

MATES OF THE ASHERAAH

ALIEN WARRIOR
BOUNTY

AN ALIEN WARRIOR ROMANCE
ZETA STAR
and **JADE IO**

ALIEN WARRIOR BOUNTY

AN ALIEN WARRIOR ROMANCE

ZETA STAR

JADE IO

CONTENTS

[About This Book](#)

1. [Skylar](#)
2. [Tan](#)
3. [Skylar](#)
4. [Tan](#)
5. [Skylar](#)
6. [Tan](#)
7. [Skylar](#)
8. [Tan](#)
9. [Skylar](#)
10. [Tan](#)
11. [Skylar](#)
12. [Skylar](#)
13. [Manipulator Skargath: Kohath Flesh Shifter](#)
14. [Skylar](#)
15. [Tan](#)
16. [Skylar](#)
17. [Tan](#)
18. [Skylar](#)
19. [Tan](#)
20. [Manipulator Skargath: Kohath Flesh Shifter](#)
21. [Skylar](#)
22. [Tan](#)

23. [Tan](#)

24. [Skylar](#)

25. [Skylar](#)

26. [Tan](#)

27. [Manipulator Skargath](#)

28. [Skylar](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgements and Special Thanks](#)

[About Zeta Star](#)

ABOUT THIS BOOK

First, I fled my home planet. Then, my last posting blew up. Now, lost in space, can I find my heart's home in the hard-scaled arms of an alien captain whose crew sees me as the enemy?

Skylar:

It's a bad day when you wake up to alert sirens and screaming. It's a worse day when you barely hit the escape pod before your spaceship explodes. And it's the worst day when your only chance of survival puts you on the wrong side of the Neutral Zone.

The aliens over here will eat you alive. Literally. That's what everyone says. Except Tan hiccup Solish (it's a little hard to pronounce) seems different. When I meet all eight feet of him with the gold scales, tail, wings, and those biceps, it's terrifying. And maybe a little intriguing. He says I'm the ship's bounty, and it doesn't sound like a menu item. He seems hungry for me in another way. And I admit, I might just be feeling it.

Maybe we've gotten things on the other side of the Neutral Zone all wrong. And if so, is Tan hiccup Solish the home my heart has searched for all along?

Raiva Tan'Solish

It's been five generations since we've had a visitor cross the Neutral Zone. If our records are correct, this creature, Skylar Zavien, is of a species designated 'human.' If my nose is right, this human is female. And given how my hearts start pumping double-time on seeing her, this human female is my mate.

This could be trouble.

Worse, she has mistaken me for our race's sworn foe, and she thinks I'm going to eat her alive. Worse than that, some in my command believe she is a spy. And they will prove it, even if that means her death. As Raiva of the Starshadow, my crew must come first. As this female's mate, I will make the universe burn before I let anything hurt her.

Caught between the claws of our enemies and the schemes of false friends, Skylar and I must stand together or risk losing everything—including each other.

Alien Warrior Bounty is a full length (and you know we mean full length) action-packed, science fiction romance delivering all the feels and some good chuckles along the way. HEA guaranteed.

SKYLAR

COULD this day get any worse?

Why would I ask myself something like that? I press my index and middle fingers to my heart to beg mercy of the stars. Not that I'm religious outside of a life-or-death crisis. It's just that my short twenty-two years of living have taught me things can always get worse.

That said, this is bad. Like 'skimming the shockwave of an explosion in a low-budget escape pod' bad.

My once home, the cargo ship Titan, does the explosion-implosion thing you only see in deep space disaster vids. Which I guess makes sense. This is a deep space disaster.

"Fex," I cuss to the empty pod, "Fexity fexing fexer!" Swearing is supposed to make one feel better, right?

It's not working.

As the Titan crunch-burn-snuffs, I can only pray to the stars my sister Ishini made it out alive. She'd have been on shift in the galley when the alarms sounded, and she'd have had the sense to run.

I bet she's floating and cussing along in one of these escape pods, just like me. Except she knows more cuss words.

Ishini made it out.

And if she didn't—?

No. I can't think about that. Not now.

I press a few buttons and after a few scratchy sounds and flickers on the display surface, a navigational model of the area around me comes up.

Thank the stars! It wasn't a sure thing. The lowest bidder contracted everything on the cargo ship Titan that I, until the exploding part, called home.

But now I have eyes on the outside world. I grin as I tap at the surface, calling up the transponders for the other pods. It takes a few tries. Then I look at the swarm of escape pods and swear again.

Where are they going?

More importantly, why am I not going with them?

My pod is spinning at a vector 167 degrees off from the others, which is basically the opposite direction.

The distance between us increases by the second. That's physics.

I look around the pod frantically, trying to recall the escape pod training. I'm a navigation officer. I can read the display. Or I could with the proper star charts. Which I don't have. Escape pods don't have great piloting systems. They're supposed to know where they're going. But mine has a flashing red light over the programmed coordinates.

"Stupid, stupid, Skylar," I mumble to myself, tapping at the flashing red warning.

Error: AIC5974-328 pops up.

That's helpful. Not.

As the second navigator on my now-exploding cargo ship, I should know all the codes, right? But this is my first posting in the Federated Universal Alliance. It wasn't as glamorous as I'd hoped, but being with my sister made it bearable, better than the Caliban colony we'd left on the run.

Luck might still be with me because as I look around, I find an emergency pod tablet floating in the third cabinet I search. I grab it like my life depends on it, because it does.

I search Error: AIC5974-328.

Warning: Off course. Adjust course to rejoin other escape pods.

No shit.

“Changing course.” I scan the tablet for the essentials on how to get back to the others. “Oxygen levels, rad system, comm system, nav system—changing course,” I read the words, then reread them. It’s nothing like the Titan’s main nav system, but it’s doable.

Following the button sequence, my pod sluggishly turns toward the other pods. Even on the right course, I’m way behind them. I read about adding speed and the necessary fuel consumption needed to accomplish this.

“Fex,” I conclude. Speeding up might catch them, but I risk running out of fuel. They’re disappearing off my radar as they move beyond my pod’s tracking range. “Things just keep getting better and better.”

I close my eyes to think, then reopen them with a plan. Skirting the Mangrel neutral zone isn’t ideal, but according to the charts in the pod’s system—which were probably updated sometime around the year I was born, but what’s a couple of decades?—there is a habitable planet just on the other side.

And this is a FUA escape pod, so my codes will get me through the minefield without setting anything off.

I hope.

Please, please let me come up with a better solution.

A soft bleep interrupts my thoughts. My oxygen is one-third depleted.

Of course, it is.

There’s no way I ran through thirty percent of my oxygen in less than twenty minutes, which means someone didn’t do their job in refilling the oxygen and I didn’t have time to check it before launching it.

Low fuel. Low air.

I'm out of good options, so we're going with the bad one. I just have to make it to the closest habitable planet and hope there aren't any Mangrel out there waiting with knives and forks to eat me alive.

The oxygen light blinks, urging me on, as I turn the pod toward the Mangrel neutral zone. I'm terrified, but I have no choice. I'll get through this. One tiny escape pod is nothing in the vast depths of space. Once I'm on the planet, I'll be able to hide.

I'm at 55% oxygen when I cross the minefield. I'll be at 20% when I reach the planet. I can see it growing closer on the display. And then I see the battlecruiser.

It's monstrously large and way too close. The jamming technology on that ship must be incredible. Either that or the scanners on this escape pod are awful. Probably some mix of the two.

Maybe it doesn't see me. Maybe I'll just drift by, safe.

I have three breaths to hope. Then the pod lurches as the battlecruiser latches onto me with a tractor beam, and I know I am going to die.

Die fexing horribly.

I spend the next ten seconds or so searching for a place to hide. Nope. This isn't an adventure vid where escape pods have nice little cubbies and hidden blasters under convenient bulkheads.

As the ship grows on my viewscreen, my horror is matched only by rising panic, the terror of how my life will end.

The massive Mangrel battlecruiser has its main, secondary, and tertiary batteries all pointed at my tiny escape pod.

Overkill, but that's what Mangrel are known for. Maybe they'll blow me up and put me out of my misery. But Mangrel eat other sentients. We're a delicacy for them, so they won't vaporize me unless I can show myself as an actual threat.

Maybe I should vent my O2? Death by vacuum is at least fast. I flip through the manual, but nope, there's a safety lock. And I

don't have time to figure out how to get around it. Ishini could do it, but I'm not as good as my sister at jerry-rigging stuff.

Is there anything I can use as a weapon?

There's a plastic cup. I could break it. Use one of the shards? Like a fexing action vid except I'm about twenty pounds of muscle out of shape and the closest I've gotten to a physical throwdown was a slap fight with Emmy Tigelius when we were nine.

I could stab myself?

Pulling in a deep breath, I stomp at the plastic cup. It slides across the deck to tap against the bulkhead and spin.

Fex.

"I am going to die." Nightmare holovids are playing behind my eyes. Mangrel eat people, and I'm helpless to stop this, caught in the grip of a force far beyond my control. "Please, let it be quick," I plead silently, hoping they won't torture me for information I don't have. Or torture me just for the fun of it. For flavoring. I've seen the vids. They're fictionalized, which means the truth is worse.

As the pod enters the landing bay, I dive for the cup. Maybe I can bludgeon someone with it.

The pod's hatch hisses open.

"Here goes nothing," I whisper to myself, gripping the cup like it's going to do something besides hold water.

Framed in the widening circular opening of the pod's entrance stands two monstrous armored aliens. Their armor is ink black, framing thick legs, a wide torso, hands tipped with steel claws, and are those wings? A tail? I look up, up, and up into dark faceplates with glowing red eyes.

Shadow armor, glowing red eyes, wings—yeah, I'm fexed.

One holds a massive blaster. Or disrupter. The barrel crackles with blue energy.

I drop the cup.

Tap.

The barrel whips toward it, then back to me.

The other shouts out something I don't understand, but waves his hand—yes, the armored hand has claws—in a gesture that looks like, “come here.”

I stand, debating the relative merits of staying put and getting blasted or walking out and getting eaten, and I stay put.

The one with the blaster growls out something else and his companion gives something like a shrug and holds the blaster up on me.

I close my eyes. Yes, it's braver to die with your eyes open, but if you haven't figured it out yet, I'm not that brave.

Then one of them grabs me by the arm, and I'm half stumbling, half getting dragged out of the pod.

Don't panic don't panic don't panic don't—!

They may rip me to shreds, but I'm going to maintain my dignity.

Yeah, right. I scream, twist, kick, bite, and scream some more. This is about as effective against giant armored monsters as you'd think.

As the gigantic guards drag me through the ship's labyrinthine hallways, I catch glimpses of lights and bulkheads and some smaller aliens, most with colorful scales: green, blue, bronze. They wear shipsuits, and none of them are covered in blood, which is maybe hopeful until I realize that humans also wash their hands after messy meals.

So, I roll with the terror. I scream. I bite. I shriek. My voice will give out eventually, but not yet.

If nothing else, I'll be the world's most annoying appetizer.

TAN

WHEN AEGISEER-PRIME VANO sends me the scan of the being in the tiny ship that breached the Zone 4 minefield, I access the system to look up what probable species it might belong to. There are three: one resembling an ocean leviathan, another of feline stock, but the dominant race in this region is bipedal with surprisingly fragile hide.

Species name: Human.

Outside of its clothing, the human appears furless and fragile from the historical rendering.

If our guest is one of these humans, it should be the height of an Asheraah youth. According to the list, humans are considered intelligent, well-mannered, and they should also speak one of the common trade languages, though which one is not specified.

Interesting.

We haven't had a Zone 4 alien cross their mine barrier for at least five generations.

Why now?

I admit, I am curious.

Then I hear the screaming.

A pair of Masg in full armor enter, one, blaster in hand, the other holding a screaming, kicking... human creature?

"Raiva." The second Masg, Specialist Rel'Kariz approaches and holds the alien out to me.

The human's hair is yellow-gold, a lighter shade than my scales, and what I can see of its skin is the tan of sun-bleached desert sand.

I flare my nostrils and flit out my tongue, tasting the air for its scent.

Female. Of mammalian stock. Human then. It is small, yes, but hardly reticent. I reserve judgment on its level of intelligence.

“Greetings,” I offer in the first of the trade Common languages. The one closest to the shrieking sound it is offering.

It shrieks again, but my translation module cannot make anything of it. I taste its fear.

“This creature has been screaming since we took it from its spaceship—fighting, biting, and kicking, sir,” the Masg reports with obvious disgust.

For something so small, it has taken two Masg, one armed, to contain it, though they were under strict orders not to damage the creature.

“Did you speak to her in any of the Common trade tongues?” I ask.

“Yes, Raiva. It babbled something in the second tongue about us wanting to shred and eat it.” The Masg shrugs. “But it does not appear to comprehend our speech.”

“Not it. She. She is female,” I say.

“Vicious little female.”

The female shrinks at the Masg's voice. Masg are trained to intimidate, but, by the Five Deities, I do not wish to frighten this female.

“Let me try,” I respond in Asheraahn.

Specialist Rel'Kariz lifts the female higher, and I lean in.

She flails and screams again. Moisture flies from her as she fights. Unlike my kind, who sweat from the tongue, under our

arms, palms, and footpads, this female sheds water from everywhere. Then, looking closer, I notice she is upside down.

“Turn her over.”

The Masg obeys, flipping it over.

In a loud, slow voice, I say in Second Trade Tongue, “We – mean – you – no – harm.”

“Fex you,” it retorts—so it can speak!—although the word before ‘you’ does not translate. Or, more accurately, it translates to ‘exclamation of emphasis related to bodily functions.’

I lean in, trying to see past the female’s long hair and hiss in irritation, “She is also backward. Turn her around.” The second Masg joins, and together, he and Specialist Rel’Kariz get her flipped over. It doesn’t help much. Long strands of gold now cover her face.

I stare closer, and prepare to speak again, but before I can think of what to say next, the female kicks again, her foot landing with a ka-thunk on my jaw.

Specialist Rel’Kariz’s ears flatten, and the scales over his arms raise in obvious embarrassment. I rub my jaw, feeling anger swell within me. I grab the female’s errant foot and shove it back into Specialist Rel’Kariz’s hand.

My estimation of this female’s intelligence is decreasing. Who in their right mind kicks a Raiva in the face?

Maybe it would be best to release her and her escape pod back into space.

No.

If she is stupid, it would be criminal for me to send her into the arms of vacuum. And perhaps we are merely having a cultural misunderstanding?

I reach over to brush the hair off her face, and she screeches again, eyes shut tight.

My head pounds. I wrap my hand around her neck and bark, “STOP.” All noise ceases, even the clicking of my bridge crew

working. She freezes too, her scream catching as she falls silent. Thank the Five!

“Open your eyes, female,” I say in a softer tone. “I mean you no harm.”

After what seems like forever, during which the bridge remains deathly quiet, she opens her eyes and stares at me. I fall into green, the hue of new spring growth on Asheraah. My pulse quickens. I feel the blood rising in my veins, the heat and urgency.

What is this?

Her mouth is soft and full, her features symmetrical and delicate, and her gaze, filled with rage and terror, is piercing. Once, when I was promised to Xil’Aktar, I thought myself enamored of her. Willing to kill for her. That emotion was nothing compared to what blossoms in my hearts now.

I do not understand this. It is too sudden, too overwhelming.

And yet, when our gazes meet, I think: this female, this strange alien, has already claimed a piece of me.

Her scent, sweat and citrus with an undertone uniquely hers, fills me, and my body reacts, the urge to claim her rising. My wings unfurl, an overreaction that would be mortifying if she did not overcome my will. This alien. A red fills my vision, the same red of battle rage, and it terrifies me.

I have killed for less.

After Xil’Aktar’s lover challenged my claim, the duel ending with his blood on my scales, my claws in his guts and my teeth through his neck, I witnessed her grief and horror and swore before the Five I would never again lose control of my base instincts.

I must reclaim my control. If I am to make her mine, I must maintain my discipline. Just because an empty part of my soul has wanted this female my entire life does not mean she wants me.

My body continues to betray me, reacting to her proximity. Yet even as my arousal builds, so does an urge to shelter and

defend her. She has awakened both the protector and the lover in me.

“Don’t kill me,” she says, the pitch of her voice high and the sound of it rough.

“I will not,” I respond in Second Trade Tongue. “If my Masg puts you down, do you promise not to cause trouble?”

She hiccups, her too-green eyes fixed on mine. “Promise you won’t rip me limb from limb? Or eat me?”

“What?” I realize I spoke in Asheraahn, and, softening my tone, add in Second Trade Tongue. “No. Why would I do that?”

“You’re a Mangrel. That’s what you do.”

Again, I see red. Mangrel? This female thinks me one of the Kohath? That murderous scum! What have I done to earn such low regard? “No. I am Asheraah.”

“Okay.” The patch of skin between the golden tufts of hair over her eyes furrows. “Are you a kind of Mangrel that doesn’t eat people?”

“I am no Mangrel at all! We are Asheraah. We fight the Kohath. The Mangrel.”

“Oh,” she replies, “That’s... wow... How long have you... uhh... been doing that?”

“For generations.” If she assumed I was one of the Kohath, her irrational behavior makes sense. And it is not as though the inhabitants of Zone 4 come through their minefield. Are they truly ignorant of us?

If so, I shall educate her. I wave for Specialist Rel’Kariz to put her down. He opens his hands. She drops, her knees bent slightly, and then draws herself to her full height, lifting her chin to meet my gaze again.

My nostrils flare, and her eyes widen.

“I am Tan’Solish, Raiva of the battlecruiser Starshadow,” I explain. “You are my guest. *And more, so much more.*

Control, Tan.

She does not know of our species at all. And I do not know if humans have taboos against inter-species mating.

If I want to make her mine, I must maintain my discipline.

“What shall I call you?”

The female takes a breath. “I am Skylar Zavien, second navigator of the FUA Titan, the former Federated Universal Alliance cargo vessel. It had an unexpected drive failure. The kind that ends with a boom. How do you speak Common?”

I chuckle. “This is Second Trade Tongue. It is loaded into my linguistic implant. They use it in Zone 5 and 7 as well.”

My second in command, Ehan Prime Ano’Couv’ray, steps forward and leans toward me, whispering in Asheraahn. “If the alien is female, she must be claimed, Raiva. Else it will be too dangerous for her and the crew.”

Of course. I did not wish to think of that. It is law though and good sense. An unclaimed female cannot serve on an Asheraah vessel. It is too dangerous, with females being so rare. Free males would want a part of her otherwise, alien or no, and there’s no way I will let that happen.

I cannot claim her as my *bokdazi*, my mate, not yet. To do that, she would need to perform the rite of mating either on the soil of my homeworld or at the least beneath the eyes of a priest or priestess of the Five Deities. But as Raiva, I speak for myself and for the ship. So, in the ship’s name, I speak the ritual words: “Skylar Zavian, second navigator of the once FUA vessel Titan, I claim you as a bounty of the Starshadow.”

“What?” she says, looking confused.

“I’ve just claimed you as ship’s bounty,” I explain. “You are under the Starshadow’s and therefore my protection,” I say.

Then in Asheraahn, I say to Vano, “Take Skylar Zavian to my quarters, and get her settled. I need a *sistan* to attend to her.”

“You will not be harmed.” I repeat for good measure. While smelling of nerves, Skylar Zavian neither screams nor attempts to bite. I count this as a victory.

As the female follows the Masg from the bridge, everyone else is studiously busy.

I lean back in the Raiva's chair. With Skylar, the Goddess of Rebirth has given me a second chance to correct my greatest mistake.

This time, I will not fail.

I will court her in the old manner. I will show her the breadth of protection I offer through songs of glory and warrior triumphs. Then, she will see I am a male of honor, and with patience and control, she will be mine.

SKYLAR

THE BLACK-CLAD GUARDS show me to a sprawling set of quarters and leave without saying a word. They move quietly for their size. That and the armor makes them terrifying, even though they haven't hurt me.

The Raiva, what's his name, Tan-*hiccup*-Solish, was also kind. Especially considering I kicked him in the face.

He's an Asheraah. Not a Mangrel or *Kohath*, as he called them.

I take a breath and take in my new home. It's weird. The bulkheads seem like metal mixed with some kind of stone, and instead of bunks or sleepsacks, I see a huge, gravity-well style bed in the corner piled high with sleeping furs.

And the room is hot. My skinsuit regulates my temperature and keeps the sweat from sticking to my body, which means I was really sweaty when I thought I was fighting for my life earlier.

My gaze drifts to the bed again. They can't mean for me to sleep with Tan-*hiccup*-Solish—

Executive decision: I'm calling him Tan Solish. The hiccup part is too hard to say, and if I keep it up, I'm going to have the hiccups myself.

There are two other doors beside the entrance, and I walk to the first. It parts, and I step through into a second, smaller room with a similar bed layout.

I breathe out.

At least they don't expect me to share a bed with the Raiva. We might not even be compatible in that way. Humanity has regular contact with two alien races. The Wheylain, or Whales as most call them, are giant, seafaring mammals. They're intelligent and have magnificent cities in the waters of their home system.

They're also not inclined to mating outside their species, which is a good thing. I'm not even sure how one would go about it.

The second we call Feilix because their true name is unpronounceable to humans. Feilix females often dally with human men. You rarely see their males unattended, and they mate in packs, something most humans don't really go for.

I have a feeling Tan Solish is more Feilix than Wheylain. At least he's got two legs and two arms and abs you can bounce a shuttlecraft off of. I can get with that. But that doesn't mean he can get with me. Which is for the best. Really. I have enough problems. I don't need romantic complications. Things are complicated enough.

The good news is, I have my own room.

"Claimed as bounty of the ship," I whisper to the empty room. What does that even mean?

Am I a sack of potatoes? A dozen packs of dehydrated eggs? An e-commerce Federated web zone for a corporation? Nothing makes sense. How is it we knew nothing about the Asheraah? One would think if there was another badass alien race fighting the Mangrel, we'd know about it. Maybe make an alliance?

But we just put up the minefield and ignored everything on the other side for how many years? A hundred? More?

When I think about it, I realize how stupid that is.

The official memo from the Federated Universal Alliance says if you cross the Neutral Zone into Mangrel space, you'll get ripped to shreds or eaten alive. Probably both. It says nothing about shades of shredding, bits of ripping, or that some aliens

over here don't seem to be the devouring-you-whole types at all.

It certainly doesn't mention being claimed as bounty and hustled off to a private, well, semi-private bedroom of the leader of the Asheraah.

How did we miss the Asheraah? It makes no sense. Their ship looks like a Mangrel ship, doesn't it?

