouth.

She gripped his head while he ravenously feasted on her pussy. His tongue curled upward, hitting her g-spot and she bucked. He savagely growled, vibrating her pussy as he zeroed in on the sensitive spot. Scala was merciless, his wicked tongue doing this tapping, stroking move against the bundle of nerves.

“Oh, fuck,” she cried as she erupted, her muscles squeezing around his invading tongue, spilling more desire that he hungrily lapped up.

He’d wrecked her with his mouth alone. God help her for what was to come.

“Mmm.” Scala licked his lips as he lowered her back to the mattress.

She panted, trying to catch her breath, but then he latched onto her swollen clit and her heart rate spiked again. Her heels dug into his back, while she shoved her pussy against his face. Plaintive moans escaped her as the pleasure quickly mounted again, radiating from her throbbing clit. The sounds just spurred Scala on. His tongue worried the swollen bead while he sucked it. Then he nipped her with his teeth.

“Ahh!” The orgasm struck at the twinge of pain. Her pussy spasmed, her stomach clenching, as the pleasure roared through her.

“Gorgeous.” Scala sat up and admired the sight of her pussy quivering in the aftermath.

His hungry stare while both straining cocks pointed at her vagina prolonged her orgasm. She was greedy. She'd come twice and wanted more.

"I need you," she insisted, attempting to wrap her legs around him and pull him back down atop her.

"You'll have me." Scala pushed her legs back down, shoving them wide.

Patience wasn't a virtue she possessed, but then she looked at his cocks with their broad crowns and thick, grooved shafts and her nervousness returned, knowing exactly what was coming.

She bit her lip when he grabbed the container from the edge of the bed. He squeezed a large clear dollop onto his fingers, before tossing the container aside. With his free hand, he spread open her slick folds, holding her ass cheeks splayed. She gasped when the cool gel met the sensitive pucker of her rear.

Oh! So that's what that was for. Her cheeks heated.

The ring of muscles tingled as Scala worked the slick gel into the taboo opening. First one knuckle then the next breached her. The cool tingling sensation spread through her tight passage, feeling utterly foreign. What was this substance?

While she was trying to decide what she thought of the strange experience, the fingers of his other hand returned to her pussy and delved into her still fluttering channel. Her breath grew labored, turning into pants when his thumb also started working her clit.

"Please, Scala," she whined as he slowly finger fucked both her holes. It was wonderful and agonizing at the same time.

Instead of giving her what she needed, Scala pulled free. He climbed up her body, his weight resting on his forearms, planted on either side of her. His colorful face with all of its masculine beauty hovered over hers. She thought he'd kiss her, but he stayed still.

“I love hearing you say my name. I love your breathy voice so full of need for me, weakness,” he rasped, his voice thick.

The intense look in his glowing eyes leveled her. It was adoration, desire, vulnerability and a dozen other emotions, which had more than simply her lust simmering to the surface.

“You never have to beg me for anything. I am yours,” he murmured, his lips brushing lightly against hers. “I was so wrong for so long. I didn't even know how jaded I was and then you came into my life. You redeemed me, Ava. Goddess, I love you.”

She was so choked up, she didn't know what to say, tears burning in her eyes. If anything, it was the other way around. The big, sweet man rescued her, then helped save her brother despite the danger. He redeemed her faith that good people existed in the universe. He mended the angry, helpless void that had been gnawing at her, and that was a miracle. But before she could say any of that Scala kissed her.

Ava didn't care that she was crying as she wrapped her arms and legs around him, getting lost in his kiss. Scala curled his hips and his hot arousals nudged at the slick entrances of both her vagina and ass. She didn't tense up. She needed this man to possess her in every way possible. She needed it like the air she breathed.

The pressure built while his hips flexed, the broad crowns on his steely cocks urging her to open for him. The bite of pain

from the ring of muscles stretching was almost unbearable, as his engorged head slowly worked its way into her ass. She arched against him, her nails digging into his back and taut ass. The unfathomable sensation was multiplied by the thick beast also sinking into her soaked pussy.