I've never seen an actual Mangrel ship, just the ones on holovids that showed ships sort of like this one. So, is this some kind of long con? Am I going to be ripped up after everyone's had a good laugh? *Look at the poor, stupid human. She thinks she's safe, then blam, wrench, rip, and shred.*

That seems like a lot of work for a simple meal.

I wander out of my bedroom and back into what I think is the common room, or the Raiva's bedroom, and whip around, looking at the door when I think I hear it opening. Nothing. No ripping, snapping aliens. Just me, in an enormous suite of rooms.

Since I'm alone and I have plenty of time to be honest with myself, I admit the Raiva, Tan Solish, is handsome. In an alien way. His hair is as pale as moonlight, and long, contrasting with the scales over his golden skin. His ears are frilled, as are his eyebrows, with the scales on his face like sparkling grains of sand. And those eyes, gold in gold with a rim of black. When our gazes met, I thought he could see right through me.

The scales on the rest of his body are bigger, more scale-like. I didn't get too good a look at them while kicking and screaming in my best attempt to fight for my life. Or at least fighting to give my potential gourmands the worst indigestion of theirs.

Tan has a tail. And wings. That's a known Mangrel trait, isn't it? It's hard to tell. Everything terrifying is a Mangrel trait on our side of the neutral zone.

I hear the door swish open and run for my quarters, as I've decided they are. The door taps shut behind me.

Is there a lock?

Maybe they'll just go away.

The door swishes open. So much for positive thinking. I crouch into my best imitation of a karate master from the action vids Ish adores. I growl to add emphasis to my stance.

It's pathetic, I know, but even if they aren't Mangrel, I think with this group it's better to come across as strong.

A new Asheraah, lighter gray than the turbulent gray of the walls, not gold, green or blue like the others I've seen, stands in the doorway holding a towel, clothes, and something that looks like a comb. Is it male or female? Or something else? Stars if I know.

The Asheraah looks confused, if they, like us, show confusion by the furrowing of the frill of skin between their eyes: the center lavender rimmed in black.

"I was told by the Raiva to help you bathe, eat, and ready yourself," the Asheraah says in the Common tongue. Or Second Trade tongue, as the Raiva had called it.

"Ready myself for what?" I snarl, crouching lower.

"To meet him," the Asheraah crouches like I am, snarls, then stands and backs out of the room I'm crouching in. I stand up, not following, just watching the alien's movements.

What happened to the Raiva saying that they would not harm me? Did I miss a timetable on that sentence? Was there a 'yet'?

Getting ready indicates something is going to happen when he arrives, and as much as I want to believe that it's nothing negative, too much mythology and horror stories about Mangrel plays in my mind.

But Tan Solish is not a Mangrel, I remind myself. He looked offended when I suggested it.

A delicious smell wafts into the room interrupting my spiraling fear, and I realize I'm famished. I come to the door, still watching the Asheraah servant in the other room. Is it a servant? Something else? To my shock, the Asheraah has turned a tap and is running what looks like a fortune of potable

water into what I assume is a tub. It's better than any tub me and my sister had planetside, let alone on a starship.

How wealthy are the Asheraah?

I look to the left, to the source of the smell, and see a tray with a couple of dishes on it. One looks like rice, the other some sort of meat product. Steam rises from it, and it smells delicious.

"You may eat first." I jump at the sound of the Asheraah's voice, much closer now. The bath smells heavenly, some sort of flowery smell fighting with the savory smells from the tray. I lunge for the tray of food.

Pathetic, I think. Desperation doesn't look good on anyone. I'm offering a pitiful example of humankind.

Oh well. I'm hungry, and if they can afford to fill a tub with water on a starship, they probably don't need to gnaw on my skinny bones. Or at least they can afford to fatten me up first.

I grab the utensil and scoop up some of the rice dish, then pick up a piece of what I hope is meat and plop the whole thing in my mouth. It feels like sunshine on a warm day. It tastes better than ice cream in summer, and ice cream is my favorite food. I didn't realize I was so hungry.

They might be fattening me up for the slaughter—probably not, but it never pays to challenge the power of 'things could get worse.' Right now, I don't care. I haven't eaten since yesterday, and then just a protein bar. I repeat the maneuver, trying another of the strange-looking cubes. Again, I'm rewarded with a wonderful taste.

I turn and see the Asheraah standing in the doorway to the tub room, watching me. They are slender and small with no visible sex organs, or at least none I can identify. I look up from my dish and smile. They stare some more.

This is going well.

I'm probably the worst representative for humanity right now, eating like a barbarian. Well, at least I used the spoon thingy—the Spork thingy.

“I don’t normally eat like this,” I say, squaring my shoulders to look less like a starving shiprat.

“You are hungry,” the Asheraah says. Their voice is a higher pitch than the Raiva’s or his two giant guards.

Is this Asheraah female? If so, maybe she can give me the lay of the land?

“Are you a female like me?” I ask as I scrape the last bits of rice and meatcube from the bottom of my bowl.

The Asheraah raises frilled eyebrows. “I am *nyrin*,” it says as though that’s an explanation. The blank stare of ‘huh’ must be universal because the *nyrin* continues, “We are neither male nor female.”

“So you’re not claimed by the ship?”

“I am fifth of my Kiyara. Blood and purpose bonds us, but none of us will bear our own young.”

“Ah.” Asheraah aren’t human, and this Kiyara group thing is a friendly reminder of that. Being claimed by the Raiva on behalf of the ship might not mean he sees me as anything more than a sack of potatoes. Or a hostage.

If Tan Solish is hoping to ransom me, he’s doomed to disappointment. A runaway, third-generation indentured colonist is worth less than the tub full of water my new Asheraah friend is waiting for me to splash around in.

I fill another bowl and eat more slowly. Then I straighten up and look at the Asheraah. They are still standing in the door, watching me. “Uh,” I venture, “thank you for running the bath water.”

“You are welcome,” the Asheraah replies, not moving.

“I’ll get to it after I eat a bit more.”

“I will wait.”

Wait for what?

“I can handle it. Unless there’s some trick to the drainage system?”

“I am here to help you.”

Help me take a bath? Ridiculous.

“I can bathe myself,” I say.

“The Raiva instructed me to help you.”

And whatever the Raiva says goes? “And you have helped me. I appreciate it.”

“I am instructed to help you get ready.”

I don't even know this Asheraah's name, and they're going to help me bathe, something only Paul, a long-ago ex-boyfriend who swiped sani-wipes over my face when I was plastered and threw up all over myself, and my mother did for me when I was a baby. I'm not plastered and I'm not a child. “That won't work. I will bathe myself.”

“This is my task, my purpose for being here.”

Purpose? If the Asheraah fought Mangrel, you'd think everyone on this ship would have better things to do than bathe random strangers who could bathe themselves. But the *nyrin* seemed determined, like they had no choice.

Maybe this Raiva was power tripping. It happened. That's one reason me and Ish had fled Caliban. If the Raiva was that type, I'd have to watch my back too. I'd relaxed with the good food and the fact that Tan Solish hadn't tried to shred or eat me, but there was a whole lot of space for misery between not getting eaten and relaxing on a beach sipping fruit drinks out of gourds.

“What's your name?” I ask, hoping to change the subject.

The Asheraah looks even more confused. “My name is not important,” they say after a few moments.

“It is to me,” I reply, perhaps a bit more forcefully than necessary. If this *nyrin* is going to insist on scrubbing me naked in a tub, the least they can do is share their name with me.

I'll tell them mine, break the ice and such.

“My name is Skylar Zavien, second navigator of the FUA cargo vessel, Titan.” *Aka piece of crap ship that blew up in the*

middle of nowhere.

“Yes,” they reply. “So they informed me. Nice to meet you, Skylar Zavien, second navigator of the FUA cargo vessel, Titan.”

“You can just call me Sky. Most do.”

“Sky,” the Asheraah says. “Like the ceiling, the red sky of my homeworld.”

“Sort of, just a shortening of the name Skylar. Now, what is your name?”

“My name is not important. Your bath water will get cold.”

“I can’t call you ‘hey you’ or ‘buddy’,” I say, puzzled by the secrecy.

“You may call me ‘hey you’ if you like.”

This is getting ridiculous. “How are we supposed to be friends if you won’t share your name?”

“I am not your friend. I am your helper, your *sistan*. My name is of no importance. Now, please come to the bath, so I can get you ready to meet with the Raiva.”

This is a creature of singular vision, it seems. “Tell me your name, and I will take the bath with you.” That didn’t come out as intended, but they seem to understand.

“Tylan.” They tap a clawed fingertip against the stone inlaid bulkhead. “Now, will you please come to the bath?”

I can’t help but grin, feeling like I’ve won a great battle. “Certainly, Tylan,” I say, walking toward the bathing room. Then I realize I may have just pissed off someone who is about to dunk me neck deep in water, and I shiver.

“Thank you for telling me your name,” I say as I follow them toward the tub. “I’m sorry if I was rude.”

“I did not think it rude. I think Sky is well named. You are one who gives without thinking and expects others to have that same gift,” the *sistan* says, their tone even.

I'm not sure if that's an insult, compliment, or just an observation. Considering my luck, it's probably an insult. But as far as insults go, I've weathered worse. This one was almost nice. "Thanks," I say. "Now, can we compromise?"

"Compromise?"

"Yeah," I say, standing before the hot tub of water and bubbles. "You hold up the towel while I get undressed. Then I'll get into the tub, and you can hand me the washcloth and the soap. Then you can hold up the towel when I'm done and get out. Okay?"

I shouldn't care so much about this bathing thing. I mean, it's cringe-worthy in the extreme, but better bathed than basted. But everything since the Titan blew up has been one spiraling disaster after another, and I've had no control over any of it. Hell, I couldn't even get the Raiva's guards to turn me right side up when they dragged me into the ship. I want to wash my own armpits. That's not too much to ask, is it?

Tylan asks, "Is this how they carry out the ritual of bathing where you come from?" as I stare into the tub.

"Yes, yes, it is," I say, avoiding Tylan's gaze. If I make eye contact, I'll burst out laughing at the sheer absurdity of it all. One minute I'm convinced these creatures mean to kill me, and the next I'm fabricating some cockamamie bathing ritual so I can wash my own armpits.

This has been a day.

"I see. How fascinating," Tylan replies. Their eyebrow frills raise. "We have little information compiled on Zone 4, unfortunately. I will ensure that we add this to our database. Is this a common custom for your kind?"

By the stars, at the rate I'm going, I can see my little white lie spiraling into a diplomatic incident. When and if humans and Asheraah ever make contact.

"No. Just my homeworld. It's remote," I say, scrambling for details. "Uh... Xanthia. Little place. Super religious folk. Holding the towel is an honor reserved only for the most devout."

I hold my breath, hoping they'll buy my barefaced bunk. Tylan stares at me for a long moment before nodding. "I see. My apologies. I did not mean to question your customs." They gesture to the towel with a hand. "I am honored to uphold this important ritual for you."

I exhale, flooded with relief. Crisis averted. My armpits are my own.

Tylan holds up the towel while I undress, sink into the warm water of the tub, and hold out my hand for the washcloth and soap. It smells like flowers. The water feels soothing against my skin as I lower myself in, the temperature perfect.

This is nice. I wonder what's going to happen when the Raiva arrives? I'd better be done with this bathing thing before he gets here, just in case he's thinking of me as more than a dozen rehydrated egg packets or a hostage.

One step at a time, Sky.

Things can always get worse.

TAN

I STRIDE through the corridors leading to my quarters, inclining my head toward passing officers and crew. I walk like an Asheraah poised to inflict violence at the least provocation. I am of the Warrior class, that special group that has proven themselves the elite through training and action. My gold toned skin is a badge of honor and a telegraph of horrible outcomes for those who oppose me.

But now, I control that rage.

I am in a good mood, heading to my quarters to meet my bounty, and hopefully one day, my mate.

If I can win her.

When I win her.

Though she is not Asheraah, our spirits are harmonious. She is my bokdazi, my destined one. In time, we will bond by heart, scale, and soul.

I arrive at my quarters just as the sistan is exiting. They see me and bow. "Is the female alright?" I ask.

"She is well, Raiva. Bathed, fed and relatively relaxed." The word 'relatively,' bothers me, but I choose not to pursue it. "She has a strange greeting." They demonstrate the crouching, snarling movement for me. "It's her way of saying hello. I returned the gesture, and that appeared to satisfy her."

"Thank you," I reply. They bow again, leaving me to face the bulkhead door and what lies beyond.

I push on the door, and it opens, my eyes adjusting to the lower level of light within than the corridors. Curled up on the couch, the female seems to be asleep. I approach, lean over and brush an errant hair from her eyes.

Skylar opens her eyes, drowsily looking at me, and as awareness dawns, her gaze goes from relaxed to confused to terror. She scrambles away from me, eyes wide, a mewling sound coming from her mouth. I mimic the crouching, snarling, teeth-bared gesture shown to me by her sistān, and hope that the familiarity of the gesture will calm her.

I am wrong.

“No,” she cries. “Don’t—” By this point she is standing, and I back up a couple feet to give her space. I try the greeting again.

“You are my bounty. No harm—” I begin, but I don’t get to finish. She takes another frantic step backward, then slips, tipping into the low table at the side of the reclining plank. Atop it is a vase with flowers and a small, decorative sculpture. Jarred, the sculpture slides and falls, hitting her squarely on the top of her head.

“Huh?” Skylar picks it up, squints at it, squints at me, and falls sideways in an unconscious heap.

So much for having a quiet conversation with my future mate.

I run to her, scoop her up—my word she is light—take her into the guest room and lay her on the bed. Then I go to the intercom system and call for a healer.

Ehan Healer Dah’rausen arrives in less than five minutes. He must have run all the way or flown, although flying is forbidden outside of the fitness areas. He is a small, stout Asheraah, scales dyed green like all of his profession, the hair of his head gray-black.

“Are you injured, Raiva?” His eyes glitter and the air tastes of fear as he approaches, his green skin gleaming in the light.

I lead him to the guest room. “I am well, but the female we captured, my bounty, my prize, she—”

“You have injured her already?”

Rage spikes through me, and my claws scrape against each other as my hands clench. Yes, I have my father’s battle lust, but after years serving under me, how could any on this ship think me capable or inclined to harm a female?

Despite my best attempt at control, something of my fury must show on my face because the healer takes a step back and then kneels, head bowed. “I did not mean you had intended to in— injure her, Raiva,” he sputters out. “These humans are fragile, that is all.”

“She tripped,” I explain, though I owe no explanation. “And this sculpture landed on her head. She is unconscious.” I point at the sculpture on the floor.

“I see,” the Healer says, running a scanner over her head. “Your female has a minor fracture in her skull, and most likely a minor concussion. I will give her something to help the pain, but you must wake her up frequently to make sure it does not worsen.”

“What about the fracture?”

“It is slight. In an Asheraah, it wouldn’t have mattered at all. However, her skull isn’t as thick as ours.”

I am not sure whether to be grateful or insulted by the statement. I decide on the former.

“It should not need surgery,” the Healer is saying. “But you must wake her every hourmark and make sure she is still capable of thought and speaking. From there, rest and painkillers and in three to five days—” he looks at me “— maybe two weeks, I expect a full recovery. She should rest for the next couple of day cycles. No strenuous activity.”

“Two cycles?” I want to be sure.

“From the files, that seems to be the case.” He is hedging, and I taste the fear on him. Fear for her or fear of me, I am not certain.

“You’ve read about humans?”

“Yes. I just started since we now have one onboard, and you have claimed her. It’s a good thing I started my research with the head.” The Healer turns to leave, handing me a vial of liquid. “This painkiller works best in a hot beverage, but a cold one will work, too. I will be back tomorrow morning to check on her. She will sleep all night except for when you wake her up to check on her. Tomorrow you will not need to wake her as often.”

“Thank you. I will see that it is done.”

“Have a good evening.” The Healer departs, and I look at the slight form in my very large guest bed, which is half the size of my personal bed.

I would need to draw a map to find her in my bedroom. I stop thinking along those lines. Simply tripping imperiled her life. I will take more care. I must.

SKYLAR

I SWIM to consciousness through viscous layers that feel like cotton candy, soft and sticky. Floating into view is Tylan, the sistan who is not my friend. They shake my shoulder gently. “Wake.”

“No.”

“You must wake for a moment.”

They are telling me to wake up, something I do not want to do. Blinding pain rewards me as I turn my head in their direction. I close my eyes against the pain, but Tylan is insistent.

“What’s your name?” They ask.

I groan in response. My jaw hurts. Even my teeth jangle with pain, stabbing and relentless. This is the worst migraine I have ever had, worst headache, worst sick ache, worst everything.

“What is your name?”

“I thought we did not share names,” I mumble, and the very act of talking makes things feel ten times worse.

Tylan laughs. “Tell me anyway.”

“Skylar.” My head pounds. “Zavien.” I choke out the last word, stars forming around the edges of my blurry vision. I want to scream, why did you wake me? But even the thought hurts like a thousand needles behind my eyes, so I let it pass. I don’t want to know. Tylan thankfully leaves me alone after that, and I slide back into oblivion, nothingness and nowhere, away from the pain, away into the stars.

“What is your name?”

Didn't I just answer that?

It is Tylan again. “Too bright,” I mumble. The room is bright white, blinding light, and the pain is back there in every part of my head, shoulders, teeth, jaws—anything connected to me hurts, pinpointed in the center of my head and radiating outward in waves of agony. I don't move my head this time.

The light in the room blessedly dims, and I am glad someone has listened to me.

“What is your name?” Tylan asks again. Is this some kind of game? Or ritual? Like the bathing ritual? Why do they keep asking me this same stupid question? It has been at least three or four times now, and always the same question.

“Why?” I respond and hear two chuckles in response. There is someone else in this space besides me and Tylan. “Who?”

My head aches, but I realize it is less, a little less, a teensy, weensy bit less agony, as my sister Ish used to say. I can think a bit more, but I still don't move my head, lest the small respite give way to the relentless agonies of before. No point in poking the beast.

“I need to know you are thinking,” Tylan says. My vision is less blurry now. I can make out their figure and the details of their face swim into view, then drift away. I frown, and they come back into view. Behind them, in what I guess is a wall, lurks the Raiva? Raiva Tan Solish. Mangrel?

No. Not a Mangrel.

But he was there, the last thing I saw before pain and darkness.

I should be terrified, but I'm not. Maybe I am dead? That's why I have no feelings. I am for sure su-uh-springled? No. The word is su-ur-prised, not su-springled. Wait, the Raiva is hovering in the background. No, not hovering. He is too big to hover.

I sigh in frustration.

“Your name?” Tylan asks again.

“Skylar Zavien.” At least my teeth have stopped hurting. “Am I alive?”

“Yes. You had an accident, and a statue fell on your head.”

I don’t remember that. It sounds like something I might do, though.

“You have a concussion.” A deep voice intones. A sexy voice. Is that the Raiva? He really takes care of his hostages? Or inventory? Or whatever I am as ship’s bounty.

I remember that!

“You made me your bounty,” I say. “What’s bounty? And why do you have a hiccup in your name?”

Instead of answering me, the Raiva turns to Tylan and says, “Perhaps we should call the healer?”

“Your female spoke like this before her accident,” Tylan explains.

I nod, then wince as I’m stabbed with an invisible icepick. Closing my eyes, I say, “That’s right. I don’t get the bounty thing.”

“It means you are under my protection.”

“Oh.” I bite my lower lip. “You are very large.”

“I am sorry I frightened you.”

“I’m sorry too,” I say, and yawn. “Raiva Tan—” I attempt the hiccup. “Solish, right? Do I have to hiccup every time?”

The deep sound of rumbling laughter fills the room. It fills me too, tingling through my body in a way that feels nice. Warm. Like home, not that I’ve had a home since our parents died.

“Just Tan,” the Raiva says.

“Tan,” I repeat and yawn again. Sleep is courting me. Dragging me under, even though I want to open my eyes and see what happiness looks like on the Raiva. On Tan. “That’s nice. You laugh nice too.”

“Thank you, Skylar Zavian.”

“Sky.” I can barely stay awake. “My head hurts,” I say. “Will you let me sleep now?”

“Take this, baby,” he murmurs in a soft voice, holding something to my lips. I swallow. “Baby is a proper term of endearment, yes?”

“For bounties?” I shrug, and the icepick taps at my skull again. “Sure. Sounds good.”

When Tan wakes me again, he brings breakfast. My stomach has settled, and while my head still hurts, it’s more an ache than an icepick. And I’m hungry.

I’m also balanced atop a mound of furs. Is it his bed? No, too small, I recognize. It is mine. My furs, and he walks a tray and sets it on the table beside me. My stomach growls. I also have to pee something fierce.

I sit up.

Tan is looming. It’s not his fault. The alien, the Asheraah (not Mangel) is over seven feet tall, not counting the tail.

My mouth feels stuffed with cotton and tastes like something crawled into it and then got strangled to death with mint floss.

“Bathroom?” I ask. Then, for clarity, add, “Toilet?”

Instead of just pointing, Tan leans toward me, slowly, and extends an arm. He’s watching me like he expects me to panic, which I guess makes sense, considering. But I don’t feel like panicking.

I feel safe with him.

Tan lets me lean on him all the way to a separate room where, after a bit of creative problem solving, I do my business. He’s still on the other side of the door when I wrap things up. My mouth still tastes awful, but there’s a spray for that. It tastes like mint. My legs are shaking by the time I make it back to my bed.

He places a tray on my lap, and I drink down a savory broth with chunks of vegetables and meats. I don’t know what they are, but they taste good. Tan sits beside me, his body unnaturally still and his gaze fixed as he watches me eat. It

should be creepy. And maybe it is a little creepy, but mostly, I think it's sweet.

"You're worried about me, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"I'll be fine. This isn't my first knock on the head."

His hand clenches. "Accidents, I hope."

I shrug. "Something like that."

Tan looks ready to murder something. Or someone. Possibly on my behalf. He is not a Mangrel. He is an Asheraah. A different set of aliens. And I need to know more about that. It's stupid we have the same enemy and yet humanity hasn't reached out to them. Together, we might do more than put up a minefield and pretend there's nothing on the other side. If we can form an alliance, we might take it to the Mangrel and win this.

"You're not a Mangrel," I say. "Or what did you call them?"

"Kohath."

"And you've been fighting them? What are they... err... how are you doing it?" All we've done is contain them. Or, more accurately, trap them inside whatever Zone this is and let the Asheraah deal with them.

Is that what we've been doing? Ignoring the problem? Did the Federation just put up the minefield so they could dump the problem on someone else? Is that why only junkers like the Titan were even sent into that sector?