“Oh!” she cried into Scala’s mouth when he finally popped through the constricted opening.

She was full to the breaking point and he’d barely entered her. The rim on both crowns pressed against her nerve laden flesh. The one shoved against her g-spot warred with the one in her straining ass. It was hard to say if this was pleasure or pain. She spasmed around the thick beasts, trying to rectify the intense sensation. Her quivering muscles elicited a lusty groan from Scala and his cocks jerked inside her. She gasped again from the spike of exquisite torment.

Scala lifted up. His loving expression had turned savage and hungry.

“Now, my weakness, you are mine,” he growled, pushing his lengths deeper.

With every unrelenting inch he forced her to accept, she spiraled further into the miasma where only this, his possession, existed. She panted, trying to catch her breath when his hips bumped against her ass. He touched places inside her she didn’t know existed.

Oh god! He was all in. It’s too much. Oh god!

Scala rocked his pelvis, grinding against her clit, while flexing the beastly cocks inside her.

“Scala!” she cried out from the spike of pleasure.

Scala’s lips slammed into hers. One of his large hands curled around and clasped her shoulder, the other gripping her

hair at the base of her neck. He ravenously consumed her mouth as his arousals pulled almost all the way out, only to shove back into her again. She bowed against him, reeling from the way his grooved cocks abraded her sensitive walls. With each lunge he moved faster, battering her womb and the deepest recesses of her ass. Her cries grew in intensity, mixing with his savage panting growls and the slick sounds of him fucking her into oblivion. The pleasure coiling tighter around her was darker, eclipsing what she knew about ecstasy and the orgasms she'd had before. This was her undoing.

“Yes!” she wailed, then detonated in a searing, rolling wave of ecstasy, her muscles convulsing around Scala’s throbbing cocks.

“Ava!” he snarled, frantically fucking her faster, twisting the pleasure.

Her cry broke, her mouth frozen open on the breathless delirious scream. He shoved in one final time, grinding hard against her clit. His muscular body jerked atop hers as his hot seed bathed her pussy and filled her ass, overwhelming her battered senses.

“I love you,” she tried to say, lost in the profound euphoria.

TWENTY-ONE



ANOTHER ADVENTURE

Scala

Scala smiled contentedly as he held his sleeping mate. He could doze with her in his arms forever. What would his life have been like if he hadn't insisted on going after Ava in that outpost?

Empty.

Love wasn't something he'd let himself have. It was a vulnerability he'd shut out. Then Ava stepped into his world and with a single touch tore down the walls around his heart the way she weakened his shell. And now he had more than he'd ever imagined.

"Thank you, goddess," he whispered the prayer, lovingly placing a kiss on Ava's forehead.

"There is an issue that requires your aid," Mercy spoke.

"Hmm?" Ava blinked as she roused.

Scala's brow furrowed as he panned the bedroom but didn't find Mercy. What did the Dremin want? He was about to reply, when the comm system pinged. His scowl deepened hearing the urgent tone.

"Aye," he called out in frustration.

"The Dremin have taken control of our navigation and are redirecting our course!" Captain Radus urgently reported. "You're needed immediately in the control room."

"Shit! What?" Ava sat up in confusion.

"Vasta!" Scala cursed as he hustled out of bed. "I'm coming."

“I was in the process of relaying the information,” Mercy continued. “I am attempting to get my companion to cease, however, they are insistent on redirecting the vessel.”

“Why?” Scala rubbed his face in consternation. He had no doubt the reply was going to be an interesting one.

“When my new companion arrived from the reptile ship, you two were making sex, so we toured the vessel and observed your progeny. Then my companion wished to be alone, so I allowed it. I am unsure what precipitated this,” Mercy relayed.

“Is it trying to return to the Jurou Biljana fleet or go home?” Scala asked as he engaged his combat shell, since it was faster than finding clothes.

“No. We are headed to a planet I don’t recognize. I have expressed the need to cease, however, this one is very stubborn and incommunicative.” Mercy was clearly frustrated.