This doesn't speak well for humanity at all.

"You think of them as one, but Kohath are three. The Thrax Kohath are their warriors. Shock troops engineered for battle. Their ships are hives and whatever they swarm, they pick it clean."

That makes an odd kind of sense. As terrifying as the Mangrel—the Thrax Kohath—are to us, they have never seemed intelligent. It is why we put up the sphere of mines. Sometimes, one of their ships will try to breach it, but the

mines hold them until the FUA can send in capital ships to pound away at the ones who remain.

“Our Masg heavy armor is based on their design,” Tan goes on.

And things come together for me. Shadow black, red eyes. Yeah, that’s why it had been so terrifying. And why I’d assumed the Kohath and the Asheraah were the same. My head has gone back to hurting, though I’m not sure whether that’s the concussion or learning that humanity’s boogeymen are not only real but come in more variety and with more viciousness than I’d ever imagined.

“Fex.”

Tan’s nostrils flare. “What is fex?”

“A curse. Saying it’s supposed to make you feel better.”

“Hnnn...”

“What about the second type?”

“We know less about them. The Gice Kohath are ghosts. Flesh Shifters. Their name means wraith-mirror.”

My whole body goes cold. “Flesh Shifters?” That sounds terrifying.

“They will infiltrate a ship or planet, gather information, and commit sabotage if possible to make things easier for their Thrax siblings. They revert to form upon death.”

“What can you do? How can you find them before they kill you?” I pull the sleeping fur up to my neck, my fingers clutching at the skin side of the duvet.

“We have passive detectors. They are imperfect, but a full medical scan will find them most of the time. The Gice Kohath are the main reason we insist all who join our ships have a mate or bond of blood. A wraith-mirror might take the shape of a friend or mate, but they cannot assume the memories or spirit of their prey.”

And I realize in that moment the risk Tan took, claiming me as his bounty. He has no bond of blood or spirit to me, a random

alien. I could, easily, be one of these Gice Kohath. How would he know?

And yet, he has been so kind to me.

“Thank you,” I say, daring to meet his gaze. “For saving me. I was hoping I could make it to a planet and send a distress beacon, but if I’d done that, they would have had me.” And after eating me, they might have taken my shape and sent me back through the minefield, using the codes on my pod to breach it and then infiltrate our side of the neutral zone.

Tan reaches out, places his hands over the lump of mine beneath the sleeping fur. “It was my honor,” he says.

And as I stare into his gold-black eyes, I feel it too. Not exactly honored, or not just honored. Honored and ... wanting something more? Wanting more of him?

Quit while you’re behind, Sky. He’s not thinking of you that way. And even if he is, how can he make that work? Humans are human shaped. With human parts. Asheraah...?

I glance down. Who knows what parts they have?

My face burns, and I know I have turned some ridiculous shade of red. I avert my eyes from the general direction of where one would expect such parts to exist, if he has them.

Tan coughs, and the scales on his arms seem to shiver. Is the gold on his face a bit more bronze? Do Asheraah blush?

I bite my tongue. Some questions are best left as questions.

“And the third?” I ask. That’s a question that might be better left a question too, but it’s less fraught than the other one. “What kind of Kohath are they?”

“Araz Kohath. We have never seen one, but according to reports, they are the mind. The Ehan Raiva.”

“Ehan means in charge, right?”

Tan nods and changes the subject. “When you are well,” he says, “I have authorized you to tour the ship with your sistan. I will assign you a guard as well.”

That takes my mind almost all the way off my embarrassment. Tan trusts me. He must, to allow me to wander his ship, even if he won't let me look around on my own.

“What do I need a guard for?” I ask.

His frilled brows lower a fraction as he narrows his eyes. After a breath too long, he says, “Ship protocol.”

Well, that's a steaming load of fexcrement if I've ever heard it. But I will not complain. It's one thing to trust someone as a tourist, another thing to trust a stranger to root around your navigational systems. And either way, I want to get to know Tan's ship. Maybe I can even make a place for myself, if not forever, at least until he sends me back to humanity's side of the neutral zone.

If he's sending me back to the other side of the neutral zone. “How long am I going to be your bounty?” I ask. Maybe there's some kind of contract?

Tan says, “We will need to establish contact with your Federation, but not in a way the Kohath can trace. This may take some time. But we were assigned patrol here. Once we have made contact with your leaders, I can send you back in your repaired pod through the neutral zone.”

That isn't an answer, and the non-answer should upset me. But it's not like I have a ship or a home to go back to. Except Ish.

By the stars, what if she thinks I'm dead?

“My sister,” I say. “When you contact them, have them tell my sister I'm here. She was on the Titan with me. But she got away.” She must have gotten away. I can't believe anything else. “I can give you her Citizen ID.” Well, I can give him the fake one we'd used to get assigned to the Titan. “And mine. She'll know mine.”

Tan looks thoughtful, or maybe pained, and his scales shiver again as he says, “I will see it done.”

TAN

THE FIRST RULE of command is not to promise what one cannot deliver. But how am I to tell Skylar's sister that she lives when the barrier between us and Zone 4 blocks all communication? Or at least, that is what Ehan Specialist Rui'lashik tells me after a tenday of attempts.

“Forget communication. Send the female back,” Ehan Prime Ano'Couvray, my second in command and closest friend, admonishes me. We are sparring. The pinprick bronze scales of Ano's face are dark with exertion, his ears flat to his head as he slashes a claw at my middle. I twist away from the blow, wings tight to my back as I swipe my tail around, narrowly missing his legs.

Ano and I have been friends and rivals all our lives. Our families are from the same village, and our fathers lifelong friends. Both are dead.

I pivot, driving the sparring rod into his flank. Ano spins around and out of range, lashing his tail like a whip. The tip hits the flesh at the top of my thigh, a quick sting, but nothing serious.

“It is unwise,” I say, crouching as I assess his stance. “That pod can hold perhaps a tenday of air and supplies, and their side of the mines is not densely populated,” I explain. “We must establish a line of communication.”

This is valid. It is also an excuse. I have no intention of sending Skylar off before I have completed my courtship and

gained her favor. But I cannot admit that. Not to her and not to Ano, even as he is my closest ally on this ship.

“You have put our communications and engineering specialists on deciphering their systems. It would be easier if you were to ask the female. She cannot wish to stay here indefinitely.”

“I need more time to assess her disposition,” I say. The moment the words are out, I know Ano will pounce.

“Ah. Disposition is it?” He charges, and I leap over him. I land awkwardly on my back. Before I can twist free, Ano has pinned my arms with his knees and my tail with his and is holding the sparring stick at my neck. A mock kill. His wings spread in triumph. “It is not her disposition you want to assess,” he hisses, pressing the stick in a touch harder. “Though why you will not tell her you desire her is beyond me. Or better, take her to your furs. You are Raiva.”

In that moment, I am back at my father’s house, him telling me of my promised mate and how she will, for certain, relish the binding. My pride, my assumptions, led to two deaths. I will not make the same mistake with Skylar.

“I am courting her,” I say. Each meal I give her, I serve with my own hands. I carve our protein with my own claws and have her take it between her oddly full lips. I tell her stories of my victories, so she knows me capable of protecting her. Or elevating her as our ship, the Starshadow, rises.

And I believe she is responding. She smiles at me with her full teeth. And she has not taken on the scent of distress for several daymarks. “She is open to my advances.” I add, putting more confidence in my tone than I feel. It is difficult to know her deeper emotions by words and scent alone. While Skylar, in this form, is my mate and I would not change that, it would be easier for both of us if she had a tail with which to express her desire.

“Then claim her. Personally. Or send her home. But as bounty, she is not yours alone. You are her warden in the ship’s name, and any other male is also free to make a claim.”

Rage boils up inside of me, and I kick up and out, dislodging Ano's grip. I roll up and then over him, pinning him with my legs and body. I press a claw into his neck to show my ire. "They dare not."

Ano laughs. "You are a fool if you believe that, Raiva. She is not bonded to you. She is not even Asheraah. Send her to the refugee quarters if you do not desire her yourself. Or bring her to your bed."

"I will not act in haste."

"As it is written in the Scrolls, 'To not act is also an action.'"

"I am aware," I grit out.

"Good. Now, either strangle me or get off so we can spar again."

I rise and kneel, holding out a hand to help him stand. "You irritate me, Ehan Prime," I say, but only to see him smile.

He takes my hand, grunts as I pull him to standing. "Xil'Aktar should have told you."

"Excuse me?"

"If she wanted another, she should have made that clear."

"Perhaps she did, and I was too blinded by my own desires to understand."

SKYLAR

IT'S OFFICIAL, I've got feelings for Tan. The question is what should I do about them? And does he feel the same way?

I'm not sure. It's been ten of their ship-days since I stupidly brained myself with a statue. And Tan has been kind. We share two meals in our days, and we talk about the food and battles. So many battles. Detailed stories of tactics and strategy and victories. It's mind-numbing. If Tan was human, I'd think he was totally full of himself. But he asks questions too. And he listens like my answers hold some secret to the universe.

Maybe this is the galaxy's most bizarre interrogation?

If so, Tan's welcome to break me anytime.

But first, I must make myself useful. During the day while he works doing Raiva things, I wander the ship. Tylan is becoming more my friend than servant. Despite their insistence that a sistan and an outsider cannot be friends.

Perhaps they just don't want to get too attached. Tan promised to send me back just as soon as the ship can open communication with FUA command. It shouldn't be taking this long, but I'm not rushing things. I should be rushing things. I should want to go home. I do want to see my sister again. But beyond that, I like it here. I'm the odd person out, being without scales or a tail, but I'm getting more and more comfortable by the day.

And I want Tan. I want to feel his arms around me, run my fingers over his scales, feel his tail and his lips.

I'm a hot mess.

He returns after his shift doing Raiva things with a hovercart full of food. There's a dispenser. Tylan showed me how to use it, and the food is different but tasty. I've seen Tan use it for himself once or twice, but for me, he always brings the hovercart.

"On my first posting, a squad of Thrax Kohath tried to board us," he begins. "I was only an Aegiseer-jun, and my battle sense not yet honed. But our Aegiseer Specialist had a keen sense of timing, and..."

I spoon spiced grains and protein chunks with half my attention as Tan walks me through another memory of combat.

Maybe all this battle talk is a ritual of some sort? A Raiva thing? At least Tan usually winds down after five or ten minutes and then we can change the subject, thank the Stars.

When he finishes, he leans across the small, round table between us and says, "and by this, *nymara*, I hope I have proven myself capable of defending your spirit, body, and hearth." His gold eyes fix on mine as his tail swishes back and forth behind him. His wings are raised, the frills of his ears upright. Expectant.

"Uhh... yes." I nod. "I believe you. You're very competent. You should be proud of your accomplishments."

Tan's ears droop a little, and I force a smile. "Extremely competent," I add. "How many more battles did you want to walk me through? I'm not much of a fighter."

"But your hearts are fierce."

"I really only have the one," I admit.

Tan shakes his head. "You do not understand." His tail is twitching now, like a cat in poor temper, and his wings, usually tight to his back, flutter with what I assume is the same irritation.

"I'm sorry," I say. I'm not trying to offend him. "Did you want to tell me about it again?"

He growls.

Fex.

Maybe I should just ask him to kiss me. But aside from taking my hand that one time when I was coming up from a concussion, he's not big on touching. Usually, if a guy is interested, he'll get in your space. And flirt. The closest Tan has come to flirting is laying out a diagram of a ship battle using small stones in the middle of his bedroom floor.

I tried to ask Tylan once about Asheraah mating, and the specifics of Asheraah male anatomy, and the sistans scales took on a yellowish cast. Squeezing their eyes shut, they said, "It is very wet. And there is a joining of sexual anatomy. I found vids of the process... unsettling. The Five Gods showered blessings upon me that I not feel compelled toward such acts."

Maybe I should have asked Tylan to take me to the Asheraah doctor for a second opinion. Or to direct me to one of those vids.

This is stupid. Maybe the attraction I'm feeling is a delayed trauma response? It's clear Tan is just being nice. Friendly. I'm not even sure our anatomy would join properly.

He's still looking at me like he wants me to say something. I wish someone had handed me the script.

"What does 'nymara' mean?" I blurt out.

His mouth opens and closes and opens again. Finally, he says, "It is an endearment."

The hint of a smile touches the corners of his mouth, and all I can think of is kissing him. Not one of those chaste, friendly yet distant kisses between friends, but one of the ones that is filled with emotion, a passionate, stick my tongue down his throat and tickle his tonsils—does he have tonsils?—kisses that leave both of us breathless and ready for more.

"What kind of endearment?"

"It means 'little one.'"

That sounds like flirting. Or maybe he thinks I'm a child?

"What are you thinking about, nymara?" he asks.

Should I tell him I'm thinking about kissing him? Do Asheraah kiss? I wish I'd thought to ask Tylan, though more questions about Asheraahn sexuality might be the end of our almost friendship.

And fex if I'm going to bring this up to my Asheraahn guard.

"Anatomy," I say.

Tan raises a frilled eyebrow. "What sort of anatomy?"

If Tan was human, I'd definitely think this was flirting.

"Wings," I blurt out. "I noticed you have wings."

He cocks his head. "Yes." The word draws out in a slight hiss.

"Can you fly? Or are they just decorative?" Sometimes questions are like a snowball running down a mountain. Except this one is a boulder, and even if I throw myself in front of it, I'll be flattened. "Like hair. Or fingernails. Or the appendix."

"Is the appendix not inside of your body?"

"Forget the appendix."

"I can fly, but we do not do so in the ship's corridors. We have an exercise cavern." Tan hesitates. "I can show you, if you would like."

I nod, feeling braver. "Are they... sensitive?" That came out all wrong. "I mean, you hold them so tight and..."

The scales on Tan's face darken, and I look down at my bowl.

"Sorry. That was personal."

"Would you like to touch them?" His voice is low, the sibilants dragging out and a little harsh, like a serpent.

My face burns. Before I can respond, Tan stands. He steps away from the table and turns to the side, so that I can see the twin gaps in the back of his uniform jacket. He reaches for the clasps and unsnaps them, exposing his bare back. The wings are folded tight, creating twin hunches that shiver as they unfurl. His scales are gold, but the wings have shimmering hints of green and blue, almost iridescent. They're more like a

bat's wings than a bird's. We used to have bats on Caliban, secretive little beasts that would dart through the trees at night and devour insects and small fish. I never saw them clearly, but in the moonlight, they sometimes reflected an iridescence too.

My fingers twitch and my mouth goes dry as he spreads. Their span is at least as wide as he is tall from shoulder to tip. Thick bone curves out like a finger, the rest of the wing trailing with the texture of woven silk.

Tan looks back at me, his shoulders tense, his mouth a thin line.

The decision is not a hard one. I want to feel him. I want him to want me to feel him. I push my chair out and stand, walking the few feet between us. "May I touch them?" I ask, my words strangely formal. But the formality feels like armor. A cracking armor around a hatchling of wanting and confusion and sheer delight.

"Whatever you wish, nymara," he says.

I run my fingertips over the thin membrane, feeling the strong bones beneath. Tan tenses, as the wings flutter against my hand. They are warm and softer than anything I would have imagined. I feel like a thief, and like a voyeur. My heart thuds. My hand shakes.

"Is that good?" I ask.

Tan lets out a long breath. "Yes." He turns to face me, the wings spreading further and then closing around us.

I step closer as he lifts me, pressing my body to his strong chest as he buries his face in my neck. My hair. His breath whispers over my skin, leaving a trail of electric heat. He looks up, his lips not even an inch from mine, and I lean in, pressing our mouths together.

He tenses again, his frilled brows lowering as his wings stiffen, his ears going flat against his skull. I pull back. "Sorry! I'm sorry!"

Asheraah don't kiss, do they? From his reaction, don't kiss is an understatement.

Fex.

Double fex.

“I’m sorry.” I should have done something useful while touring the ship and asked one of their doctors about how sex works for Asheraah. Now I’ve gone and offended him.

The intercom beeps, and I’ve never been so grateful for an interruption. Even if it means the ship is getting attacked. Tan lowers me to the floor, pulling his wings in as he walks to the intercom.

Now I know I’ve upset him. The intercom is voice activated. Tan doesn’t need to walk to the device unless he’s trying to put distance between us. He taps it with his claw and begins a low, rapid-fire conversation in Asheraah.

I just stand there, watching.

I am a fexing idiot.

When he’s done, which seems to take too long and not long enough, he turns back to me. “You offer an exchange of breath and water. Does this mean you accept my bond?”

“Huh?” Wasn’t I already his bounty? Is that a fancy way of him asking if I like him? “I don’t understand.”

Tan glances at the door and back at me. “I must return to the bridge.” His gaze sweeps over me, and I realize the rims of his gold eyes have thickened. He runs his tongue over his thin lips. Maybe I didn’t offend him?

“I like you,” I say. My face is hot. “We kiss to show that.”

“Kiss.” He breathes the word as though tasting it.

“But if I offended you—”

“You did not offend.” His tail taps against his leg as he glances at the door again. “You cannot offend, my nymara.”

The intercom buzzes again, and Tan mutters something under his breath. It sounds like fex.

I want to laugh.

“I must go,” Tan says. “But when I return, we will continue this talk.”

TAN

THE STARSHADOW PASSES over the burnt-out wreck of the family trader vessel Tch'Dara, our ship's sensors picking up no trace of life signs or signals beyond the lingering pulse of its final distress call.

“Kohath,” Ehan Subcommander Quayl'Gar'dee'al, my second, says, his tone grim. He is large, even for an Asheraah male, a formidable warrior with scales dyed in the bronze tones of command staff. “Looks like they were here long enough to strip the wreck. Permission to send a boarding crew to check for remains. And security data, if any, survived.”

The Tch'Dara is well off the established trade routes, which is why it has taken so long for us to receive their cry for help. Flying solo as a small trader is a risk, but Kohath raids are rare, this close to Zone 4. The Thrax Kohath have a healthy wariness for the minefield and the semi-regular Asheraah patrols.

Rescuing Skylar and my desire to stay close to the neutral zone for Skylar's sake had delayed our patrol. Which puts the responsibility for this on my shoulders.

“Send the boarding party,” I order, knowing it is too little and far too late.

The Ehan Subcommander relays the order to the Masg, performing his duties to the letter, but I can tell by his stature, and the slow, steady swipe of his tail, the way the scales along the edges of his cheek ridges stand upright, that he is disturbed. And angry.

“We have not had a Thrax Kohath incursion this bold in a year,” the Ehan Subcommander notes. “And suspiciously close to the arrival of our new bounty.”

“One has nothing to do with the other, Subcommander,” I snap. I don’t like Quayl. I never have, and if I was not so unbalanced from Skylar’s ‘kiss’ and this incursion, I would have better control of my reactions.

“I did not say they did,” Quayl returns. “But the female has been a distraction.” His tone is mild. Not a direct challenge to my authority, but a criticism nonetheless. And one I cannot combat because Skylar has been a distraction.

The brush of her soft fingers over my wings, the heat of her breath against my lips, all of it tears my attention from my duty in a way I cannot deny any more than I can deny Skylar or the mating bond I feel growing between us. I had not thought it so obvious. But if my third in command is saying this on the bridge, in front of the other Aegiseers, how sharp are the crew’s criticisms of me behind my back?

I will speak with Ano. Find out how far the discontent on my ship has spread.

We retrieve what’s left of the Tch’Dara’s data drive and, thanks be to the Five Deities, the family registry with the genetic memories of the crew still intact to return to their remaining relatives, or lacking those, the temple of the Goddess of Rebirth. As per protocol, we will quarantine the boarding party for the next twelve hourmarks and then subject them to a full medical scan before allowing them to return to the ship’s population. Once they are on board, we scuttle the Tch’Dara’s remains in a flare of fire, soon devoured by darkness.

I stop by Ano’s quarters after I leave the bridge. It is later than usual, and Ano is in his sleeping clothes, a dark robe wrapped tight around him as he sits at his desk.

He gestures for me to sit.

“Ehan Subcommander Quayl hinted today I am too distracted by the human female to do my duty to the ship,” I say, cutting

straight to the point. “Is this a common view?”

Ano huffs out a breath, not quite a sigh, not quite a growl. His tail thumps against the ground once, his wings lifting a fraction before he lowers them again. “They want things settled,” he says. “And since you have not claimed her, others would like the chance.”

“Skylar is mine.”

“Currently she is the claim of the ship and in your care as Raiva.”

It is a fine distinction, and one I dislike, though I trust Ano to tell me the truth. Even when I hate it. That is why he is my second. “Skylar will be mine.”

“Then you had best get on it, Tan. For some, the scent of an available female is a temptation. But they are not foolish enough to risk your temper. For one like Ehan Subcommander Quayl, though, the female offers an opportunity. He wants to be Raiva. And he’s been getting more obvious about it on this tour. Not quite insubordinate, but close. Walk with care. And I will shield you as I can. As always.”

We clasp forearms and I leave.

My thoughts are a whirl. It is their right to challenge, but as Raiva, I must judge who is worthy. Of course, I will deem none worthy. I will rip their throat out if they step up and try to claim that position, even if it is their right. I will rip their heart out and feed it to the *crizans* who scurry in the depths of this vessel.

But is that just my pride speaking? The same pride which caused me to kill Xil’Aktar’s preferred mate in front of her?

I do not know, but the human female offered me breath and heat. Ano is right. I must press my suit and find out, once and for all, if Skylar will accept my claim. And if not, I will, by my honor, let her go. No matter if it breaks me.

SKYLAR

I'M DOZING on the sofa when Tan returns. He walks in, pushing a hovertray. My stomach grumbles as I smell the spices and savory scent of grilled meat.

“What happened?” I ask. “Is the ship in trouble?”

It must be because he had time to bring a late dinner, but it's still good to hear Tan's, “No.” He's a weird mix of jittery and focused as he strides to the table and places the tray atop it. I stand, yawn, and cross the few paces to sit down.

Tan lays out the bowls and cutlery and begins spooning grain and savory sauced meat inside. There are two glasses, both with a chilled fruit drink I've grown to love. It tastes like a mix of oranges and fizzy berries.

“There was a Kohath attack,” Tan says as he settles onto his open backed chair. “Likely Thrax.”

My stomach twists, and my fingers clench on the neck of the spoon. “You said we're not in trouble.”

“It wasn't our ship. We received a distress signal. Answering it has taken us farther from the neutral zone.” His tail is swish-swishing over the floor again.

“Do you think the Mangrel... the Kohath are preparing to attack us?”