“Great,” Ava sarcastically commented while her combat shell slid into place, hiding her gorgeous body.

Maybe bringing the Dremin aboard who’d been embedded in the Jurou Biljana starship was a bad idea.

They emerged from the bedroom to find Yitu and Lucas in the sitting area batting around one of the cushions like a ball.

Ava waved to them to get their attention. “Boys, stay here. We’ll return shortly.”

Scala hit the controls by the estuary, sealing the pool.

“What is happening now?” Lucas asked, fear entering his eyes.

Scala was equally worried. The Dremin were a complex race with their own emotions and growing understanding of

the universe. He wanted to hope that this particular Dremin was well meaning, but he couldn't say for sure.

"Just stay put, please. Everything will be okay," Ava said reassuringly and they exited into the corridor.

He locked their quarters so the little males couldn't wander, then picked Ava up and jogged down the hall. They quickly reached the control room and entered to find one Dremin attached to the console with three crewmen from security aiming their disrupters at it.

"Crap!" Ava murmured, voicing his exact thoughts as he set her down.

"It refuses to detach so we can resume course." Captain Ratus jabbed a hand toward the Dremin.

"Please tell me you didn't fire," Scala asked as he stepped around security.

"No." Ratus shook his head. From the captain's tense expression, the male had heavily considered it, though.

"Who is this?" Scala asked.

"Mercy," the Dremin on the console replied.

Scala sighed. It was a very good thing the crew hadn't fired.

"Detach, so the crew can relax," he requested.

"If I do, my stubborn companion will retreat into the system, ignoring me entirely," Mercy relayed.

That's when he noticed one of Mercy's feathery arms was entwined with another poking out of the console.

"Mercy is trying to coax the other Dremin out," Scala explained to the captain and crew, pointing to the entwined

arms.

“Maybe the Dremin is afraid. I’m afraid and I trust you guys.” Ava warily looked at the armed crew as she joined him at the console.

With a sympathetic frown, she reached out and touched the end of the troublesome new Dremin’s arm. Scala drew in a sharp breath, his concern doubling, when its tentacle instantly latched onto her hand, the feathery projections burrowing into her.

Ava

She couldn't imagine what the Dremin had been through at the hands of the Jurou Biljana. Now it was on a strange ship, among new unfamiliar people who were angry. The one other Dremin aboard, Mercy, was also frustrated. That had to be upsetting. She understood how daunting this all was. She'd been in the Dremin's position. No wonder it didn't want to communicate.

She reached out to the Dremin and gently stroked the tendril. The feathery threads instantly wrapped around her hand. She stilled, resisting the urge to pull away, when they pierced her combat shell and embedded in her wrist.

"It's okay," she said to Scala as his hand tightened on her other arm.

"You tell me the instant it's not." Scala scowled in worry, knowing just what the Dremin were capable of.

There was no pain, just like when Traveler had done the same to her.

"There's no need to fear. We're just trying to understand what is going on," she gently crooned to the Dremin.

"What is it saying?" Scala asked.

Her head tilted as she tried to interpret what she was sensing. "There are whispers and flickers of images, but nothing I can make out yet. Maybe we're still connecting."

She closed her eyes and relaxed. Her brow furrowed when an image appeared of her cleaning up after the boys on the Jurou Biljana vessel. She was looking down on herself, like her spirit had left her body, and she realized this was from the

Dremin's perspective. The song she had been singing to herself reached her and it was soothing.

What is this? the tentative voice asked.

"It's a song. I tend to sing when I'm happy and to entertain the boys," she replied.

"What does singing have to do with anything?" Captain Radus asked in agitation, but she ignored him, keeping her eyes closed.

I enjoy it.

She watched as the Dremin flicked through her memories of singing, like a playlist on shuffle.

"We don't have songs. They are pleasant," Mercy said, listening in on their conversation.

It brings calm, the new Dremin added.

She was right. The Dremin *was* stressed.