“They would not be so foolish. We are too formidable. The ship they destroyed was a small, unarmed transport. It would be suicide to attack the Starshadow.”

That's something of a relief.

"But it shed light on a larger problem."

A problem bigger than being swarmed and devoured alive?

"What problem?"

"It need not be a problem."

"Okay." Now I'm just confused.

Tan takes a breath. "Before. What you called the 'kiss'?"

My cheeks flame. "Yeah. It means..." This is so embarrassing. I've never had to break down the meaning of a kiss before. "It means I like you."

"Ah."

"I mean, like, like you. I'd like to explore a deeper relationship." My mouth is dry and I grab the fruit juice and take a long, semi-sweet swig. "A sexual one. If that is something your kind does—"

"Yes." Tan rises, his wings spreading as his eyes lock on mine. The gold centers shrink to pinpoints as the black rims darken and thicken. When he kisses me, his lips are a tickle against mine. I lift my palm to his jaw and lift my chin, wanting more of him.

I moan when he threads his fingers in my hair and tilts my head back to taste more of me. I can feel the roughness of his hands against my skin, and I want more.

"Yes," I breathe against him. "Yes."

Pleasure ripples through my body as his hands slide up my legs, the claws skimming over my skin, leaving fire in their wake. I part my lips, and he moans into me, pulling me to him.

"I am glad you want me as much as I want you, my nymara."

Heat rushes through me. My nipples harden, and my pulse quickens. He strokes my chest, cupping my breasts, the claw tickling at the nub as his tail wraps around my waist and his wings encircle me.

I swallow hard. My skin is tight and tingling with sensation.

With one smooth motion, he lifts me and carries me from the table to his giant bed. He lays me out on the sleeping furs and climbs on top of me, his wings spread overhead, framing the light as he presses kisses across my neck and collarbones.

The Asheraah shipsuit Tylan gave me feels too tight, and I fumble with the fastenings, desperate to get them off so I can feel Tan's hands on me. And just as hungry for a look at him.

Tan helps me undo the seals, exposing the plain undersuit. It is thin, designed to cling to the body and provide a smooth, seamless fit under the other suit layers.

I reach up to do him the same favor, and Tan catches my hand.

"Your eyes are soft, but your movements are urgent," he says, the words a light hiss.

"Is that bad?" I've had my share of partners, but none who were alien, or had tails, or wings, or claws.

"It is good, and yet, I want our first coupling to be slow."

"And after? Can we do slow and fast and... whatever we want after?"

Tan's mouth is a tight line, but I can see the flash of his sharp teeth behind his lips. He looks me over, his eyes widening. "If I can wait that long. By the Five Gods, you are so beautiful."

"So are you," I say. The moment the words are out, I realize how true they are.

Tan's smile is brilliant as he brushes my hair away from my face. He looks at me like I'm a prize he doesn't know quite how to handle.

"Is this what you desire?" he asks.

"Yes." It comes out on a breath.

Tan hisses against my skin, and he pulls back enough to run the pad of a claw across the naked expanse of skin. I lift my hips, feeling the heat of him, his hardness, where his body meets mine.

"I am so honored you have chosen me, nymara."

The undersuits will not come off easily, but the fabric is thin. I slip my fingers under the edge, running them between the slick cloth of the suit and the silky heat of his scales.

Tan makes a sound somewhere between a groan and a hiss. He does the same, mimicking my motions and, by the Stars, has anything in the universe ever felt so good?

“Let go,” Tan says, as he touches my other hand, the one clenched on his forearm. I relax my grip, and he drags his claw down, slicing the undersuit. I shudder. His wings quiver, the edges tickling my legs and arms. He pulls the sides away, leaving my breasts exposed. The cool air teases my nipples as his tail wraps tighter around my hip.

He lowers his head, sucking the nipple of my left breast into his mouth. I arch my back, and a low whine escapes me.

He pinches the right nipple as his mouth devours the left. And stars above, I want him inside of me, and I want him here forever.

I slip my fingers into the gap at the waistband of his undersuit, and Tan hisses. “Hold.”

The word is a whisper. I freeze.

“I can’t get the rest of this off until you move.”

Tan chuckles. It’s a husky, full-throated sound that vibrates through my core. “Is this what you wish, nymara? To touch the spirit of me?”

I nod, and Tan slides down my body.

“I will give you what you want, just as you have given me,” he says. He works the fabric down, exposing my navel and the neat triangle of pubic hair. Tan sniffs, his nostrils flaring.

“Stars,” I whisper as he lowers his face to my slit and dips his tongue inside. My fingers clench the furs under me. His tongue is long, like his body and his tail, and he knows how to use it.

“Sweet,” he murmurs, the tickle of his breath making me shiver. His tail squeezes my hip as he slips two long fingers

into me, fucking me with his hand and his tongue. I spread my legs and arch, wanting more, wanting all of him.

“I did not know the scent of a female could be so sweet,” he continues. “Nor the taste of the spirit.” His tongue dips into my folds. “I want to taste all of you.”

“So beautiful,” he murmurs, then leans in and parts my lips. “So wet.” His tail moves under his chest and the end pushes inside my passage. As he does, he leans in and licks my clit.

I moan, writhing as he buries his face in my cleft. Each flick of his tongue sends another wave of pleasure through my body until I feel like I’m floating. His wings hover, creating a canopy around the two of us. The frills around his ears stand upright as the black rims of his eyes swallow the gold, and his nostrils flare.

“Oh yes, so sweet,” he whispers and laps at my sex, his tongue teasing me and making me shudder as his tail works in and out of me.

He reaches up and takes one of my breasts in his large hand, massaging it and then playing with my nipple. He keeps at this until I can’t stop myself and have to grab his head and hold it to me, pushing my hips up into his face.

“You like my tongue on you, don’t you, nymara?”

I can’t find the words to answer and just moan.

“My tail?”

I moan again.

He chuckles and keeps going, the tip of his tail rubbing at my G-spot. I guess that answers the question about alien anatomy matching mine. He then moves to suck my clit.

“Oh, oh, yes!” I cry out, my hips bucking. “Please! Please, Tan, please!”

“Come for me, nymara,” he moans against me. “I want to feel you come.”

I’m already so close. With him sucking on my clit like this, I know I will last only a few seconds longer before my body

seizes up and I shatter, screaming my release.

My body is like jelly, and I am clinging to the furs, my chest heaving and a sheen of sweat coating every inch of me. Tan kisses his way up my body, pausing at each nipple to tease the swollen bud before continuing his path to my lips.

He pulls his tail out of me, and I feel empty even as the sparkles of pleasure from my orgasm are still dancing behind my eyelids.

“Stars...”

He sits up on his knees, his eyes hooded, and watches me. “I need to be inside you, nymara.”

His cock is large, golden, the shape similar to a human’s, though the shaft is thicker than any man I’ve been with. Like his face, the skin of his cock glitters like golden grains of sand. He strokes himself, his movements slow. His face is tight, his breathing shallow.

My mouth goes dry at the sight of it, the sight of him, and I wonder if it will fit and what it will feel like, filling me. I want to know. “Come here,” I order, and he tugs me toward him.

“It will be easier if you are on top,” he says, lifting me to straddle him. His wings spread out beside him like twin sails. I reach down, grasping the shaft of his cock in my fist. It feels hot, slick with his juices, the texture of it like a bit rough. I want to know how it will feel inside me.

Slowly, I lower myself onto him, sighing as his girth fills me.

“By the gods,” Tan whispers, his palms resting on my hips.

“Yes.” Tan hisses the word, the sound sliding across me like a physical caress. He rises, meeting me, thrust for thrust, and I tighten my thighs, drawing him into me, gasping and sighing. He growls. His fingers tighten around my waist as his pace increases. His wings encircle us, and I wrap my arms around his neck. The slick muscles of his tail squeeze my thigh, and I gasp, feeling the tension and the heat growing between us.

“Oh, yes.” I moan.

He's close, and I'm getting closer, again as we fall into rhythm. He leans in, and I take his mouth, mimicking the way his tongue felt earlier inside me.

"My nymara," he moans against my mouth, his breath hot as he pants. His cock throbs deep inside me, the texture of it sending sparks of pleasure through me. I moan as I ride him, my hands gripping his shoulders, my nipples aching. The pleasure of his cock is incredible, and when he sucks my nipple into his mouth, I cry out. It is hot and wet, and the sensations are building, tightening in my belly, squeezing my pussy.

"You are mine," he growls as he thrusts. "Mine, you hear me?"

"Yes," I moan. "Yours."

His cock gets even harder, and my second orgasm is building, making my breath ragged. My pussy tightens, the orgasm hovering on the edge.

"Please," I moan.

"Yes. Come, my nymara. Come with me."

His claws dig into my flesh, the pain mixing with the pleasure of him.

"Come with me," he snarls, his hips rolling as his tail twines around my thigh. He groans, his rhythm going erratic, and his shuddering body carries me on a wave of pleasure. It crests in a moment of hot, dark ecstasy.

I toss my head back as I unravel again. He's the center of the galaxy, the world, my world, and the only thing in all the universe that matters.

I collapse against him, panting. He holds me, and I lay my head against his shoulder and breathe in his scent. His arm wraps around me, and I feel the shivers that run through him, matching mine. Everything feels so good, I can barely breathe.

"You are beautiful when you come," he says. "You are perfect."

"Nobody's perfect," I say.

“That, nymara, might be the most foolish thing you have ever said to me.”

TAN

I WAKE up and stretch and feel a warm body against my back. I smile, remembering what had happened last night. It also brings to my mind the need to claim her as my mate, my bokdazi, and soon, before anyone else dares. If what Ano said is true, others are more than ready to go after her, and that will not happen.

Skylar lets out an adorable little moan and squirms against me, still asleep. I turn and wrap her in my arms, enjoying her warmth. Is she thinking of the joining we shared? Arousal pools in my belly, thickening my member as I remember the heat of her. The sounds she made. How sensitive she was to my touch. The smooth heat of her skin under my palms. The way her body sheathed mine as though one of the Five Deities formed her only for me.

I want her. I cannot imagine not wanting her. Her scent is a drug, and the taste of her is even sweeter. And now that we have joined, that we know the pleasures each of us can give, I cannot imagine waiting any longer to claim her as my bokdazi.

A chime sounds from the com. Skylar stiffens, and her eyes snap open. She's a light sleeper, and even in my arms, I sense the spike of fear at being awakened so suddenly.

"Shh..." I say, the sound more like a hiss than the susurrations of my implant models. "It is just the bridge." I consider ignoring them. It is not an emergency tone, but we just witnessed the results of a Thrax Kohath attack, and if there is

any evidence found from the wreckage, I should know. The responsibility is mine.

I roll over and tap the com. “Raiva.”

“This is Ehan Prime Ano’Couv’ray,” he says in Asheraahn, his tone too formal. “We have finished going through the ship logs of the Tch’Dara freighter. There have been some... troubling findings. It would be best for you to look over this yourself.”

I dislike this. “Thank you, Ehan Prime,” I respond with equal formality as my mind races. What in all the nine hells could they have found on those logs? My tail is twitching, and I realize I’m digging my claws into the furs.

Skylar, now awake, narrows her eyes and asks, “Is something wrong?”

I force a smile, which feels more like the baring of teeth than anything of humor. “Nothing you need trouble yourself with. I need to take care of some things on the bridge. You should eat breakfast. I’ll com Tylan.”

“They showed me how to use the dispenser,” Skylar says. “It’s not the Kohath, is it?”

“No attack,” I reassure her, though I know whatever it is, is a problem. A serious one. “An administrative issue, most likely.”

“You’d let me know if it was something worse?”

“Yes,” I promise, hopeful I will not have to keep that promise in the coming hours or days. Indulging myself, I lean in and touch her lips with mine, a caress and nothing more. If I linger too long, I will not want to leave, and the urgency in Ano’s tone gives me no reason to believe there is time for a leisurely morning with my nymara.

Ano and an Aegiseer specialist meet me on the bridge.

“Raiva,” Ano says. “It would be best to take this in the briefing room.”

The specialist, a thin male with scales the blue of twilight, nods once, his features drawn. His eyes have the silver sheen of ocular assists. When we are seated, the doors sealed and an

encryption field up, the Aegiseer calls up a map of the data. “Much of it was corrupted, but we were able to pull some... troubling data.” He glances at Ano.

“Tell me,” I order.

“Two hourmarks after deploying the distress beacon, the Tch’Dara’s sent a tightbeam.”

“Was it a call for help?” The beacon should have handled that, but if they had a way to contact and warn off a closer ship, they might have tried that.”

“The Tch’Dara crew could not have sent the signal. Vid evidence shows after the Thrax Kohath gained control of the ship, they immediately executed the crew.”

“So the Kohath sent it.”

“Yes.” My hearts pound, an uneven rhythm that sends excitement through my skin. “Where? Can we follow it?”

“They sent a signal through to Zone 4. Through the Neutral Zone.”

Oh. This is bad.

Now I know why Ano was so formal, and why the high level of security.

“What does it say?”

“As I said, the data became corrupted and we have not fully decrypted the message.”

It’s all I can do to hold my fear in check. If the Kohath have allied with humans, what does Skylar’s sudden arrival on our side of the Neutral Zone mean? I believe in my mate. But my crew does not, and the evidence suggests foul play.

“Get on it.”

“Yes, sir,” the Aegiseer Specialist says. “I have some ideas, and with more time...”

“Who else is aware of this development?” I ask.

“Just the three of us,” Ano says.

“And some members of my team who recovered the logs,” the specialist adds.

“Keep it that way. Let’s keep it that way until we have definitive evidence.” One way or the other.

“Sir.”

My mind races as the Aegiseer Specialist and Ano both nod. Skylar is my bokdazi. I feel it with every fiber of my spirit. But that will not matter if I can’t prove she was not a Kohath plant. If I can’t prove that I’m not an unwitting pawn.

Or worse, a traitor.

As the specialist rises to leave, I wave to Ano. “A moment.”

Once he’s left, I say, “Skylar has nothing to do with this.”

“You bedded her, then?”

“She is my bokdazi. I need to claim her as such and soon.” For her safety, if nothing else.

“And if the logs tell a different story?”

“She is mine,” I snarl.

Ano looks at me, his golden eyes flat and his tail stiff. “I trust you, Tan. You are as a brother to me, and if you have accepted her, I will stand by you. Even if it costs me my life. But the crew may not. And it is the crew I am worried about. You cannot have forgotten that they are the ones who will pay the price if the Starshadow is raided. If we are attacked. If they cannot trust you to do the right thing and remove the possible danger you are keeping here.”

“I know.” I breathe a hiss out through my teeth. “I will not sacrifice her. Even if it means I must sacrifice my position as Raiva.” Even if I must sacrifice my life.

And my honor? That too will fall if I am wrong.

I cannot be wrong.

Ano’s tail twitches, his brow ridges flaring. “As you will it. I trust you, Tan. And whatever you decide, I will follow.”

Ano leaves, and I am alone.

Skylar made me promise her to tell her if our meeting concerned something worse than an administrative issue. But how can I tell her of this evidence that she might be a spy? And if I am wrong, revealing this evidence would be disastrous. I hate myself for thinking that. For doubting her. I know she is innocent.

But I cannot, as Raiva, reveal to her about the transmission. Not yet.

And if I am fortunate, and the Five Deities smile, this will come to nothing and none need be the wiser.

Decision made, I stand, swipe my hand to end the encryption field and make my way to the mess hall for a quick breakfast before assuming my place on the bridge.

SKYLAR

THE DAY PASSES, and Tan is distracted when he returns for dinner. But he will not tell me why. Whatever it is, has him kissing me with extra ferocity after dinner and not let me leave, holding me in his bed and burying his head in my hair.

I'm not complaining, except I know something is wrong.

“What’s happening?” I ask.

“Nothing.”

“You’re not a very good liar.”

Tan sighs, and I turn to face him as the lights in his room dim, casting an ethereal shimmer over his skin. He says, “It is... a bureaucratic issue.”

“What does that mean?”

“Personnel issues. Boring, and we will soon resolve them. I am stressed. That is all. But as soon as this is finished, I will be free to focus on us.”

“You’re done with your duties for the day, though, right?” I give him what I hope translates as a teasing smile. “Maybe we can focus on us a little now?”

The tension melts from his face, and he pulls me against him, his fingers tangling in my hair. “Nymara. What did I ever do to deserve you?”

“It doesn’t seem that hard. You saved my life.”

“So far,” he whispers, the words harsh.

“You will.” I lean in, kissing him, the feel of his scales a caress against my skin. We make love fast and hard, and when we are curled up together in his sleeping furs, he whispers something in Asheraahn that ends with “*bokdazi*.”

“Bok-dahzi?” I ask, and he kisses my forehead and runs a hand down my back.

“Sleep, my Skylar.”

And, because I have no choice, and because he’s pressed the spot on my neck that makes me yawn, I do.

When I wake, he’s gone, though he’s left a tray of still hot food on the table. Tylan comes as I sit down to eat. “I want to see how Asheraah handle navigation. Janu, right?” I say. It’s about time I earn my keep if I’m going to stick around. And with Tan, I want to stick around.

Tylan says, “Janu is not a ship’s system. It is a talent. You must be born with the sense. The ability to connect with the living spirit of Starshadow. Our ship.”

Living spirit? I look up at the stone and steel merged bulkheads, think of the full bath, and the other wonders I’ve seen traveling through the corridors with Tylan. “The ship is alive?” I ask, glancing around. Is it watching me? What does it think of me and Tan? Well, it hasn’t tried to suck me out an airlock, so I guess it’s not too pissed off. I hope.

“All Asheraah ships have a spirit. An intelligence. Yours do not?”

I doubted the Titan had possessed much intelligence. And that was for the best, considering its end. “Ours don’t work that way,” I say. “Can we talk to it?”

“Not with words. This is the area of the Janu.”

Tan has mentioned nothing about communing with the spaceship. Then again, I didn’t ask. “I need to make myself useful here, somehow,” I say. “And I’m trained in navigation, so I was hoping, maybe...” I shrug.

Tylan says, “It cannot hurt to look. And the Janu might like to learn of how other species navigate the stars.”

I admit, I'm curious too. I've never met anyone who could talk to a living spaceship. And if this is a living spaceship, I should stop treating it like a machine. Once I load my used dishes into the recycler, I lay a hand on the bulkhead. It's warm, and I feel a slight hum through my skin. "Thank you," I say, my face warming at the idea of talking to a spaceship. Still, it can't hurt to be polite.

As we walk through the corridor, I'm struck again by the many colors of the Asheraah. According to Tan, they dye their scales in colors and patterns to show their department and rank.

Tan is the only deep gold I've seen. Probably because he's the Raiva. Other high-ranking officers are metallic. His second, Ano, is a deep bronze. I've seen him chatting once or twice with Tan. The Masg, their marines, are a mottled navy, brown, and black. Green is medical, blue for sciences, and there are other colors whose roles I don't understand. Maroon may be engineering. The majority are a mix of bland dark gray and brown, though some of these have stripes running along their backs and arms in the standard colors. I'm guessing that's for regular crew or trainees.

And a smattering are bone white. Maybe those are Janu?

I lean to Tylan, not wanting to be rude. "Is that one a Janu?" I ask, pointing to a bone white male passing us in the corridor.

"Huh?" Tylan's ear frills flutter. "Sciences. Communications tech."

"Is Communications white then?"

"White?" Tylan cocks their head, eyes narrowing. "What are you talking about?"

Now I'm confused. "His scales," I whisper. "They're white."

Tylan holds a finger up to their lips and hisses, a mime of the "shhh" gesture I showed them a couple of days ago.

I shut up. Once we're alone in the corridor again, they ask, "Are you still having headaches, Skylar?"

"No."

“Still, it is best we have the healers check your vision. A concussion can have lingering effects.”

I laugh, though the stiffness of her tail and her worried expression are making me a little nervous. “I’m not concussed,” I say.

Their voice lowers. “Only ghosts wear scales of white,” they whisper.

“Wha—?” I start, then shut my mouth. “I don’t think that guy was dead,” I say.

“No.”

“What color was he to you?”

“Blue, with a stripe of yellow. Communications tech.”

Maybe something did go wrong with me when I hit my head. I hold my hand in front of my eyes. Concussions can give you color auras. But my hand looks normal. It’s the right color. And Tylan looks normal. As does the next Asheraah, who marches toward us in scales of gray striped with maroon.

“He looks normal,” I whisper to Tylan. “Gray and maroon.”

Tylan breathes out a hissing sigh. “Good. We should visit the healers.”

“I want to see the Janu,” I say.

“But—”

“It was probably just a trick of the light,” I add, a weak excuse and one I don’t believe. But I will not spend the rest of the day cycle getting poked, prodded, and scanned by alien doctors over mistaking the color of some Asheraah’s scales. Especially since this isn’t even the first all white one I’ve seen.

Unless I am seeing dead people. Well, dead Asheraah.

No. It’s probably just something different about human eyes. Some of their scale dyes might just be out of our visual range. Or interpreted differently by our eyeballs. That’s a good excuse, and one that doesn’t involve ghosts or a brain bleed or something else horrible.

Tylan doesn't look happy, and I add, "If I see anything else weird, I'll let you know, okay?"

"And then we will see the healer?"

"Yeah."

The Janu seem to have their own wing of the ship. As we cross the threshold into this area, I swear, I hear a low sigh, and a cool wind brushes past my cheek and ruffles my hair, almost playfully. Vines and moss and what look like flowering berry bushes cover the walls and ceiling. This area has a lot more organic material than the rest of the ship. In fact, when we pass a bulkhead, I swear I hear a soft whisper of a groan.

Asheraah—I assume they're Asheraah—in long robes of deep purple are tending the plants. The robes split into four strips, with room for the wings to fit through. The air is cool, and I can smell flowers and the sweetness of a honey-like nectar.

One approaches. The Janu is probably female, judging by her silhouette. Like humans, Asheraah female hips are wider than the males I've seen, and I see the curve of breasts in her chest area. Her scales are a deeper purple, almost black, and she wears a crest of red feathers.

"Ehan Janu Yar'thxliz," Tylan says, bowing. I bow too.

"Visitors are rare," the Janu says, her voice a deep, husky rumble. "You must be very special."

"Yes," Tylan says. "Skylar is—"

"A navigator," I blurt. "I mean, not like you. No... uhh... special sense like that. But I did navigation on human ships."

"Hmm..." the Janu studies me.

"I was just curious. I hope I'm not imposing."

Her nostrils flare, and she flicks her tongue out toward me, her eyes falling half-shut. "No sense? Are you certain?"

"I—?" I shrug. "Our ships aren't smart like that."