"Good, I'm glad. It does the same for me, too." Her finger soothingly caressed the Dremin's tentacle. She didn't expect her song to be the topic of conversation, but it was a start. "I could call you Song, if you'd like?" she suggested to the unnamed Dremin.

Captain Radus huffed, clearly thinking this was ridiculous, but she was connecting with the Dremin and that took patience. Scala scowled at the man in censure.

I do not have a name. Traveler conveyed that I would need one to communicate with flesh-bearers but nothing occurred to me. I do like Song.

"Good." She smiled. "I didn't get to say thank you, Song, for halting the Jurou Biljana ship and relaying the coordinates

for their fleet.”

A sudden flash of fear worked through her. The image of Lucas longingly telling Yitu about Earth flickered in her mind, followed by the distinctive image of her blue planet.

“Is that where we’re going, to my home, Earth?” she asked, stunned.

Yes. It is in danger. Song sounded panicked.

“In danger, how?” she gasped, gripping Scala’s hand.

More images surfaced of other worlds being pillaged by the Jurou Biljana. The carnage was horrific. With a sad sinking feeling, she realized Song had witnessed all of it. The trauma Song experienced passed through their link and she shook from its intensity. No wonder Song was hesitant to communicate with anyone, even its own kind, it was suffering immensely.

Many of the scaly beings just crossed the rift. We must prevent the destruction, Song ominously conveyed.

“Oh no. We were too late.” Tears filled her eyes as she looked at Scala.

Scala

The news Ava relayed from the Dremin was devastating. The Jurou Biljana were already using the rift drives and had started sending their fleet through the wormhole. The exact thing they'd worked to prevent was happening now.

"Thank you for telling us," Scala spoke to Song. "We have many other ships that will go after the Jurou Biljana. We won't let them harm Earth, but this vessel needs to stop."

"As much as I'd love to see my planet, going home would put Lucas and Yitu in danger, especially if the Jurou Biljana are heading there. Scala's people are very capable. I trust them and I need you to trust them, too. We need to keep the children out of conflict. They don't need to experience that," Ava urged.

Instantly the ship slowed. Yet again, with her sweet brave nature, Ava had connected with the Dremin.

His sigh of relief was echoed by the rest of the crew in the control room. Scala watched in awe as Song emerged from the console, moving up Ava's arm.

"It's okay, everything is okay now," Ava murmured as she cradled the Dremin almost like a baby.

"You are amazing." He pulled her against him, careful of Song, and kissed her head.

She smiled at him, then turned to Song. "Will you be okay returning to our quarters with Mercy? We need to share this information with the rest of Scala's people."

"Yes," Song hesitantly answered and Ava gently placed the Dremin on the floor next to Mercy.

“Join me, Song,” Mercy encouraged. “I regret my own stubbornness. You were attempting to aid our new companions. We both have much to learn about the universe.”

Ava waited for the Dremin to leave before turning her gaze back to him.

“Maybe you and I should go. We could stay out of danger and help communicate with the Dremin. That would help stop the Jurou Biljana, right?” Determination was mixed with Ava’s concern.

He’d seen this expression before. Scala smiled incredulously at Ava.

“My brave, sweet weakness, you’re ready to run right back into the fray, just like you did at the reptile outpost when we first met.” He pulled her close.

“Well, that worked out.” She nibbled her lip.

“Yes, it did,” he chuckled, squeezing her tight. It had worked out better than he could’ve ever imagined. “But I think Thorac and Faktil can handle this.”

Scala leaned in and captured Ava’s mouth, kissing her with every ounce of love he felt. They had their own adventures and he was looking forward to them.



EPILOGUE

A Month Later - Somewhere on Osi

Ava

A grin spread across her face as they emerged from the cruiser. The boys happily bounded down the ramp.

“Yitu, Lucas, be careful,” Tiba, one of Scala’s mothers, called after the pair hurrying down the ramp.

“You don’t have shells,” Ula, Scala’s actual birth mother, worriedly followed, along with Brae, the third matron.

“Let them be little males,” Rrow, Scala’s father, took off after his three overprotective wives.

Ava chuckled as Scala’s patrem and matrons debated just how much mothering the boys needed.

“I used to see these conversations very differently.” Scala wrapped his arms around her. “Now, I think my patrem secretly enjoys the harassment.”

She looked up at Scala to see him smiling at his parents. It made her heart sing with joy. The way Scala had spoken of his parents when they first met, one would expect them to be cold and constantly bickering. They weren’t. The pain of losing Scala’s brother had affected them, and tinged Scala’s memories. As she studied Scala’s handsome face while he watched them, she could tell that wound was healing.

“I love your conclave.” She smiled and rubbed his chest.

This wasn’t his entire conclave. He had several sisters, many who were mated and had children. Meeting all of them when they arrived on Osi had been an overwhelming family

reunion. She'd never remember them all. However, this trip was just for their immediate family.

Ava turned back to the view of the park. It was so damn sweet that Scala remembered she and Lucas loved visiting the park back home, and had arranged this camping trip in one of Osi's preserves.

She took in the trees lining the river and the rolling sandy dunes beyond the oasis of life. Her eyes widened at how familiar it was.

"This is from our shared dream, the simulation when the Dremin were healing us," she gasped.

"Aye." Scala grinned.

"I love it." She beamed. Seeing this place in person made this camping trip even more special and exciting.

"I'm glad you like the surprise." He hugged her. "Oh, I better go save our little males. My matrons are trying to carry them." Scala released her and jogged down the cruiser ramp.

Ava snorted at the sight of Ula cradling Lucas like a baby. The relief on Lucas's face when Scala came to the rescue turned her snort into an all-out laugh. A little more than a month ago, she didn't have much to laugh about, and certainly not a full belly laugh that made her almost pee. All that had changed.

"I like that. Maybe my name should be Laugh," Song said, a wispy arm coiling around her ankle.

She smiled at the Dremin. Everyday Song found something else they liked and debated changing their name.

"That's a good name. Laughing is wonderful." She went along with Song, not minding the routine. It was a sign that

Song was finding joy to replace the sadness they'd experienced.

"I will think on it. Mercy said I should heavily consider decisions that involve others and converse with them about it. You have to use my name more than I, so I decided to mention it," Song said thoughtfully.

She smiled at the good advice. In many ways Song seemed like a child, if the Dremin had stages of development like humanoids did. She should've asked Mercy before the Dremin decided to rejoin the fleet. She missed Mercy's salty attitude and Traveler's inquisitive nature. Hopefully Mercy, Traveler, Faktil and Thorac were okay. She'd never be able to thank them enough for fighting to protect her home world.

"Thank you for telling me. I will like whatever name you choose," she reassured Song. "We better join the group. The boys are looking antsy."

She was about to walk down the ramp when Song's arm tightened around her calf. She paused and looked down at the Dremin.

"There is something else I should convey," Song slowly said. "It is the reason Mercy gave me that advice."

"Okay." She patiently waited.

"I learned about love mates and making sex. We don't do that."

A grin tugged at Ava's lips, curious of where this was going. These strange discussions were normal with the Dremin and always entertaining or enlightening.

"Yes, I'm aware. Your people have progeny in a way that's called budding on my planet." She nodded in understanding,

proud she remembered the biology lesson on asexual reproduction.

“You and Scala aren’t the same even though you are love mates. When you make sex, if it creates progeny, your progeny won’t be able to reproduce,” Song relayed.

Ava’s heart sank at the revelation. She and Scala hadn’t looked into it deeply or even discussed having children. For now, Lucas and Yitu were enough. But the idea that any children they had couldn’t have children of their own made her sad.

“I changed that,” Song admitted.

“What?!” Ava’s eyes widened.

“I altered your physiology one of the times we connected. I should have discussed it with you first. I understand that now,” Song sounded remorseful.