"Ah, so that is how it is. Interesting! You may call me Janu Yar." She waves a clawed hand. "Come, we will have tea, and you will tell me how your kind find their way between the

stars, hmm?” As we walk, her robes sweep behind her. Her feet are bare, her claws tapping the ground in a rhythmic pattern.

We enter a small alcove framed with vines. There is a table with a tray of steaming liquid. We sit, and I am surrounded by plants with tall stalks and green, leafy fronds. The chair has padding and is not nearly as uncomfortable as it looks.

Tylan sits beside me, Janu Yar opposite us.

Tylan pours the tea.

Janu Yar takes the first cup, holds it to her mouth, and breathes before taking a sip. When it is poured, I do the same with mine. The scent is floral with a hint of smoke, and the taste is both bitter and sweet. It reminds me of a stout beer and, for a few seconds, I’m on the stardock with my sister, sneaking a bottle she bought from, as she put it, an “adult store.” I’d been fourteen. I blink the memory away.

Janu Yar asks, “You read gravity and star charts, yes?”

“Uhh... yeah.” I glance at Tylan, who is wide-eyed and staring, their tail tapping at the floor. I turn back to the Janu. “But I’m more interested in how you do it. You can speak to the ship?”

“Oh yes,” the Janu says, her crest rising and falling as she gives the Asheraahn equivalent of a nod, which has a little bit of a back-and-forth head tilt. “Our Starshadow likes you,” she adds, and I feel something like a hum through the soles of my borrowed boots. It’s pleasant.

I smile. “I’m glad to hear that.” And relieved.

And then the Janu asks me detailed navigation questions, worse than the proctor of my verbal exam, and by the time our tea is finished, my eyes are crossing, and my head is spinning. Finally, she sits back, her crest fanning, then lowering. Her wings shift as she smiles. “You are a navigator,” she says.

“So I passed your test?”

“Indeed. We have some of the older equipment. Relics of before the Janu bond was common. Perhaps you would like to

come back and try your hand at it?”

“I would love that!” I grin. “Thank you!” I may not be a Janu navigator, but I could become a backup navigator. Or at least keep my skills up while I figure out what else I can do to make a place for myself on Tan’s ship.

“Of course. I have never met one of your species. This has been enlightening. You are most welcome here.”

“Thank you.”

I glance at Tylan. Their tail swishes, and their wings are partially extended. Asheraah aren’t normally this animated, so the reaction seems strange.

“Good,” the Janu says, standing. “I will have one of my disciples take you and your sistan to the older equipment at second shift, tomorrow, when it is unpacked.”

Knowing a dismissal when I hear one, I stand, bow like Tylan did before, and we take our leave.

SKYLAR

I'M jittery with excitement as we step back into the corridor. Without the greenery, the air seems cooler and smells less sweet. Still, now that I'm paying attention, the bulkheads are more textured than any human ship I've flown on, and the deck plates have a higher relief, giving it a more organic feel.

"You made an excellent impression," Tylan says. "It is uncommon for the Ehan to give so much attention to a single member of the crew, let alone a guest." Their tone is something between awe and bewilderment.

I don't like the awe part. I mean, it's better than suspicion or disdain, but I'd rather have the sistan as a friend than whatever awe means. "Tan said she'd be interested in the differences in how humans handle navigation," I explain. "I don't think it's any more than that."

"She said the ship likes you."

"Doesn't it like everyone on the crew?"

"I do not know." Tylan hisses out a sigh. "I have never spent much time with the Janu, in truth. They are not secretive, but they are very protective of their knowledge."

"Like Tan's responsibilities with the Raiva?"

"Yes. And you impressed her with your knowledge of navigation systems."

I sure studied hard enough. It's nice to see the hard work paying off.

“You saw nothing else... odd with the Janu, did you?”

I laugh. The entire thing had been odd, but I figure they’re talking about the white scale thing. “No. Everyone was shades of purple. I mean, there were the robes. I’ve seen none of the rest of you in robes.” The Asheraah tended toward minimalism in uniforms, letting their scale colors mark their status, which with Tan I appreciated.

“Ah, the Janu keep to the temple ways,” Tylan offers as explanation. “Still, perhaps it would be best to visit the healers. We have a few hourmarks yet before Tan’s due to return to your quarters.”

The last thing I want is to be poked and prodded by doctors. “I want to see the gym,” I say. “Tan says you have a big arena where you practice flying? I want to see it.”

“Better the Raiva take you.”

“He’s so busy right now. Come on. It’s way more interesting than watching me take medical tests, isn’t it?”

“If there is an issue—”

“I’m not seeing dead Asheraah. I promise. Listen, I’ll talk to Tan about it, and if he thinks I should see a healer, I’ll go. But I feel fine. And you can’t say you don’t want to stretch your wings out a little, can you?”

Tylan’s ear frills spread and contract. “A brief tour, then you must speak with the Raiva.”

“Agreed. Short tour. Promise.”

“Very well.”

She takes me to a large compartment that’s mostly open. The deck plating is covered in the Asheraahn equivalent of mats. At first glance, the whole thing reminds me of a cross between the mat rooms back on the stardocks and a giant outdoor patio. There’s a smaller area set aside near the back that has a couple of small chairs and a large screen that looks a lot like the one in Tan’s room, except it’s not lit up.

Passing through the archway, I realize the compartment is much, much larger than I’d thought in the corridor. The ceiling

is at least five stories high and the room itself is probably a good thousand square feet. The bulkhead has several more of the small alcoves like the one the Janu had offered us tea and perches as well. There are also what appear to be nets hanging from the ceiling.

Some Asheraah are scattered across the mats, with others in flight, some gliding, and a couple of them using their tails to lift themselves.

There's also a lot more Asheraah here than I expected, which is maybe a stupid thing to be surprised about, given the size of the compartment and the number of wings. A small flock near the ceiling seems to play a game like tag. Their chirping laughter echoes around me. All are the regular array of colors I know are acceptable for live Asheraah. All except one, doing what looks like is a series of complicated calisthenics on a floor mat. He is bone white. My gaze keeps going back to him, though I know I shouldn't stare.

He spreads his wings, though from this distance, they possess a strange translucent quality. All of this is strange.

I lean to Tylan and whisper. "What exercise is that?" I gesture toward the bone-white Asheraah.

"Ah, Ehan Subcommander Quayl'Gar'dee'al," Tylan says, hiccup-coughing at the appropriate points. "It is odd to see him doing floor exercises. He prefers flight."

His wings flap listlessly. They seem sickly, but I'm keeping that to myself. If I say anything about what I see, Tylan will be dragging me off to a healer, for sure. And maybe I need one. But something inside me says this ghost Asheraah thing isn't a trick of my mind.

"Can you fly?" I ask Tylan, gesturing toward a nearby perch maybe two stories up on the bulkhead.

"OF COURSE!" TYLAN BARES THEIR TEETH IN AN ASHERAAH grin and, with a shoulder shrug, unfurls their wings. They crouch and leap into the air. It's magical to see. They tap down on the perch with their lower claws, turn, and drop back to my side.

I'm clapping as Tylan lands. "That was wonderful!" I exclaim. Why hasn't Tan taken me here? Shown me this? As wonderful as it was to see my friend flying, watching Tan would be even better. "Does Tan come here a lot?" I ask, trying to sound casual."

Tylan laughs. "So you wish to see the Raiva fly?" Their tail twitches, betraying amusement.

"Yes." My face flushes. I hope the temperature isn't making the pink tint worse. It's stupid to be embarrassed. I've seen him naked. I've had him inside me. Wanting to watch my lover fly isn't a strange thing. Right?

"I will send him a com message," Tylan says. "I believe he would like to see this expression on your face."

"No! He's busy. Doing Raiva stuff." And by the way he's been acting, it's stressful Raiva stuff. Bureaucracy has to be fifteen times harder when your subordinates have claws, tails, and wings. "I don't want to bother him."

"Too late. I sent the message."

"Tylan!"

"I think, in this, the Raiva would like to be bothered," Tylan insists.

I'm too involved with our conversation to notice the bone white Asheraah, Subcommander something, until I hear his voice. "Excuse me, Starshadow Bounty Designate Skylar Zavien." His voice is cold, his tone formal.

Tylan, her wings partially open, startles, pulling them tight to her body as they turn. I turn too. I blink and blink again, hoping to bring some color to him. But it's no trick of the light. He's colorless and his wings are almost transparent, like a ghost's wings.

Fex.

Maybe I should go see the healers. His eyes are flat, black circles without rim or center, and his gaze is fixed. It reminds me of an insect's stare, and I shiver, drawing my arms around myself.

“Ehan Subcommander,” Tylan says, bowing. I do the same, forcing myself to lower my arms.

“Sistan,” he says with brief, dismissive nod, his gaze stuck on me. “Skylar Zavien.”

“Yes?”

“I see the Raiva is quite comfortable allowing you to roam the ship at will.” His tone is flat, his words on the proper side of politeness, but I feel his disapproval. Anger. Hate?

My stomach twists. “Tylan’s with me,” I say. “Is that a problem?”

“It is the Raiva’s decision,” he says, not answering the question.

“Do you fly too?” I ask, in part to change the subject, and in part because I can’t imagine how wings that thin would hold him up. Unless I really am seeing things.

The subcommander’s insect eyes narrow, and he says, “I had a sprain,” he says, rolling his left shoulder. The wing shakes a couple of seconds later, and the movement feels wrong. “I am forbidden from flight for the next 10 cycles.” He bares his teeth. It should be a smile, but it feels like a threat.

Get a hold of yourself, Sky.

Maybe I do need to see those healers.

“Are you well?” the Subcommander asks, and I realize something must have shown on my face, or maybe I’ve been staring too long.

I force a smile. “Just a little tired. The Janu Yar grilled me.”

“The Ehan Janu granted you an audience?”

It wasn’t quite an audience. Or, thinking back on the tea and questioning, maybe it was an audience. “Tan... uhh, the Raiva said she was interested in learning more about how humans do navigation.”

“I see.”

Tylan pipes in. “The Ehan Janu was very impressed. She’s invited Skylar back. Said she was a true navigator.”

The Subcommander tenses, and his gaze swings between me and Tylan. He’s frowning. “How... fortunate.” He flexes his hands, the claw tips glinting in the overhead light. “To win the regard of the Janu is quite a feat.”

His wings rise as he speaks, and beneath them, I see something shadow. My skin goes cold as thin tendrils of shadow, like antennae, unfurl from his shoulders.

“Ahh, thank you.” I take a step back. My mouth is dry. Am I the only one seeing this? I glance at Tylan.

The shadow antennae freeze, and his expression goes blank for a second, like his face is made not of flesh and scales but clay.

“Sky!”

Relief flows through me as I hear Tan’s voice and know, deep in my bones, that I’m safe.

Tan strides toward us from the entranceway, his tail swiping left and right, his gold eyes locking on the Subcommander. “Quayl,” he says without even a nod to politeness. “What business do you have with my bounty?” His words are a hiss, and the threat is clear.

“None,” the subcommander hisses, his wings opening. The shadow antennae are gone, and I’m wondering now if I imagined them in the same way I might be imagining his bone white scales. “We were simply discussing her visit with the Janu. It seems she impressed them.”

“Which is no surprise to me.”

“I do not doubt your judgment, Raiva, but is it safe to have this human wandering the ship on her own?” He tilts his head, a very snake-like movement that raises the hairs along my arms. “As an issue of safety, I mean.”

“Why would she be unsafe with us?” Tan asks.

The subcommander presses his lips together, his nostrils flaring. “Merely an observation,” he says. “She is without a

mate. Discipline amongst the ranks can slip, given enough provocation.”

“Skylar Zavien is mine, and if anyone dares touch her, they will answer to my claws,” Tan snarls, his wing feathers raising.

The subcommander raises both hands, palm up. “I meant no offense, Raiva,” he says. “Merely noting.

“She is under my protection,” Tan snaps. “Now, Skylar, I think it best we take our leave.”

Around us, other Asheraah have stopped and are watching the exchange. Some are smiling. Others look concerned.

“Yes,” I say, nodding toward the group. “I’d like to go home now.” As soon as the words fall out of my mouth, I realize the word ‘home’ in that moment meant Tan’s quarters. And the world seems to tilt again.

Is my home with him? Is that how my heart sees it?

“Ehan Subcommander,” Tan says, nodding, his wings lowering as takes my hand.

When we are in the corridor, I turn to Tan. “We need to talk,” I say.

“Did he hurt you?”

“No.” I mean, he did nothing besides scare me to death with ghost antennae that may have been a figment of my imagination, anyway.

“If he, or anyone, threatens you, I will deal with them,” Tan says. “You must not fear my crew.”

I nod.

“Say it,” Tan says.

“I will not fear your crew.” And I shouldn’t. Even though Quayl scared the stuffing out of me. What I really need to fear, it seems, is my brain. And how can I explain that to Tan? How can I explain it to myself?

MANIPULATOR SKARGATH: KOHATH FLESH SHIFTER

I STRIDE DOWN THE CORRIDOR, my heart racing with a mix of fear and anger. The encounter with the human, Skylar Zavien, in the flight chamber has left me, Manipulator Skargath, Flesh Shifter of the Fourteenth Hive, feeling exposed and vulnerable.

The way the human female reacted when she saw me— the fear in her eyes, her retreat at my sensory antennae, the whispered conversation with her sistan companion— it all points to one terrifying conclusion: she saw something of my true form.

How?

My only saving grace is the human Skylar Zavien does not seem to understand what she saw. We of the Kohath rarely bother with the other side of the Zone Four Barrier. It is not because we cannot crush their defenses should we choose, but because until now, it distracted us from our true banquet, the Asheraah.

What worth did weak, scaleless, clawless lumps of flesh offer us beyond a quick meal? Their technology is inferior, and the beings within are easy enough prey for those of us strong enough to use the pathways of the beyond to cross the void.

Now, it seems, we might have missed the depth of the resources—and threat—in Zone Four. If these humans can see through our abilities, we must study and then eliminate them.

But time is short. How long until she tells the Raiva what she saw? And how long until he understands the truth of her

vision?

I had intended to challenge Raiva Tan after arranging an accident for his second, Ano. But now, we must accelerate the plan. We cannot fail. After months of fooling the advanced Asheraah scanners, to think a stinking human female could undo my disguise is almost too much to bear. The stakes are too high, and our mission is too important.

As I approach the quarters of Communication Specialist Tar'Quin, I steel myself for what's to come. The challenge against the Raiva for the human female is now not just a part of our plan— it's become a necessity for my very survival. I must win, at any cost.

The hum of the jamming field passes over my exoskeleton as I enter the compartment. My fellow Kohath agent, Operator Morthrix, is sucking the guts from the carcass of a flitterrat, one of the Star Shadow's nocturnal vermin. Morthrix's physical form is that of an Asheraah communication specialist, and I see that form superimposed over his true insectoid form, the ash-white carapace splattered with guts and viscera.

We are messy eaters, especially when the food, such as it is, has been too long dead.

"Is there a problem, brother?" Morthrix asks as he removes his antennae from the corpse, swiping his tongue over the tips with a slurp. "Our meeting is not scheduled until the cycle after next."

"We must accelerate our timetable." At his inquisitive chitter, I explain what happened in the flight chamber.

"Are you sure?"

I whip my stinger outwards, tapping at the gap in his exoskeleton between his jaw and neck. "Do not challenge my judgement, Infiltrator." I hiss in our proper tongue.

Morthrix, cowed, lowers his head. "My apologies."

"Leak what we have planted in the Asheraah ship's logs. We must sow doubt about this human. And then I will challenge the Raiva, eliminate him, and claim the human as my own."

“It is a good plan, Senior Flesh Weaver,” Morthrix grovels. I resist the urge to poison him, just a little. So he once again understands the value of agony. But I cannot risk compromising his focus when our plans are so close to fruition.

Later, I promise myself. His cries will mingle with the human’s screams, and in it I will know peace.

“And while I am dispatching of the Raiva, you will use the distraction to plant the virus. When it is done, we shall return not only with the ship, but a valuable test subject. We shall be elevated for our contribution to the Hive.”

“It will be done.” Morthrix hisses, showing his rows of sharp teeth in anticipation. “At last, a chance to strike a blow against our enemies.”

Perhaps, if he performs admirably, I will allow him to have his part of the reward. After I have punished him for his disrespect.

Mandibles twitching with eagerness, I turn to the door. “For the Hive. For the Masters. For our Glory.”

“For our Glory,” Morthrix echoes.

Events are moving swiftly in our favor. Soon we of the Kohath will have a valuable prize, tearing the battlecruiser Starshadow and all the Asheraah on it asunder.

And none too soon. I am exhausted of impersonating the Asheraah. Their scaled hides and manners are so... limiting. But when the work is complete, I will let the facade drop, and they will know pain, fear, and true despair.

SKYLAR

I WAIT until we're back in Tan's quarters to ask about the ghosts.

"Bone white?" Tan asks, sitting beside me on his sleeping furs. He brushes my hair from my forehead.

"Yeah. It seems to happen almost at random. Tylan said white scales are a sign of the dead. Like ghosts. But they don't act dead."

"Does it happen at random? Like, what color am I?"

That's a good question. None of the Asheraah I see regularly have bleached out on me. But aside from Tylan and Ano, his second in command, and the healers who tended me while I was ill, I haven't gotten to know many other Asheraah. "You're always gold," I say. "And Tylan and the healers don't change. I'm not sure about anyone else, though. Today, I saw two Asheraah with white scales. Tylan said one was a communication tech, and the other..." I take a breath. Tan's not going to like me accusing his officers of... well... looking dead. On the other hand, Tan looked like he was ready to rip Subcommander Quayl's throat out for looking at me the wrong way, so maybe he won't hate the thought of his subcommander looking dead that much. "Subcommander Quayl."

"Quayl. Did he always look like that to you?"

I shrug.

He was on the bridge when we brought you in. Did you see any white ones there?

I think back. It's hard to remember anything through the fog of terror I'd been feeling. I shrug again. "I don't remember seeing any white Asheraah before I hit my head."

"You should see the healers. Has Quayl done anything else suspicious?" Tan's lips curl, a low growl sounding in his chest. It's sexy and a little terrifying. "He did not touch you, did he?"

"No!" I'm not about to tell Tan about the weird shadow antennae when he's in this kind of mood. Next thing I know, he'll be gutting Quayl on the floor of the Starshadow's bridge. Then what will the ship think about me?

"Good. If he touches you, I will peel his hide away and feed him his own guts."

"Ugh, can we please not talk about eating other sentients?" I put a hand to my stomach.

Tan breathes in, and the muscles along his shoulders and arms relax. He lets out a low, rumbling laugh. "I apologize. I had no intention of frightening you."

"Good."

"It is best you do not mention this, though. We do not speak of ghosts, and nobody will appreciate it if you claim they or their fellow crew members are walking on both sides of the veil."

"It's probably just an effect of the head injury." A weird one, but I don't make a habit out of hitting my head so hard I see dead people, so what do I know? Maybe it's something in the food too. Asheraah food hasn't bothered me so far, but I can't be certain.

"Regardless," Tan says. "If you see anyone else with the color, you will tell me. In fact, if you see anything unusual, even if it seems unimportant, you will tell me."

I think again of the weird shadow antennae coming out of Quayl. Maybe I should tell Tan about that? But it was probably just my imagination running away with me.

Let me see what the healers have to say first.

"I have one regret," I say.

“Hmm?”

“That I’ve never gotten a chance to see you fly.” I grin. “I mean, Tylan was so pretty, gliding through the air.”

“Pretty?”

“Adorable. You’d be adorable too, I think.”

“I am not adorable!”

“Oh?”

“I will show you adorable.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Please. Show me.”

Tan launches himself to his feet. The next thing I know, he’s holding me cradled against him. He spreads his wings wide as he leaps upward. There’s hardly room in here for him to do more than flap his wings once before we are near brushing the compartment’s ceiling. And then he spreads his wings wide, and we glide over the sleeping furs and his gold eyes and the wicked smile on his face capture my gaze.

We’re only in the air for maybe thirty seconds, but it feels like magic. Flying differs from Zero-G. I feel the strength and power of him in how he holds me to his chest as the ripple of his muscles transfer the energy needed to lift his mass into the air.

“Oh Tan,” I gasp as he guides us with barely a wobble to the sleeping furs. We land in a tumble of limbs and wings and, though his scales tickle, it’s an absolute pleasure to run my hands and legs over him as we fall into each other’s arms.

“Now, how was that?” Tan asks, the question punctuated with a quick thrust of his hips.

“Utterly adorable.”

He lets out a bark of a laugh and presses his head to mine, his tongue tickling my lips until they part, and I welcome him into a deeper kiss.

I want him, right now. When we part for breath, I say, “I can make you fly, too.” I run my fingers over the line of his hips,

down, and stroke the hard ridge of his cock beneath his skinsuit.

Tan gasps and pulls back, his eyes half shut, his ear frills twitching. His wings flare, then settle. "Can you?" he breathes.

"Oh yes," I assure him, swiping my fingers over the seam of the suit. With a shrug of his shoulders, it falls away, revealing his scales, his ridges, and the hard muscle of his chest and abdomen.

I climb over him, teasing him with a kiss, and then, with him pinned beneath me, I straddle his hips, rubbing myself against the hard ridge of his cock.

The friction sends sparks of heat through me, and Tan groans, his hands rising to cup my breasts. My skinsuit is still sealed, and I like the power it gives me clothed, him nude and hard for me. Arousal aches between my thighs, and I grind my hips down, letting his ridges rub against my sex, the suit's texture increasing the sensation.

"Sky," Tan hisses.

"Yes?" I raise an eyebrow.

He opens his mouth to speak, then closes it as I tease him.

I move my hands to his pectoral muscles. They are hard under my palms, and beneath his scales, I feel the thrum of his twin heartbeats and the echo of his tension. His hips are making tiny thrusts, the tip of his cock wet. The ache inside me is rising, becoming need, and soon, I'm going to want out of this skinsuit. But not yet. I promised I'd make him fly, and I'm the type of girl who keeps her promises.

I kiss his mouth first, pressing my body against his. Tan's hands grip my hips, and he attempts to flip us, but I push down against him. "Not yet," I say, and we rock together. His groan is needy.

My lips travel along his jawline and down his neck, my hands following the contours of his muscular body to his chest. I lick the ridges along his collarbones, and Tan arches into me, a groan rising in his throat.

His nipples are small, hard, and a rich shade of almost copper, and when I take one into my mouth, he hisses, his hands flexing against me.