The ramifications of Song altering their very DNA was staggering, yet she couldn’t be offended. The Dremin were still learning how to interact with people who were entirely different from them. If she was honest and looked past how freaky the concept was, Song had actually given them a gift. Her heart sped up as she glanced at Scala laughing with the boys. Warmth replaced the sadness of a moment ago, and she cupped her belly. The idea of having his babies brought tears to her eyes. She already knew he was an amazing dad.

“Thank you for telling me,” she wistfully replied. “Mercy was right. Please discuss it before you make changes to my body in the future, but I am not upset. It actually makes me happy.” She reached down and patted Song.

“Are you ready?” Scala called to them.

“Come on!” Lucas hollered as he and Yitu tugged Scala toward the path through the trees.

“Coming. Let’s go before we get left behind,” she said to Song.

“I will close the vessel and follow,” Song replied.

“All right, but don’t alter any wildlife you encounter either,” she added, just to cover all the bases, before heading down the ramp.

“Of course.”

As she was walking toward Scala to share what Song did, Rrow intercepted her. His sober expression made her nervous.

Oh. What now?

“Did you know I brought Scala here on a hunting trek when he was young?” his father asked, walking alongside her toward the trail.

“No. I didn’t.” She knew the place was embedded in Scala’s memory but she didn’t know why.

“I didn’t imagine I’d be back here with him.” Rrow looked fondly at Scala, then turned his gaze back to her. “Thank you.”

The appreciation in his eyes made her vision blur and tears form as he pulled her into a hug.

“I can’t take credit for that,” she insisted. Scala had figured out where he’d gone wrong with his family all on his own.

“Maybe not, but I don’t think we’d be here if you weren’t in his life.”

There were a lot of things that would be different if she and Scala hadn’t met. She’d still be angry at the universe and trying to escape the Jurou Biljana. Worst of all, the love she

felt for the amazing exotic man wouldn't exist. That was the saddest and most unfathomable part. All these wonderful things were happening because of a twist of fate.

"Thank you for welcoming me into your family." She hugged Rrow back, loving the feel of a good solid dad hug. She missed those.

"Rrow, don't you know that's Scala's weakness?" Brea teased as Rrow released her.

"I think you have enough females," Tiba attempted to sound stern, snagging Rrow's arm and leading him away.

"Oh." Rrow feigned a guilty expression, looking a lot like Scala did when he was being rotten.

Ava wiped her eyes as she laughed.

"What's my patrem done?" Scala backtracked to join her.

"He's trying to steal your weakness. You better watch him," Ula warned with a grin.

"As if Rrow even knows what to do with the three of us, let alone a fourth," Brea scoffed, giving Rrow a playful nudge.

Ava continued laughing at the four parents heading down the path. They certainly loved giving each other a hard time.

"Is this true?" Scala wrapped a possessive arm around her, pretending to scowl at his father.

"Well, he is my type. Reminds me of someone I know. Hmm. Who is that?" She thoughtfully tapped her chin, a smile tugging at her lips.

"Who?!" Scala's eyes widened in mock offense before an impish expression entered them.

Suddenly he yanked her off her feet.

“Scala!” she barked when he tossed her over his shoulder.

“Don’t break her. She has no shell!” Ula hollered when Scala ran past the parents.

Lucas and Yitu erupted in laughter, and broke into a run, but Scala swiftly outpaced the boys.

“Remember this?” he asked, coming around the bend in the riverside trail.

“I do.” She grinned, recalling the way he’d run with her like a caveman through these very woods. How could she forget?

Scala slowed and shifted her into the cradle of his big arms and her eyes widened taking in the stepped pyramid. This is what he’d been talking about. She was actually going to get to see the amazing temple.

Her gaze shifted back to Scala’s. Hunger burned in his red eyes. Her cheeks heated at another memory of what happened while they were here. She licked her lips and reached up to caress his face as Scala leaned in close.

“I love you,” she said, fixating on his colorful lips as his shell receded.

“And I adore you, weakness,” he rasped, his voice thick and deep.

Just as his lips met hers, the boys boisterously came running into the clearing.

“Oh, cool,” Lucas declared, obviously spotting the temple.

“Gross!” Yitu said, and she knew he was staring at her and Scala.

“Interrupted, just like the last time we were here,” she whispered against Scala’s mouth.

“They’re all sleeping outside!” Scala groaned.

With a grin that made her cheeks hurt, she kissed Scala. Love had redeemed them both. There was no way this was just a chance twist of fate. No. This was meant to be, and she didn’t care who saw the miracle.

The End

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you, and I hope you enjoyed *Warrior Redeemed* (Cadi Warriors Book 9). If you would be so kind to leave a review it would be greatly appreciated.

The series isn't done, so stay tuned for book 10.

Please find more of my tales on Amazon.

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* * *

Series Timeline

My stories standalone, each featuring a new couple, but are best if read in order. As you progress, you'll see I have woven together my Cadi Warriors and Anguis Defenders series.

Viper's Hope (Anguis Defenders Book 1)

Tara's Big O (Anguis Defenders Book 2)

The Warrior's Pet (Cadi Warriors Book 1)

Warriors' Providence (Cadi Warriors Book 2)

Warrior's Paradox (Cadi Warriors Book 3)

Warrior's Pain (Cadi Warriors Book 4)

Warrior's Purpose (Cadi Warriors Book 5)

Warrior's Plight (Cadi Warriors Book 6)

Unleashing Boaz (Anguis Defenders Book 3)

Warrior Revealed (Cadi Warriors Book 7)

Warrior Rescued (Cadi Warriors Book 8)

Forsaken (Anguis Defenders Book 4)

Warrior Redeemed (Cadi Warriors Book 9)

ALSO BY

Cadi Warriors Series

***The Warrior's Pet* (Cadi Warriors Book 1)**

<https://books2read.com/WarriorsPet>

Giselle didn't know how long she lay near catatonic, willing the terrible headache to go away. She sat up as one of the reptilian aliens entered. Giselle backed up and looked around, realizing she was alone in a gilded cage.

“What's going on?” she stammered.

“If you're wise you'll keep quiet. Pets don't speak on this planet,” the creature admonished.

A pet? Giselle's eyes widened. She hadn't misheard.

Her cage was moved into a large tent. There were hundreds of aliens gathered for the auction, and these creatures were the largest yet. The fearsome creatures had long tails that rose out from what looked like chainmail kilts. Their flesh was red like some kind of demon, with dark black hair, and stone-cold obsidian eyes. Giselle shrunk back when she saw the creatures also had sharp fangs. How in the hell could she get out of this, and if she did, how could she possibly survive on an alien planet?

Kagan beheld his pet. Nothing like her kind had ever set foot on Cadi. He wondered where in the universe her unique species hailed from. Giselle refused to behave and even enjoyed his attempts to rebuke her, reveling in the rough handling a male usually refrained from with females. She was brave instead of meek, standing up for herself in a sea of foreigners.

Can Giselle find acceptance and love on an alien planet, or will she always be nothing more than a warrior's pet?

Caution – This book has adult content and may have triggers for some.

Anguis Defenders Series

Viper's Hope (Anguis Defenders Book 1)

<https://books2read.com/vipershope>

Hope covered her ringing ears as she stared wide-eyed at the molten rock strafing across the sky. It got larger and brighter with the smoke trail parting the horizon. The sudden eruption of water out at sea was cataclysmic when the meteor struck. The wave of water that barreled toward San Francisco a moment later was small at first, then grew in size. Hope watched aghast as the water pushed aside massive buildings. She couldn't begin to fathom the level of devastation in front of her.

As if the tragedy she'd witnessed wasn't enough, something lurked in the trees outside her campsite. She watched as a portion of the tree separated from the trunk. The colors morphed into a bronzed, earthy tan figure of a man. The camouflaged man was at least seven foot tall with well-built legs and a massive broad chest. He swayed hypnotically as he walked with the sleekness of a predator. His facial features were not human, yet not altogether frightening. He was an alien, a giant freaking alien, and he was abducting her!