Fex, I want to touch myself, to relieve this growing ache, but I want him at my mercy more. I tease at his nipples until he is saying my name, and then I kiss downward, toward that large, mouthwatering cock. I've had him inside me but never tasted him. Not like this.

The length is thick. The head is smooth and, despite its shape, not much larger than that of a human's. It has ridges, not unlike the rest of his body. Up close, I can see their fine detail. His hips jerk, and I lick up the underside.

Tan sucks in a breath. "Skylar—"

"I said I was going to make you fly," I say, and with a grin, I take him in my mouth. The tip is larger than the rest, and when he hits the back of my throat, it takes a lot of willpower to relax.

I've only ever done this twice before and neither was Tan's size or shape.

I grip the base with my fist and start a slow rhythm. Tan's wings tremble. His whole body trembles as he groans, pushing up into my mouth in time with the strokes.

"This is a dream," he whispers. "You are a dream."

I swirl my tongue around the head of his cock and suck him all the way in until the tip brushes the back of my throat again, then I pull back, letting him sink free. He tastes like salt and spice and his natural musk. I play with him, kissing, sucking, using my tongue, and he's begging me for more, and for release, and when I swallow him back to the base, and start a steady, hard rhythm, his hands tighten against my scalp.

He's close, I can sense it. I suck harder, taking him in as deep as I can.

"Skylar—I'm going to—" His breath is a series of soft hisses, and his body is shaking, his hips working. "Stars, Sky!"

He comes in a hot gush. I keep pumping, drinking him until he stops shuddering and his grip loosens against my scalp.

His hands slide away, and he pulls himself back, breathing hard.

I slide off him, grinning.

“I hope that was close enough to flying,” I tease. And he pulls me down, crushing me to his chest and nuzzling my hair.

“Stars, Skylar,” he whispers. “I—” And then his hands are at the seam of my skinsuit, opening it, sliding the suit away, his fingers exploring me. He rolls us both until he is above me and then his mouth is on mine, his fingers pressing and teasing.

He parts my legs and slips a finger inside. That touch sends ripples of pleasure through me. My sex is slick, and he’s pressing and curling that finger, and my whole body feels like an instrument he’s playing. He presses another finger inside, and my breath catches. He thrusts slowly, his thumb rubbing at my clit, and my head falls back, my eyes squeezing shut.

I feel his breath against my lips, and then he’s kissing me. He’s biting at my lower lip, his tongue swiping over the marks, and it’s a delicious pleasure.

“Tan,” I gasp. “More, please.”

He kisses my jawline, then my throat. And while his fingers thrust, his tongue runs along my collarbone and then up to my ear. “You can never hide from me,” he whispers, and then he licks a slow circle on the outer edge of my ear.

The shiver starts at the point where his tongue meets skin, and it ripples through me until the intensity of it breaks, and the pleasure rises like a wave. And then I’m coming, shuddering against his hand and the press of his fingers.

Afterwards, when we lie tangled in each other, and he’s stroking my hair, my limbs loose and warm, I snuggle against his chest, and say, “That was almost better than flying.”

“Almost?”

“I’ll need to test it. Both. We’ll have to do it again.”

“It will be my pleasure.”

I yawn and try to burrow closer. “We’ll do it later,” I say, because I don’t think I can stay awake much longer. “When I don’t feel so good.”

“Sleep,” Tan says, pulling the blankets over us. “I will be here.”

“Promise?”

“Always,” he says.

I believe him, and when I close my eyes, the world has a bright gold tint, and it’s not from the light but the color of Tan’s scales filling my world.

TAN

I STAND at the head of the ship's conference room, my temper simmering as I survey the assembled officers. Someone has leaked the data about the Kohath communication. If I were as brutal as my enemies, I would have had every one of the communication techs tortured until one told me what I needed to know. But I am not a monster. I have control of my worst urges.

Besides, it would not help.

The rumors of a message from the Kohath to human space have swept through the Starshadow over the night shift like fire over dry leaves, and now doubt hangs like smoke in the air of whispered conversations.

Thankfully, nothing has sparked beyond words. And the Masguard I have assigned to Skylar will protect her from anyone daring to speak their doubts aloud. Or worse, taking things into their own hands to 'protect' the ship.

It is, in part, why the meeting is closed, and my officers, most of whom should be sleeping, have gathered here instead.

"There will be no formal announcement, yet," I begin. "We only have suspicions, not evidence, that they sent this message to humans at all. And if so, that doesn't mean it has a thing to do with Skylar Zavien."

"Raiva," Quayl cuts in. "We cannot just assume it is a coincidence, no matter how... fond you have become of the female. The Kohath are not known for idle chatter."

A muscle in my jaw twitches. It is taking every ounce of self-control not to let my wings flare wide in a show of aggression. “And what exactly are you implying, Subcommander?” I keep my tone low, but I can’t hide the threat in it.

Quayl turns his gaze toward me. “I am implying, Raiva, that we should not be so quick to trust this human. It’s possible she is here under false pretenses. The Kohath might use her to gain intelligence, or worse.”

My hands grip the edge of the table, my knuckles turning white. “Skylar Zavien has done nothing to warrant such suspicion. She is under my protection.”

Ano shifts, his eyes darting between us, uncomfortable with the rising tension. The rest of the officers maintain a respectful silence, though I can see the doubt flickering in some of their eyes.

“And are you certain,” Quayl presses on, his voice dangerously calm, “that your protection of her is not clouded by... personal interests? Your emotions may be... compromising your judgment.”

My vision narrows. “Ehan Subcommander.” His rank rolls from my lips with lethal precision. “You will not question my decisions. If you doubt my capacity to command, you are welcome to challenge me.”

A murmur of surprise ripples through the room, and even Ano tightens his grip on the hilt of his ceremonial blade. Quayl’s eyes flicker, and though his expression remains calm, concerned, I scent something like glee on him.

“Of course, Raiva,” Quayl says, his tone smooth. “But for the sake of the crew’s safety, I must insist that the human undergo a full scan. Just to be certain she is what she claims to be.”

“They scanned her when she had her concussion.”

“That was a basic scan. To determine if one is Gice Kohath, we must perform a more thorough examination.”

I understand the examination he speaks of, and to know for sure she is not a flesh shifter, she will need to be brought to the

brink of death. I will not kill my mate. I say, “Our standard scan will suffice.”

“When we have existing biometric data,” Quayl says. “We have not interacted with a human in five generations, and our records are tuned to the norm of the species, not to Skylar as an individual. We could have missed something.”

“She is not Kohath.” I would know. I have shared breath with her. Shared pleasure and seed. The thought of her being one of those insectoid monsters makes my bones ache and my wings tighten against my spine. My fingers clench. “We do not make a habit of killing our guests.”

“For less than ten breaths. We can easily resuscitate her. But this test is a precaution we cannot afford to ignore.”

“I cannot impose this on her.” I could, but I would not. It would be a breach of trust and shatter the bond forming between us. One that was more precious to me than my own life.

“And until she agrees, we should relocate her to secure quarters. The brig, perhaps.”

My wings threaten to emerge as my anger peaks, but I rein them back, my voice a low growl. “Skylar stays where she is. I can handle her.”

Quayl’s face hardens. “You are risking the lives of everyone on this ship by letting your attachment to her cloud your judgment. If—”

My temper snaps, and I slam a hand against the table, rising from my chair. “Do not question my judgement, Subcommander.”

Ano steps forward. “Let me remind you, Quayl,” he says, and there’s a challenge in his tone, a tension in his posture. “Our Raiva has never failed us. Remember that it was he who kept the Kohath from our doors after the Victory Massacre. He deserves our faith.”

Quayl stands, his wings rising. “These are not my questions, Ano. These are the concerns of our crew.” His wings flare, and his claws click as his hands grip the edges of the table.

“Surely, as their leader, Raiva, it is your duty to ensure their safety. We must do everything in our power to make sure no harm comes to this ship.”

“And there won’t!” For a moment, all I want is to taste his blood in my teeth. For challenging me. For threatening my mate.

Control.

I must maintain my control. If I slip, I will not deserve my crew’s faith. And how well can I trust my judgment when it comes to Skylar Zavien? She has, in such a short time, become the center of my universe. I cannot believe everything we’ve shared, everything I feel for her is a lie, but could I be so blinded by desire I would allow a monster aboard my ship?

No.

A scan would clear Skylar’s name. It would show she is not Gice Kohath and thus cannot be a threat to our ship or crew.

“Very well,” I say, every word a struggle. “I will speak to her about the scan. And if she agrees, we will perform it, though it is unnecessary. I can vouch for her character.”

“The Kohath have deceived us in the past. Can we risk allowing them to do so again? She could be here under the guise of a hostage and secretly waiting to deliver us all to the enemy.”

“Your suspicions are unfounded,” I say. “The scans will prove her innocence.”

“Then we are decided. For the safety of this ship and its crew, we will subject the human, Skylar Zavien, to a scan.”

“Should she agree,” I state again, though I recognize Quayl has outmaneuvered me. And perhaps I wanted to be. I know the scan will clear her. And if I am wrong... then I am not worthy of the title of Raiva. And I know, in both my hearts, even if she is a traitor, I will choose her. She is my bokdazi, whether or not we have completed the bond.

SKYLAR

MY WHOLE BODY IS SHAKING. “You want to stop my heart?”

“For a short time.” Tan runs a clawed hand through his hair, his tail curling against his leg. “Skylar,” he begins, then stops, and when he speaks again, I’m not sure how I feel about the pain and apology in his voice. “You do not have to do this.”

“But if I don’t, you’re going to throw me in the brig, and Quayl sounds like he wants to torture me for information.”

“He will have to go through me first.”

“I just don’t understand. We don’t want anything to do with the Mangrel. It’s why we have the minefield to begin with. And why we don’t cross it. I didn’t even know Asheraah existed. Why would I pretend to be one and infiltrate your ship?”

Tan nods, the muscles along his jaw flexing. “I know. It is a terrible thing to ask of you, and if there were another way, I would not. But Quayl is determined. And... his accusation has already infected the crew.”

I think again of Quayl’s ghost scales, his shadow antennae. The healers said my concussion seemed to have healed when I visited them yesterday morning, but they also said they only have historical records to show what our brains should be doing. It’s been five generations since the Asheraah have crossed paths with a live human.

Can I trust them to stop my heart? And restart it without killing me for real?

The thought is terrifying. But Tan is right. I've felt a shift in the crew since my visit to the flight room. Only Tylan and Ehan Janu Yar look at me without suspicion. I need to prove my innocence. "I'll do it. But if I die for good, I'm haunting the hell out of you."

"And I will let you. You will not die, Sky. I promise. You'll come back to me, or I will follow you across the void."

That shouldn't sound romantic. There's nothing romantic about being dead. Except I've just agreed to stop my heart, so what does this mean to me now?

"When are we going to do this? The sooner the better, I hope." I don't want to spend more time than I have to worrying about it. Forcing a smile, I suggest, "If there's going to be puking, maybe we should get to it before we eat?"

"We can do it whenever you are ready. The healers are waiting."

"Great." My attempt at levity is pitiful. But the idea of my heart stopping and being 'brought back to life' scares the shit out of me.

"I will not let anything happen to you," Tan says, pressing his lips to the top of my head. "Believe in me."

"I do," I say, and it's the truth. I trust Tan with my life. My spirit. My heart. It's not about trust Tan. It's about the rest of them. But Tan trusts them. They are his crew. His family, from what I have seen. And I will not ask him to choose between me and his family.

Ish. My stomach clenches. So much time has passed, my sister must think I am dead.

If she even made it out of the Titan. The fear I've avoided thinking about rips through me like a hot knife. Is this why Tan has taken so long to 'figure out' our communication codes? Because he doubted me?

If so, can I trust him with my life? My heart?

I don't want to believe everything Tan and I have shared has been a lie.

“And if I refuse?”

Something in his expression breaks. “Then I will stand by you, even if I lose my place as Raiva and they cast us out in a pod to the stars. Even if I have to fight them all. You are my bokdazi.”

Fex.

“What’s a bokdazi?”

“My mate of life, heart, and spirit.”

Double fex.

Tan means it. If I force this, he’ll ruin his life and abandon everything he’s ever worked for and fight every one of his crew to the death or whatever that means. I can’t do that.

“Fine. I’ll do it.” I take his hand. “But you stay with me.”

“Beyond the edge of the stars, if need be.”

“Then we should go,” I say. “Get this over with. I’m supposed to be meeting with Janu Yar to go over the feel of gravity something or other. It’s supposed to help me understand your way of navigation.”

Tan’s earfrills raise as he lowers his brows. “The Ehan Janu believes you can sense this?”

“I don’t know. She said it’s an experiment.” Mostly it involves me sitting in a dark room breathing and ‘expanding my senses.’ Aside from a bunch of itches, I haven’t sensed much. But I like Janu Yar. She’s easy to talk to and easy to be silent with, which is almost better.

We walk together to the healers, hand in hand. They are in a room close to the med bay, a cramped area filled with low benches, and, as I approach, I can hear bubbling water, the splash of liquid against metal, and the sharpness of bitter herbs and antiseptic. The air is heavy with the smells, and the lights are dim.

Behind me, the door slides shut. When I turn, I am greeted by the healer who treated me for my concussion. His green scales are muted in the dim light. His eyes meet mine, and he bows

his head. “I regret we must do this. You will be fully sedated for the process, and we will be monitoring your status at all times.”

I pull in a breath. I agreed to this for Tan and for myself. I can’t make a place here if everyone suspects I’m a monster.

“Thank you,” I say with a nod of my head.

He gestures to a large, white sphere mounted over a cushioned mat. “This is where you will be scanned. You’ll be surrounded by the fluid, and when we stop your heart, the nanos will initiate their processes, and the fluid will filter oxygen from the air into your lungs while the machines do what they must.”

“Sounds delightful.”

The healer’s ear frills flutter as his brow furrows, and I recognize the sarcasm was lost on him. I force a smile. “Faster started, faster done.” My smile feels brittle as I sit down and strip my outer layers. “Skinsuit?” I tap at the form fitting fabric.

“It can remain.”

That’s a relief. Weird how the brain focuses on insignificant things like modesty when approaching the point of death. Even if it’s a temporary one. “This is why you always want to wear clean underwear when you’re going on a trip,” I remember my grandmother saying. “You never know when you might pass. A lady needs to have some dignity.”

It hadn’t made sense to be then, and it doesn’t make sense to be now.

With a deep breath, I walk over and climb onto the table. The material is strange against my skin, a blend of softness and firmness that seems almost alive. I lay back, my limbs heavy with anticipation and fear, as the sides start to come up.

Dozens of tiny pricks pass over my skin, and my years grow heavy. The lead healer waves over a couple of assistants. One is bright green, the other—!

Fex.

I sit up. The tube hasn't fully locked around me yet. The sudden movement makes the world go spinny, and my stomach lurches.

"Sky!" Tan takes a step towards the table. "What's wrong."

"Not him!" I point. Where'd the white one go? He'd been messing with that weird, glowing box by my shoulder. I blink, turning my head.

My skin is hot now. Burning. My legs are twitching, and I start to hiccup.

"What's wrong with her?" Tan's arm lashes out, and I see him gripping the healer by the neck of his tunic, his lips peeled back in a snarl. "Why does she speak so?"

"Nothing should have happened!"

I start to retch.

"Why is she throwing up?" Tan releases the healer and rushes to my side. The burning is in my throat now, behind my eyes, and my whole body is on fire.

Tan has his arms around me, and the healer is shouting something as the edges of my vision go dark. My skin feels too tight.

Tan shouts something in Asheraah and the healer, his voice tight with panic, shouts something back. Then Tan is pulling me from the half-shut tube, holding me tight to him and whispering. "It's the gel. You're having an allergic reaction, but you will be fine. I swear it."

I shut my eyes, feeling safe in Tan's arms as something else cold pinches at my neck. I tense, or try to. My body feels weak. My skin, my bones, my lungs.

"Sleep. I will not leave you."

A wave of calm washes over me, and the fire in my veins is muted as I drift away.

TAN

MY HEART THUNDERS as the healers run toward me with instruments and scanners in hand. I do not know why Skylar had objected to one of the healers, or which one, but her reaction to the sedative had been immediate and severe.

Sabotage?

“Away!” I order. “All except Ehan Healer Dah’rausen.”

“But—”

I growl, baring my teeth as my wings come forward, shielding my mate. Skylar is so fragile in my arms. So still.

“Go,” Ehan Healer Dah’rausen says, and the others stream out. Whatever injection the Ehan Healer gave Skylar seems to have steadied her breathing, and the horrid red flush over her skin is fading.

“What has happened? Why was she poisoned?”

“The gel is designed to not cause irritation. There is no record of a human having an adverse reaction to it, but we have not had contact with her kind in five generations. It is possible our records are wrong. Or it is a quirk of this human’s physiology.” He calls up another platform. “This is clear. Lay her down. We will need to monitor her vitals closely.”

The scanner forms around Skylar as I lay her in the hollowed out platform. She looks so frail, her blond hair a mess, and her lips pale. “Will she survive?”

“Her condition is stabilizing,” the Healer says, looking at the schematics. “It does not appear as though the gel affected her lungs, and her brain activity is normal.”

“For a human, or an Asheraah?”

The Healer hesitates, and the rage re-ignites within me. He steps back, raising his hands. “As close to what is standard for her kind as I can understand.”

Her breathing has evened out and she seems calm. There are no physical signs of pain, or distress, and her vitals are solid.

“Why did she have such a violent reaction?”

“The effects are unclear. It could have been the substance, or it could have been the mix of medicines we gave her. We will need to do more tests.

“Understood. But we will not be—”

The door chime sounds, and a group of my senior officers, led by Subcommander Quayl stride in. “Raiva,” he says with only the barest nod of courtesy. “They informed me that the human had an irregular reaction to the test.” He glares at Skylar on the bed. “And yet there is no guard on her. No—”

“Skylar did not fail the test. She had an allergic reaction to the sedative.”

“Allergic reaction is it?” Quayl hisses, his eye ridge lifting. His nostrils flare, and his hand drops to his knife. “Or has the human tricked us all.”

“Skylar tricked no one.” I step between my third and my mate. “She had an allergic reaction.”

“A convenient allergic reaction.”

“Enough, Quayl. The test is inconclusive. The healers are going to do a more thorough examination to discover the cause of her reaction. Once it is safe, we will move forward.”

“In the meantime, she will remain free amongst us?”

“In the meantime, the healers will determine the cause, and she will remain here, with me, under guard.”

“With all due respect, Raiva,” Quayl says, stepping toward me. He is tall enough, his head level with my shoulder, and a lean mass of corded muscle. While I train more, he is said to be more cunning. Were we to come to blows, either of us could walk away victorious, though I do not doubt his intention is not just to win but to kill. I will have to keep an eye on him.

“We cannot permit a Gice Kohath aboard our vessel, under any pretense.”

“Skylar is not a Gice Kohath.”

“We do not know that for certain. She is the ship’s bounty, and as Raiva, you claim authority over her. But she is not your mate—”

“She is mine,” I growl, my temper a frayed thread.

“This human has poisoned you,” Quayl says, and though his eyes are black as the void, there is no emotion in his voice, his expression is flat, cold. “She is manipulating you. Surely, even you, Raiva, can see this.”

I am done with Quayl’s insinuations. His near insubordination.

“Step down, Quayl,” I whisper. “You will not harm her.”

“I do not intend to harm her.” His voice silky smooth, and his expression mild, he asks, “Is not the safety of our ship and crew most important to you?”

It should be. I would not put my crew in danger, but with Skylar, my judgement has been clouded. Everything about her feels right, and it would be too easy to lose myself in her. To risk everything.

I feel, in my soul, the rightness between us. Just as I know Quayl’s assertions he speaks only to protect the crew is not the full story. He’s always wanted power, though he keeps it under a veil of good intentions.

And he is playing his hand well today. I note the other officers behind him, the Ehan Masg, the Ehan Communications and Ehan Environmental. My Second, Ano, is not here.

Yes, Quayl is playing his hand well.

“Until the human has proven herself innocent, better we keep her under guard. One who has not been... influenced by her.” Quayl’s lips twitch. “I have a suggestion, Raiva.”

My scales feel tight as the rage burns inside. “Make it,” I growl, forcing myself not to tear his head off.

“You will continue your command of the ship,” Quayl says. “You have the confidence and trust of its crew, and the ship needs its commander. You must not allow yourself to be distracted. But I will watch the human and see that she does no harm to any of our people.”

“No.”

“Excuse me?”

“I will assign a pair of Masg, but I will not have her alone with anyone.” Especially Quayl. He had frightened Skylar. I remember the scent of fear on her, and I refuse to have her alone with him, even with Masg present. “It would be, in your words, problematic.”

“Then best to administer the test quickly so we know for certain.” Quayl turns to the healer. “Ehan Healer, your patient looks stable. Can we test her now?”

A low growl rises in my throat. “You will not.”

“Your over protectiveness of the human is unseemly, Raiva. Until and if this human is cleared, she poses a danger to us all. If you refuse to see that, then perhaps it is time for a new Raiva to take your place.”

“Are you offering me an official challenge, SubCommander?”

“If you refuse to see reason, then I have no choice.”

“Be certain, Quayl.”

“Oh, I am.”

“Very well,” I hiss, rising to my full height. “So witnessed?”

The Ehan Healer glances at me as the Ehan Masg and our Ehan Environment officer. “So witnessed,” they all reply.

“I accept your challenge, Subcommander,” I hiss. “You have dishonored me. You have challenged my judgement, my honor, and my command. I will not allow this to stand.”

“That’s what I was hoping for,” Quayl hisses back, his wings extending, a gleam of pleasure in his eye. “The next cycle will begin in six hourmarks. That should be sufficient time for us to purify ourselves in the eyes of the Five Deities.”

I dislike the barely masked delight on his face, the scent of anticipation on him. Quayl has always been ambitious, but now, he seems bloodthirsty in a way he was not before.

My gaze narrows, and for the first time, I wonder if, somehow, I’ve underestimated him. Or missed something else critical. But it is too late now. Quayl has always depended more on cunning than strength. He has neither the skill nor the instinct to defeat me in this.

I turn to the Ehan Healer. “Please, see to her recovery.”

The Ehan Healer taps his fist to his chest. “I will, Raiva.”

And with that, I take her hand in mine once, giving it a light squeeze before I step away. The priests will be here soon to take us to the cleansing pools, and the preparations for my duel are already consuming my thoughts.

I will return for her, as soon as I have dealt with Quayl. And then, no more waiting. I will ask Skylar to be my mate in truth, and I will bind her fate to mine as mine is already irrevocably bound to hers.

SKYLAR

I WAKE to the sound of an argument. Huh? The voices are angry. They are speaking in Asheraahn, and I can't quite place the voices. I try to open my eyes, but it hurts, and my head feels too heavy.

My sistan, Tylan, is engaged in a heated argument with the healer. Where's Tan? What happened with the test? Did I pass? The memory of the white-scaled healer and the heat, the feeling of my airways closing, come slamming back to me. Did I die? If so, they brought me back like they were supposed to. But if they brought me back, that means I passed. And if so, why are there two Masg looming — on in front of the door and one only a few feet from my bed?

Did I fail? I'm not a Mangrel or a Gice Kohath. I'd know, wouldn't I?

Fex.

Tylan's shouting now, and it's adding to the pain throbbing behind my eye sockets.

"What happened?" I ask, but my voice is hoarse, and the words come out broken and slurred.

Tylan stops yelling, thank the Stars, and hurries to my side. "Can you sit up?" she asks in Second Trade Tongue.

I groan. "The test?"

"There was an issue with the sedative. You'll have to do it later. After—"

“Sistan Tylan, the Raiva wanted Skylar Zavien to rest.”

The sistan’s tail whips back and forth as the frills of their ears lay flat against their head.

“What’s going on, Tylan?” I ask, ignoring the healer. “Tell me.”

“It is best she not—”

“The Raiva was challenged. He is going to fight Quayl in less than a half hourmark.”

“Challenged?” I blink, trying to clear my head. Tan has never mentioned this. I wonder if it happens often. The Asheraah seem big on physical contests. “Do you think he’ll win?”

“Of course he’ll win.” Their expression is fierce, lips drawn back, teeth bared. Their tail snaps against the floor. “But it is a test that may end in death.”

I sit up. “What?” I can’t let Tan die. “He can’t do that.”

“The challenge was heard and witnessed,” Tylan says. “It is now a matter of honor. I am not worried for Raiva Tan. He is a fierce warrior and Subcommander Quayl, while cunning, is not a fighter. But I felt you should know what he is risking for you.”

For me?

It all comes together. I didn’t pass the test, and it seems Quayl took that as his chance to get Tan out of the way. I’m not sure how the power structures go with the Asheraah, but I know if Quayl is the one in charge instead of Tan, it won’t be good for me. And if Tan dies...?

I can’t bear the thought of Tan dying. I can’t bear the thought of waiting, knowing that Tan is out there fighting for me and I’m hiding in medical hoping nothing goes wrong. Not to mention those shadow antennae. Maybe they were a figment of my imagination, but it felt real. And Tan didn’t see them.

“I have to go,” I say, swinging my legs over the side of the table, which has, courteously, lowered its sides for me while I was sleeping. “Where are my clothes?” I’d prefer not to go in the Asheraah equivalent of a hospital gown, a kimono-like

garment, which covers from my shoulders to my upper thighs, in public, but I will, if I have to.

“Skylar Zavien, you should stay,” the Ehan Healer says. But I’m not listening to him on this. A sense of urgency has filled me, and I know I cannot stay here.

“I need my skinsuit,” I say. My mouth is dry and tastes lousy, and my head is still hurting, but the healer wants to keep me here, and I’d rather have a headache than get knocked out again. Or worse. I stand up. My legs shake a little, but the room isn’t spinning. I’ll take that as a win.

Tylan helps me get dressed, and within minutes, we’re in the corridor with the two Masg in tow. They don’t seem inclined to stop us, so I keep my mouth shut about them.

We end up in the same massive exercise room where Tylan showed how they flew. I hear the sounds of drums and the steady drone of conversation spilling out from the large, open archway. One of the Masg steps around us and moves ahead, clearing the way.

The inside is packed with Asheraah lining the walls and gathering on the perches above, their wings tight against their backs. The center of the floor has been cleared, and pushing through the crowd, I see Tan and Quayl standing at the center. Tan is magnificent, his scales glittering gold, his wings spread, with ink-black armor covering his chest, legs, and arms. He and Quayl hold long wooden sticks, similar to bokken which Ish used in her Kendo training back when our parents were alive and we were at least somewhat happy on Caliban. He holds the staff like he knows what to do with it.

Subcommander Quayl stands near statue still, his hands resting on his staff. His scales are bone white, as before, though I don’t see the antennae. Maybe those were just my mind conjuring nightmares. I hope so.

I catch Tan’s gaze, and his expression tightens for just a second. He tries to smile, but the worry on his face cuts straight to my heart.

It hits me then, what Tylan meant by ‘may end in death.’ Tan is putting his command and his life on the line. And Tylan said it was to protect me.

A pair of drummers approach the central ring, their tails coiling in a circle around the base of the sticks, their fingers deft as they beat out a measured, complex rhythm. The crowd stills, and the drumming continues as a silver-scaled Asheraah steps out into the ring. Unlike Quayl, her scales catch the light with orange-red accents like the reflection of flame. Her tail, her wings, are all a soft shade of gray, and she seems gentle, with fine features and a body built for agility.

She raises both clawed hands above her head and intones something in Asheraah. I turn to Tylan. “What is she saying?”

“She is reminding everyone the Deities will watch them and judge their honor true by the results of their actions.

The silver scaled Asheraah brings her hands down and steps back, folding her arms over her chest.

I can feel the tension in the crowd, but it is nothing like a sporting event or the occasional gang fights that would break out in the back alleys of the Docks. I’m surprised by the hush that has fallen over the room. Even the drumming has slowed to a heartbeat tempo, the beats echoing and rolling through the room.

The drums stop, and Tan and Quayl circle one another. Tan moves like the predator he is, and Quayl is a boneless, serpentine dancer.

They are magnificent. Both, their scales gleaming, and their wings spread, they are beautiful creatures, both of them, and I’m afraid, terrified, that this will be the day I lose Tan.

“They are assessing each other’s strengths,” Tylan explains as Tan makes a quick sweep with the staff. Quayl pivots, and his tail snaps the staff.

Tan’s staff strikes a heavy blow, and Quayl spins around, ducking underneath and circling around. His wing is within reach, and Tan makes a calculated strike.

Quayl twists and comes up with a staff aimed for Tan's throat. Tan parries, their weapons locked, and, their tails wrapping around each other, Tan leaps up and sends the pair crashing to the ground.

They break apart. Tan is breathing a little heavier while Quayl's movements are fluid and sinuous. They circle again.

"I thought Quayl was a bad fighter," I whisper.

Tylan's response is equally hushed. "He is, but his agility is impressive. Tan is trying to tire him out."

Again, Quayl makes a strike, and Tan counters, pushing forward with a rapid succession of blows, the wood crackling. The crowd murmurs, and a ripple runs through them.

I don't realize what's happening until it's too late. A coil of Quayl's tail snags Tan's, sweeping Tan's legs from under him. Tan hits the ground hard, winded. Standing over him, staff in hand, Quayl presses his advantage with a heavy, two-handed blow.

My skin feels like ice and my breath catches. The world slows and the crowd noise fades as Quayl's staff comes down.

I can't breathe. It's not real. It's not real.

Tan rolls to the side, catching Quayl's blow with his tail.

Beside me, Tylan sucks in a sharp breath, their wings flared.

And then I see them. The shadow antennae, and a shadow tail. It looks like something I would see on a desert scorpion, and it's whipping straight toward Tan's head.

"Down!" I scream. "Tan, down!"

TAN

I CAN HEAR SKYLAR, her voice ringing clear even over the din of the roaring crowd. “Down! Tan, down!”

My body and heart listens before my mind can understand, and I twist, rolling across the floor.

Quayl’s staff clatters against the floor and I feel a breeze of something passing over me though his tail is nowhere close.

I come up ready to fight. Quayl loses his expression of calm, and I see pure rage and bloodlust in his eyes. “That human is a curse upon you. She will be interrogated. Tested. If you do not have the guts to do what is right, I will.”

“You will not touch her, and you will not speak her name.” I sweep my tail low, connecting with Quayl’s ankle, while striking his jaw with the staff in the opposite direction. He grunts as his leg buckles, sending him crashing down beside me. It gives me the respite I need. I tremble with exertion but somehow stagger back to my feet, determined to keep Skylar’s fate in my own claws.

Quayl snarls and attempts to right himself, but I am on him in an instant, pinning him to the ground. My claws dig into his shoulders, drawing azure blood. “Yield, Quayl,” I hiss through clenched teeth.

“No,” he snarls back, his eyes blazing with hate.

I knew Quayl sought power, but this level of rage is not merely the product of ambition. This is a deeper wound. “What have I done to make you hate me?” I hiss.

He moves, and I feel something press into my neck, though he has not moved his claws or tail. I slam the staff down with all my strength on his wrist, hearing the crunch of bones even as he goes limp.

The crowd is shouting, a dozen voices speaking over each other, but they are not jeers, they are commands and questions and confusion. I throw the staff aside, my vision red with rage and the need to end him for what he has done. For the harm he promises my mate.

The priestess strikes at the gong, signaling my victory, but I hardly hear her as I rear back and, claws bared, strike at his neck. His blood will flow over my hands, and I will taste his flesh on my tongue and rip his—

“Tan!”

Time seems to freeze. I hold Quayl’s throat in my hand, one claw pricking through the scales, and glance up to see Skylar’s wide eyes. The horror in her gaze is unmistakable, and it cuts deeper than any blade.

I cannot let her see me as a murderer. This would break us.

With a growl of frustration, I release my grip. My body shakes as I stand.

Killing Quayl would have been justice, but I will not become a monster in Skylar’s eyes. I catch my breath and roar to the gathered crew, “Take Quayl to the brig!”

Now that the heat of battle has passed, I feel my wounds. Blood tickles my neck, and my ribs and chest throb with every breath.

But Skylar is alive and unharmed.

And I have kept her safe.

“Raiva. Raiva. Raiva.” the assembled chant, stamping their boots against the floor and flicking their wings as the Masg carry the unconscious Quayl from the floor of combat. I wipe sweat and blood from my eyes, my wings spread wide. The fear should have passed, but I dare not meet Skylar’s gaze as I

walk a slow circle around the ring, fist raised to honor my crew.

When I have made the full rotation, Skylar is rushing toward me. I freeze up. Her eyes are wide and I smell fear on her.

Fear of me?

“Are you alright, Tan?” she asks. “You’re bleeding!”

“Yes. Just need some time to clean up.”

“You need to see the healer,” she insists, reaching to touch me.

And then I realize, she is not scared, and the center of me, which had been wound tight and afraid, eases. I smile. “When did you wake?” I ask, waving for her to follow me. “You shouldn’t have come here.”

“Tylan said you were fighting to save me. And you could have died!”

“Quayl is no match for me.”

The rest of the crew has finished stamping and chanting and some have begun to disperse. Others stare, curious about Skylar, our ships’s bounty and the cause of Quayl’s challenge.

“The challenge is over!” I bellow “Back to your duties!” Considering the Kohath presence in this sector, it is not safe to run at skeleton crews for too long.

“Where are the healers?” Skylar says, reaching up to touch my jaw. “Someone needs to look at this.” Above the warmth of her fingers, the scales have split and split again, and the tips are jagged and torn. It will take a while to repair, and I will bear a new scar. “You’re hurt.”

But the ache of my wounds fade at her touch. Her scent holds concern and maybe a touch of desire, but no fear. Not of me.

This magnificent female who came to me, who called out to protect me from something. I remember the whip of air passing over me, but Quayl’s tail had been nowhere near.

Had he brought a special weapon? If so, how did she see it?

I would have to ask Skylar once we were in our rooms. After I had claimed her as mine. Not as bounty, but bokdazi.

A deep, hungry roar rumbles in my chest, and her brows lower as she cocks her head. I bend and kiss her, not caring that we are in sight of the crew. I want her, and nobody would be fool enough to challenge me in this after what happened to Quayl.

“Take me to our quarters,” I whisper against her lips. “I am well enough for what comes next.”

Her scent flushes with heat, and her pulse flutters. She does not protest as I scoop her into my arms, holding her tight and burying my face in her soft, wild hair.

The smattering of remaining spectators parts as I stride through the archway. The two Masg who Quayl had insisted watch Skylar follow. I let them until we reach my quarters. “Outside,” I order, the touch of a growl in my tone.

They snap their fists to their chests and step to either side.

As the doors shut behind us, I carry Skylar to the bed and lower her to the furs. I am not taking things slow or gentle, and my words are gruff and low as I ask, “Do you fear me?”

“Never,” she replies, her fingers caressing the skin behind my ear frill, the soft warmth of her skin sending shivers of desire through me.

“Good.” Her word more healing than the strongest of medicines, I bend my head to hers, kissing her as I strip the skinsuit from her beautiful curves. “I would have killed him for threatening you. But I would never harm you.”

“I know.”

“Skylar.” My chest tightens, and I bare my fangs in a possessive snarl. “You are mine. My treasure, my mate of spirit and heart, and when the ship is safe, and you are strong, I will bind us together so thoroughly that the universe will weep at our bond. Will you accept my bond. Seal yourself to me as I have done you, bokdazi.”

Skylar tenses, and I scent something on her. Fear? Uncertainty? Rejection?

“My sister,” she says. “You’ll help me find her?”

“Of course. Even if I must go to the gates of each of the Seven Hells, whatever you want, I will find a way.”

Skylar lets out a nervous laugh. “I mean, I think she’s probably just looking for work on another cargo ship.” A shadow passes over her features. “If she made it out.”

“If you made it through the minefield to my side, your sister certainly had an easier path.”

Skylar nods. “Yeah. I know she’s alive. I can feel it.” She lifts her fingers to touch my cheek. “And I know we’re connected. Like, I don’t know about spirit matings, but my mom, before she passed, said everyone had someone in the universe for them. And all we had to do was find them and hold onto them as long as you can. So, yes. Yes, I want that. More than anything. I will be your bokdazi, your mate, as long as it’s you.”

The relief is a river rushing through me, cooling the burning rage. With a deep sigh, I press my forehead to hers and take her hands in mine.

Her skin is so soft. My side aches, and scrapes and wounds sting through my scales, but this is nothing compared to the feeling of Skylar’s bare skin pressing against mine. The joy of her declaration. I want her, every part of her against me. I want to taste her. To be inside her and feel her come undone around me.

I lean forward and trail my lips up her neck, breathing her scent in, allowing her essence to fill me as much as my mind is consumed by her. She’s still in her skinsuit, and I still in the light armor of the challenge floor.

Skylar’s skin pebbles and her hips lift toward mine.

She’s ready, and I cannot wait.

I push the plates off my shoulders and slide them down.

“Let me,” she whispers, sitting up.

My head feels light, and everything in the universe has narrowed to the points where our bodies connect. As she

undoes the straps and slides the plates free, her nails tickling over my scales, her gaze meeting mine.

Our souls are entwined, and this woman is mine.

It's only a few quick motions to shed her skinsuit. She's magnificent. Her hair is a yellow-gold, an echo of my scales, and her body, though soft, holds a hidden strength. My wings open, canopying us as I lean forward and kiss her, her lips sweet and welcoming.

Skylar makes a soft, needful sound, her breasts brushing my chest. They are fuller than Asheraahn females, the nipples a dusky pink, the skin around the texture of flower petals.

What would it be like to have her shed the rest of this armor and press myself against here as she touches be everywhere, sending shocks of pleasure through me?

I haven't yet shed my skinsuit, and the fabric, damp with desire and pre-seed, itches. I groan as her teeth graze my neck. Skylar's hand slides down and traces the bulge of my desire, the friction making me gasp.

"We need to take this off," she says, looking up at me through lowered lids. She slips her hands over the seal and with deft movements, frees me. The skinsuit falls away, and I wiggle out of it, taking her mouth in mine, needing the taste of her, the closeness, the promise of eternity.

With the barrier between us removed, I can feel her soft skin pressing against my shaft. Our tongues touch, and I reach down and cup her firm rear, rubbing against the cleft as she writhes atop me, her hips shifting as her desire grows. I know she wants this, that she will welcome me inside her, and the feeling is, indeed, mutual.

I dip my head, capturing her nipple between my teeth, her gasps and moans encouraging me as I run the tips over her hips. My control is slipping.

She lifts her hips, and I see her wetness glistening, the petal-like folds peeking through the golden curls of her sex. I push her back into the sleeping furs and taste my way down her body. The peaks of her nipples, the curve of her stomach, her

skin is silky smooth under my touch as her fingers, her scent, her sweet cries call to my every instinct.

This is different, the sensations stronger and the need almost overwhelming, and I find my self control slipping further and further away as the mating instincts roar within me.

Skylar moans. I'm hovering above the delicate folds of her sex, breathing her in, losing myself in her. When I nuzzle closer, her thighs part, and her hands curl through my hair as she whispers my name, urging me on.

I lap at her folds, the slick sour-salt filling my senses, drowning me. I lick and suck until she is mad from it, moaning and trembling, begging for more. I feel her nails dig into my scalp, and I want her pleasure, want her coming undone at my touch.

I draw the sensitive, hard peak between my teeth, sucking gently and letting the very tip of my tongue dance over the sensitive flesh.

“Stars, yes, yes. I'm gonna...”

Her body spasms, her back arching, hips lifting, and with a growl, I force my tongue deep, wringing another cry from her throat as I drink her, lost to sensation, to taste, to smell.

I want to be inside her so much I can hardly breathe. I want to sink deep into her, make her mine as surely as I have been bound.

“Tan!” she cries.

And my control snaps. I lift her hips, opening her legs and positioning myself at her entrance.

“Yes,” she says, her eyes half open, pupils dark and dilated.

I let out a low growl and sheathe myself with one powerful stroke. She is hot and wet and I am home, lost in the feeling of being one with the female beneath me.

“Oh, Stars, yes,” she whispers, her expression half ecstatic and half tortured, as her channel grips me tight. I move, slowly, a gradual retreat and thrust, allowing her body to accept me. To grow accustomed to my size, my girth, my length.

Then I stop holding back. My instinct is to rut and fuck her, my need primal and undeniable.

Skylar urges me on, her words growing more and more filthy until I am lost in the tide of passion. She takes and takes, and I give and give, and the moment has gone from exquisite to essential, and I cannot get enough.

She wraps her legs around my waist, and I feel her tense and tighten. The world spins, and every fiber of my body tingles with a building pleasure and an impending explosion.

Skylar's body is lithe and powerful, the muscles of her sex tighten and spasm, wringing pleasure from me with every pulse of her second, perhaps third, orgasm. I am rushing toward that end, the heat burning within me.

This is mine. My female. My Skylar. My bokdazi.

I don't realize I'm crying this out until she presses her lips to mine, her tongue and mine tangling, her taste in both our mouths. Another thrust. "Mine."

Another thrust.

"Yours," she moans. "Bokzari."

And the orgasm rolls over me, pleasure rippling through me, crashing like a wave as my seed pours forth.

The world goes white and still, and I feel only her wrapped around me, clinging to me, suspending me somewhere between this world and the next.

Our heartbeats match, mine doubled for each one of hers, and we pant together.

When I am able, I lift myself onto my elbows, and, taking a deep breath, I withdraw and roll, bringing Skylar to lie atop me, her head pillowed on my shoulder, her legs entangled in mine, the furs wrapped around us.

"Fex," she says and laughs. "I think I love you."

I grin, kissing her head, and stroking the lines and curves of her body. "As I you. Bokdazi. And we have forever to explore one another."

“Forever sounds about right,” she murmurs, her voice soft and drowsy.

“Rest,” I whisper, kissing her temple and inhaling her scent as sleep claims us both.

MANIPULATOR SKARGATH: KOHATH FLESH SHIFTER

FEAR GRIPS me as I lay on the hard slab of the brig's bed, the sharp edges of it making me dream of vengeance. The human female can perceive our true form, and that may pose our greatest threat. But only if we can bring her to the Hive proper and find out what gives her this ability. If we must take her apart atom by atom to do this, so be it. Her scream will sing the anthem of our Hive's Glory.

And if Infiltrator Morthrix had not failed, our Glory would not be so far from reach.

I glance again at the brig's entrance.

Where is that useless maggot?

Should Morthrix survive his idiocy, I will ensure he suffers the consequences of his failure. But until then, he is useful to me. A useful idiot, but an idiot nonetheless.

The cell door opens. I close the eyes of my outer skin while reaching out, very slightly, with my upper antennae to sense the change in the pressure field, the shifts of the airflow, the disturbance in the heat patterns of the space.

The tap-tap-tap of nail against carapace is a welcome sound. I lay still, waiting.

Five breaths later, Morthrix says, "I have looped the surveillance, Skargath. We may speak freely."

He speaks in the clicks and taps of Mid-Kohath, and the sound makes me sick for the close confines of the hive, the feel of

the damp air, and the comforting clacking and whirring and clicking of our fellows.

Soon.

“The virus?” I ask.

“It is done. The effects will seem minor at first, but within three cycles, the ship’s systems will be slag.”

“And the Janu?”

“Dead. The Starshadow will be ours for the taking.”

“Good. You will be rewarded in kind for your service,” I say, knowing Morthrix’s arrogance will blind him to the truth of my words. “Now, you will take my place.”

Morthrix freezes, his antennae twitching in a sign of displeasure. He lets out a long hiss. “Why?”

I dislike his questioning me, but I keep my rage from seeping into my scent or movements. The benefits of age and experience. “Our commanders have entrusted me with the final stage of our mission.”

I see Morthrix weighing the benefits of betrayal, and I prepare to crush him. Morthrix does not have my skill in battle, and while it would be inconvenient to dispose of him here, I will not hesitate.

“A single shift,” I say. “Take my form. You will have my authority amongst the Asheraah, should it become necessary.”

“I sssee,” Morthrix says, the elongation of the syllable showing his lust for power. Even if it is the illusory power of our enemies. He does not know, whether or not he chooses obedience, his days are short. “As you wish.”

And with that acquiescence, we exchange the skins of our enemy.

It takes a minute, and I am Healer Apprentice Ar’Geks. My ID card and retina enable me to exit the cell easily. I nod at the guards as I make my way from the brig, free to enact the next part of our plan.

Skylar Zavien will leave with me. And to the faithful servants comes Glory.

Glory for the Hive and Glory for myself and my spawn.

SKYLAR

I WAKE AGAIN in Tan's arms as his *bokdazi*. Mate for eternity. He's not even human, but he feels like my heart's home, if a heart can have a home. The thought of losing him terrifies me.

"Skylar?" he asks, brushing his fingers over my forehead.

"Bokzari," I return, just to see the way his face lights up, to feel his happiness.

And then he wraps his arms around me, presses his mouth against mine, and we lose ourselves in each other.