Before the scourge of the universe struck, Viper never aspired to do more than rule his people, but his entire life had changed in the blink of an eye. The tragedy galvanized him with a single-minded purpose, to see to it he defended the Anguis and any other race unfortunate enough to cross paths with the plague, and wipe it from existence.

Finding his mate was the farthest thing from Viper's mind as he attempted to rescue the humans off the doomed planet. With his own planet in turmoil over aiding so many other species and the universe at risk from the catastrophic plague, Viper never expected to find Hope.

Caution – This book has adult content and may have triggers for some. There is a rough scene where our heroine is chained and taken by our hero. However, fear not, in the end, Hope finds the experience mind-blowing.

Fated Mate Series

***Nameless Fate* (Fated Mate Book 1)**

<https://books2read.com/NamelessFate>

Harper might get an uncanny gut feeling every now and then, but that didn't mean she believed in portents, and certainly not the kind that got her abducted. As she gripped the bars of her cage in the alien prison, it sank in that she seriously had been kidnapped from Earth, to become the fated consort of some alien prince. This wasn't some elaborate prank, or government experiment. True to form, Harper pissed off the tyrannical king with her refusal. Now she found herself at the mercy of convicts, locked away and forgotten in the bowels of a mountain.

Harper's gaze fell on a shadowy beast of a man, sitting casually on the rundown catwalk. The imposing man looked like he ruled the prison. He was the color of midnight, and his eyes were that eerie arctic blue, that was nearly colorless. Harper shivered as he regarded her.

All Nameless knew was the Hold, with its misery and struggle. He never wanted to keep a female, surviving was hard enough, but that was before the Pink Pearl dropped into his world. Nameless had never seen anything like the stunning exotic little creature. Not only was she the catalyst for strange dreams and revelations about his past, but she made him feel. He had to have her.

Harper wanted free of the alien prison, and she wanted to go home, except Nameless wasn't prepared or willing to let her go, even if she hated him because of it. He owned every part of her, and bound her to him in ways that could never be undone, collar or no collar. In her wildest dreams, she never imagined the twists destiny could take, or that she would find soul-deep satisfaction with such a nameless fate.

Follow Harper and Nameless as they struggle to get free of the Hold, and seek their revenge on the despot responsible for putting them there.

Caution – This book has adult content and may have triggers for some. This book contains erotic scenes where the dominant hero bends the heroine to his will. What pisses her off the most, is that she likes it.

Individual Titles

***Loving Libra* (Astrological Mates Series)**

<https://books2read.com/LovingLibra>

***Hard as Rock* (Khargals of Duras Series)**

<https://books2read.com/HardAsRock>

***Ruffled Feathers* (Once Upon A Harem Series)**

<https://books2read.com/ruffledfeathers>

The Warlord's Gift

<https://books2read.com/WarlordsGift>

ABOUT STEPHANIE WEST

USA Today bestselling sci-fi and paranormal romance author. All my tales feature strong, gutsy, and sometimes gifted heroines, usually human, overcoming difficult odds. Expect a lot of action and steamy scenes that don't fade to black. Generally, the romantic adventures I tell are about one hero and heroine, but occasionally a girl needs more. My alien or paranormal heroes are growly and often scarred, but with marshmallow centers. Although I've been called dark and told my stories push boundaries, they always end happily ever after.

As a child, I had difficulty learning to read, so anything I took an interest in was deemed acceptable. I have always enjoyed fairy tales, mythology, science fiction, and action. However, romance inspired me most of all, love being the greatest adventure. As I read, my mind wanders, spinning its own tales. So, after encouragement from friends, I figured I'd share my ramblings with the world, and my life as a science fiction and paranormal romance author began. I try to use my tales as a way to share the various escapades, comedies, and tragedies that have peppered my life, from archaeology in the hot sun to riding on a Harley with a dark stranger. It is my greatest hope you finish each story inspired to make your dreams come true no matter how impossible they may seem.

Thank you for going on this journey with me and here's to the imagination and a little daydream.