We finish bathing and—reluctantly on my part—put on clothes. I stand in front of the food dispenser with Tan's arms around my waist.

"Yahila," I say, giggling as Tan presses a kiss to the pulse of my neck. Yahila is the Asheraah equivalent of coffee, a lightly caramel-tasting beverage made from one of their tree barks.

A sound like falling sand greets my request. I look into my cup.

Seeds?

Tan laughs. "Your Asheraahn accent is terrible," he says.

I snort. "Fine, you order it for me. Or deal with un-caffeinated Skylar. You won't like un-caffeinated Skylar."

"I like... no, I love every Skylar."

My face heats. "Flattery will get you everywhere, bokdazi. But your mate needs caffeine."

“My mate is demanding.” Tan says, dumping the seeds in the recycler and saying, “Yahila.”

Another sand-swooshing rush of seeds.

“Your accent is terrible,” I say, grinning.

“Quiet you.” Tan says, leaning over me to punch at the manual controls. It takes two more tries before he’s filled two steaming mugs with Yahila. It takes another two tries to get something hot and edible.

“I think you need to call maintenance,” I say, sitting across the table from him. The Yahila is too sweet and the Asheraahn eggs a little too salty, but I’m not going to complain. It makes me feel a bit more comfortable, to be honest. Technical glitches are common across the universe.

Tan’s nose wrinkles as he sips at his Yahila, but he gulps it down and says, “We should speak of what happened yesterday.”

My eyebrows go up. “What happened was a pretty amazing orgasm or four.”

“Before the orgasms,” he says, chuckling. “When I was fighting Quayl. You called out for me to duck.”

“Oh,” I say. My mind flashes back to those black antennae, the shadow tail. I swallow and stare at him, trying to put into words something that still has no context for me. And in Tan’s arms, now, it feels so faraway. But I’d known something was wrong. Off. It was why I’d known I had to see the fight, despite the assurances everyone gave me that Tan would win with ease.

“Remember what I said about the Asheraah with white scales?”

Tan nods. “You said Quayl had them. And another member of the crew. A communication tech?”

“That’s what Tylan said. But I didn’t tell you everything about Quayl.” My face is hot. “You already thought I’d just been knocked too hard on the head, and I didn’t want to make

myself look even stranger, especially because nobody else saw them.”

“What them?”

“The shadow antennae. They were coming out of his shoulders, toward me, when you came. I didn’t want to think they were real. I mean, I’m still not sure if they’re real or just something going on with my brain. It doesn’t have to be a concussion. Once, when Ish and I were thirteen, we found a... lost box of fancy pastries that had fallen off one of the transports. It was addressed to the High Families. Caliban was like that. If you weren’t one of the high families, you were dirt, and you lived in dirt housing—that’s what we called it—and ate standardized food that tasted like dirt if you didn’t have credits for spices or couldn’t trade. But Ish and I had never seen food like this. We ripped open the box and ate down to the last crumb.”

I still remember how it had tasted. And the warm hum that had gone through me with each bite. A reaction, I learned later. “After the second, I began seeing little frogs everywhere. It was raining frogs. Ish saw butterflies, and we were laughing and laughing.” It had gotten worse as the effect strengthened, and we were lucky not to have been run over when we danced into the street, convinced the frogs would stop the oncoming trucks. But there was no point in going into that.

“It was hallucinations, then.”

“Yeah, a reaction to something in the pastries. I still don’t know what. But it happens. And I’m not sure if it’s real or if something in the food here or the air is messing with my mind. I was allergic to your anesthetic, remember?”

Tan nods.

“But I told you to duck because Quayl had a shadow tail. Not like yours. It was more like a stinger. And I was scared of what would happen if he hit you with it.”

Tan’s ears go flat against his head as his expression darkens.

“Is it bad? I should have said something—”

“No. It is not your fault.” His voice has gone too flat. “I do not know what this means. But it is worth investigating.”

The com pings, and Tan answers, “Raiva.”

I recognize Ano’s voice, but both he and Tan are speaking Asheraahn, so I don’t know what they are saying. It sounds important, though. When they cut the communication, Tan says, “Get dressed. I will need you to come with me.”

This isn’t my mate, Tan speaking. This is Raiva Tan.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“I do not yet know. But I intend to find out.”

Tan is quick and efficient in his dressing. No soft kisses. No subtle touches, though I feel his gaze on me as I dress. It’s not cold, but I feel distant. And I don’t like it.

He leads me through the corridors and into what looks like a large briefing room. Ano, his second, is there, along with the Ehan Healer.

A cold spike of fear passes through me. Have I done something wrong? Do they suspect me again of intending harm to the ship? I didn’t pass the test. But Tan hadn’t seemed too concerned with that last night when he was inside me and claiming he wanted to be with me until the end of eternity.

Ano does not look pleased to see me, and he says something rapid-fire in Asheraahn to Tan, who shakes his head, an exaggeration of the human gesture.

Then, Tan says in Second Tongue, “Look around. Do you see anyone here with white scales?”

“No.”

Tan visibly relaxes. Ano looks confused and starts to say something in Asheraahn, but Tan lifts his hand. “Speak so my mate will understand.”

“You think she can see them?”

“I think she sees something. We have vid inside Quayl’s cell, right?”

“Yes, I’ve called up the feed.” Ano waves a hand, and an image of a bronze scaled Asheraahn appears on the far wall. He’s asleep on his cell bed.

“He’s bronze,” I say before Tan can ask. “Nothing strange.”

Except he seems almost unnaturally still, his legs straight out, arms at his sides, wings tucked back, his chest barely rising and falling. I don’t see any wounds on him, though he’s probably had a healer in to see him already.

“Maybe it does not work over vid,” Tan says, frowning.

“Then take me to him,” I suggest. “We’ll see if it’s different in person.”

“If he is one of them—”

“One of what, Tan? What aren’t you telling me? Because if it’s important, I need to know so I can help.”

Tan looks to Ano, who shakes his head.

“Not yet,” Tan says. “I trust you. It is not that. But we need to know it is not your personal feelings that are influencing what you see.”

Well, that was fexing vague. It’s clear Tan trusts I’m seeing something, though. Which means the shadow antennae and the stinger may be real.

“One of the healers,” I say, remembering the awful time of the test. “He had white scales. Or I thought he did. I was also reacting to the sedative.”

The Ehan Healer looks grim. “I have had all of my healers tested. And all matched their biometrics. If you order it, I will submit to a full test, but I will require a half shift to recover. And I can do the same for my staff in shifts.”

Full test? Like the heart stopping one they wanted to do on me?

It all comes clear.

“You think they’re Gice Kohath, don’t you?”

Tan averts his gaze while Ano’s tail twitches.

Tan says, “We do not know.”

“How could they get on the ship? I thought you had scans and procedures.”

“We do. But no system is perfect. It is possible something got through our defenses.”

That’s a big mistake. Quayl was his third in command. If he’s a Gice Kohath, how long had he been here, spying? No wonder Tan looks so grim.

It makes sense, though. The best defense is a good offense, and Quayl had been throwing the first punch again and again. “If he’s one of them, we need to know.”

“We can give him the full test,” Tan says, but he sounds reluctant. “But that will kill him before we can interrogate him. Tan, if you think your mate can just look at a Gice Kohath and pick it out, we need her to try. Then we could interrogate him and find out how many more are on our ship.”

I’m not sure if I’m buying it will be that easy. Shapeshifting cannibals aren’t exactly known for their honest conversation. But it’s not like I’ve chatted with many—or any—shapeshifting cannibals, so what do I know?

“I will not allow anyone to put my mate in harm’s way.”

“Have you asked her?” Ano shifts his attention to me. “Skylar Zavien? Will you do this for us?”

I’m scared of seeing Quayl again. Of being in a room with him and getting in reach of his shadow weapons, but if I am to become a member of this crew in truth, if I am to be Tan’s mate, then I cannot hide.

“I’ll do it,” I say, even though fear tightens a knot in my chest.

“Then we shall,” Tan says. “And he will have to go through me to get to you.”

“And maybe I’m wrong,” I add, hoping still this is all just a figment of my imagination. There are times you want to be right, and there are times you’d rather be wrong. I’m definitely in the second camp here. “It could just be something weird with me.”

“In truth, Skylar, I hope so,” Ano says. “If you are correct, then we are in far deeper trouble than we ever imagined.”

TAN

I AM in awe of my mate's courage, and terrified I may not be able to protect her.

"You will enter behind me," I tell her again. "If the Subcommander is compromised, he may—"

"I understood the first four times you told me, Tan." She takes my hand. "We can do this."

"You are my second heart that beats in time with my first."

Skylar smiles, "And you are my only."

We reach the entrance to Quayl's cell. Reluctantly, I let go her hand. Two Masg, fully armored, flank my mate. Between the three of us, she should have nothing to fear. Quayl, or whatever this creature is impersonating Quayl, could not beat me on the field of challenge. If he could not defeat me then, he will not defeat me now.

Taking a breath and preparing myself for the worst, I activate the entrance.

Quayl is still on his cot, but his body is rigid. I see no difference in his scales or form. He turns his gaze to me. "Raiva," he says, his expression almost arrogant as he remains supine, only lifting his gaze to meet mine.

I hear Skylar moving behind me, feel her stepping to my left side. She breathes sharp and quick through her teeth.

"White?" I ask in Second Tongue.

"Yes," she says, her voice shaking a little with the revelation.

Gice Kohath. He must be.

His eyes whip open and I see understanding in them. Understanding and fear.

And then Quayl launches himself in the air at me. No, at Skylar. I throw myself in between, grabbing at him. His talons dig into my forearm, but I shove him back.

“Tan!” Skylar cries out in terror.

“Stay back,” I roar.

My talons dig into Quayl’s shoulders as I slam him against the wall, holding him pinned. “How many?”

Quayl hisses, spittle spraying over my scales. I smell the venom, the toxin of the Kohath.

“How many?” I roar.

He meets my eyes, and something hits my side. With it comes a rush of agony. It expands in a wave of heat, numbing the skin and muscle around it, sending shockwaves of agony through my veins, and forcing the air from my lungs.

This is poison.

Poison meant for Skylar.

The rage of what Quayl planned for my mate gives me the strength I need to move through the pain and the sudden trembling of my muscles. I release his shoulders, bringing my hands together go his neck. His scales are too smooth, the texture wrong. My claws scrape over them as I feel for the joint, and in one smooth motion, snap his neck.

For a moment, I see the Gice Kohath before me: its sickly gray-white carapace and exoskeleton, its stinger tail punched into my flesh. Then the creature turns to ash in my hands, drifting down, leaving only dust.

“Tan!” Skylar rushes to my side. I lift my hands, show her they are clear.

“It is done,” I rasp, the pain spreading up and down my left side. My vision goes dark as Skylar screams, “Healer! By the

Stars, Tan! Help!” The last sound I hear is her sobbing my name.

TAN

IT TAKES a full cycle for the poison to clear my system. I wake with Skylar at my bedside. She looks exhausted, but when her eyes meet mine, her smile is brighter and more welcome than the stars. “You’re awake. They said you would be, but...” She laughs and takes my hands. “Tan, you could have died!”

“We have anti-venoms,” I tell her. I feel like an angry bag of rocks bludgeoned me for twenty-minutes, but my fingers and toes are working. It was only a short exposure to the poison, thank the Deities. “They are effective.”

“The healers said you would be okay, but I don’t want you doing that again.”

“If I must stand between you and danger, I will. And you can be angry at me after.”

Skylar snorts, but a tear slides down her cheek. She wipes it away.

“I will be well soon,” I say, reaching for her hands. “Do not cry.”

She threads her fingers through mine. “And so you are alive. The Ehan Janu say a bokdazi’s tears have healing properties.”

“I am healing well enough,” I say, smiling. “Have you eaten?”

Skylar wrinkles her nose. “Hospital food is hospital food, no matter where you are in the universe.”

We laugh and talk of foolish things until the healer returns with a tray of the promised bland but healthful fare of healers

everywhere.

It takes another day for me to be well enough to return to my quarters and my duties. In some ways, being ill was preferable. We know there is at least one more rogue Gice Kohath on the ship. Ano has set up checkpoints and officers and crew are subject to random testing as Masg search through the ship.

Worse, the ship's systems are acting up, and it's getting worse. And one of the Janu navigators has taken ill. There are six full navigators, total, and three apprentices, so the ship's functioning is not compromised.

Still, it is troubling.

We have a team of Aegiseers working on the ship's systems. Janu should not be affected by them, but they are telepathically connected to the ship, so it's not impossible.

"Do you really think the ship's malfunctions are related to Janu's sickness?" Skylar asks, echoing my fears.

"I do not know." And I hate that. "As for the ship, we have run diagnostics but have found no clear cause yet. I'm going to talk to the other Janu, to see if they've sensed anything unusual. Their abilities give them insights we lack."

One sick Janu is worrying enough. If more fall ill, if we can't navigate... No, I can't think like that. There has to be a way to fix it. I will find it. I have to.

I STARE IN DISBELIEF AS ANO DELIVERS THE GRAVE NEWS. "The Janu Sal'hyakin is dead?" I ask, needing to hear him confirm it again.

Ano nods. "Yes. It started as a minor illness, but it suddenly worsened. The healers did everything they could, but her body just seemed to shut down. She now walks forever in the fields of Shekan-Ahru."

I clench my fists, anger and guilt churning inside me. As Raiva, the lives of every crew member are my responsibility. Losing even one feels like a personal failure. And a Janu at that. All of them are essential, but beyond that, we consider

them the soul of our vessels—cherished. They not only navigate but they interface with all areas of our ship. To have one die in such a way is unthinkable, but here we are.

“And you say another has fallen ill?” I ask.

“Yes, her apprentice. She started showing the same symptoms this morning—fatigue, headaches, fever. The healers have her quarantined.”

I curse under my breath. “Have the healers determined the cause?”

“No. And it is worse than that,” Ano says hesitantly. “The remaining Janu—their interface with the ship’s systems appears to be deteriorating. They say the ship feels cloudy to them. Unclear.”

“What of the missing Gice Kohath?” These two things must have a connection.

“No sign. Are you sure there were two?”

“Skylar saw two.”

Ano sighs. “If whatever is going on with the ship is affecting the Janu, it might be best to anchor for a full system by system reset,” Ano suggests. “It will leave us vulnerable to attack, but we cannot afford to lose our Janu.”

After a moment’s consideration, I must agree with my Second’s assessment.

“Do it,” I order.

I would rather control our shutdown than wait until this glitch or virus finishes its course.

SKYLAR

JANU FUNERAL RITES ARE PRIVATE, so I waited until after they interred the fallen Janu to seek out Ehan Janu Yar. Hopefully, she will accept my condolences in the spirit they are meant. My heart aches for them after learning of the tragic death of one of their own.

I find the senior Janu in a small alcove, gazing out a porthole with sadness in her crimson eyes. She startles when I approach, then recognizes me.

“Hello, Skylar,” Yar says. “I am sorry, but I am not good company right now.”

“There’s no need to apologize,” I reply. “I only wish to offer my condolences. I know what it’s like to lose someone close.” I still feel the loss of my parents. And I feel the distance between myself and my sister Ishini, who I can only pray is still alive.

Yar nods, blinking back tears. “We feel her absence. Losing a Janu is like losing a part of ourselves. The ship reaches out looking for a Janu to fill the hole in our being, and now with Apprentice Janu Kil’hya having fallen ill, we shake from her absence as well.”

“I can only imagine,” I reply gently. “Your bonds must run so deep.”

“They do,” Yar says. “We are all connected. When one of us is lost, it leaves an emptiness within us all.”

Yar looks back out the porthole, her crimson gaze distant. “We say that when one of us departs, our bond stretches across the stars, eternal and unbroken. It is meant to comfort us, but right now that stretch feels so very far.”

“I wish there was more I could do to ease your grief. Just know that she will always be with you, in spirit, if not in body. Her memory lives on in you.”

Yar lets out a long hiss. “Your words are kind, Skylar. I apologize that I cannot be better company right now, but please know that I appreciate you being here.”

On impulse, I take her hand. A spark passes between us, and I can sense Yar’s grief swirling within me. I gasp in surprise. It is the first time I have touched the skin of a Janu.

Yar gasps, looking at me with wonder. “I thought you might have the gift!” she says. “But I did not expect it to manifest with such speed!”

I can hardly hear her over the hum of the ship and a whisper in my mind. Something like an embrace. I’m not sure how I feel about it, having this entity in my mind. I try to pull my hand away, but Yar holds tight. “Starshadow has reached for you.”

I feel a profound sense of connection with the Janu and the ship, as if someone has lifted a veil from my eyes to reveal a deeper truth.

I have felt a kinship with the Janu ever since we were first introduced. This is a step further, and I can’t believe it’s real. That the ship wants me.

We stay joined a few moments more, our energies intertwined, before Yar lets go my hand. “You will need further training,” she says. “The bond is fragile, but true. You will return.”

“I want to help, if I can,” I tell her. “You know I’m familiar with old navigation systems. I could use that to help plot courses and take some of the burden off you and the others.”

Yar’s eyes widen. “Perhaps. But the fact that Starshadow has connected with you is astounding and much more important.” She pauses, closing her eyes, taking my hand again, and I feel others, the whisper of powerful minds moving through me.

“Janu Aet’heryanis has told me to share the coordinates to the repair hub with you. We do not know what took our sister from us, but it is organic. You are human and may be immune. If so, you can be of aid to us. But first, you must learn as for Janu coordinates are felt, not seen.”

“Really?” I am stunned, not sure how to respond.

“Yes, with your knowledge, if we become desperate, you can use it to translate it to old tech.”

“Thank you for trusting me,” I say.

Yar manages a small smile. “You have a Janu spirit. We welcome your help, and you are *kinexus*, one of us. “

I leave Janu Yar feeling a renewed sense of purpose. For the first time since coming aboard the Starshadow, I can contribute something beyond being able to see their enemies. I have a place here now. Not just in Tan’s arms, but with the ship and crew as a whole. And knowing this, I feel as though I have finally come home.

SKYLAR

“WHAT HAPPENED?” Tylan asks me as I return from my meeting with Yar. Like my guards, Tylan waited in the public center of the Janu sector to give me privacy to meet with the Ehan Janu.

With each breath, a thrumming energy courses through my body. The ship is a comforting presence, like a hand on my shoulder, and I feel the vacuum of space, the ship’s movements and something of our direction. It’s wild.

I consider blurting the entire thing out, but while I trust Tylan, this feels like something I should speak with Tan about first. “Janu stuff,” I say, keeping it vague.

“As you say.” Tylan’s brow furrows. “What next then?”

As usual, my two Masg guards trail us like shadows from the Janu sector. Though I’ve tried to get to know my various guards, they aren’t the most sociable. Today, one has his helmet up and tinted.

“I need to speak with Tan,” I say. “About something Ehan Janu Yar told me.”

“It isn’t about the illness, is it? I heard another Janu had taken ill?”

“Besides apprentice Kal’dahna?”

Tylan shrugs. “I do not know. Tan is on the bridge.”

I bite the edge of my bottom lip. “This feels important, but Tan is already burning his candle at both ends, trying to find the

missing Gice Kohath and dealing with the ship system issues. The change in my connection to the ship will not make a difference in the next few hours.

“I should probably just return to our rooms,” I say.

Tylan nods, and we walk a few more paces before they cock their head, tapping at their earpiece to receive a personal com message. Tylan’s tail swishes as they nod, listening.

“Understood,” Tylan says in Asheraah, a word I’m surprised and happy to recognize.

Tylan looks at me. “I got a ping. There is an emergency with my bondpair’s child.”

“Go!” I make a shooing motion.

“I should not leave you alone.”

I laugh, glancing back at the two slabs of armored muscle flanking us. “I’m just going back to our rooms. If anything happens, these two should be more than enough.”

Before Tylan can protest again, I give them a light shove. “See to your family.”

Tylan hurries off and I continue to the Raiva’s quarters. Our quarters.

At the entrance, the helmeted Masg steps forward. “Have to clear the room,” he says, nodding to me to enter the code. Confused, I do as I’m told, and he steps inside.

“What happened?” I ask my other, friendlier looking guard. Do they suspect the missing Gice Kohath might have snuck into the Raiva’s rooms? Thinking of that stinger tail, and the moment Tan had his hands around Quayl—or the fake Quayl’s—neck when I saw his shell, I’m reminded of the phrase, “If you see one, there are hundreds in the walls.”

I shiver.

The Masg comes back to the main room and waves me in. “All clear.”

We pass each other, and I go to the food dispenser. Hopefully it’s not glitching again. I could use something hot and sweet.

I've just asked for my Yahila when I hear the door open.

"Tan?"

I look over to see one of the two Masg guards striding toward me. I don't see the other one, and that feels wrong. My stomach goes to ice as I'm hit with a rush of fear.

Something in my head whispers *RUN*.

Behind me, about ten paces, is the door to the bathing room. I take a step back, grabbing handle of the steaming mug of something that smells like burning socks. Yeah, it's glitching again. Why have bad luck when you can have worse luck?

"Let me see your face," I say, trying to keep my voice calm.

The Masg takes another step to me, and I meet the action, getting another two steps closer to the bathing room. I can close the door and then hit the com. Or dive into the pool. Or...?

I don't know, but it's better than staying here.

"You..." the Masg hisses. "I should have killed him quickly on the field of challenge. But I needed it to look real."

It's not just the missing Kohath, some, it's Quayl. "I thought you were dead?" I blurt out. The gig is up, so what does it matter, anyway?

Quayl retracts his helmet. It folds back into the shoulders of his armor, and I see him, scales white, eyes a burning orange. "So you see us but you don't. Interesting."

I throw the Yahila at his face and run. Behind him, he screams once, following it with a gravelly series of hisses and curses. I'm just at the bathing room door when he grabs me.

Fex!

I twist, trying to bite, but my teeth just slide over his armor as something stabs into the side of my neck.

"I will pass my regards to your bokdazi," he whispers as the world goes dark.

I WAKE, BOUND AT THE WRISTS AND ANKLES, IN DARKNESS. It's chilly, but the air smells like rotting. My stomach twists, and I swallow down the urge to throw up.

By the stars, where am I? Kicking outwards, my toes hit something soft. A sticky liquid clings to the skin of my toes, and I have a bad, bad feeling.

If Quayl and the communication tech and the healer were replaced by these Gice Kohath, what happened to their bodies?

I scooch backward until I hit something hard. A wall. But not a bulkhead. It feels more like the wall of a cargo container.

By the Stars, I'm in a cargo container with something rotting. Please, please, let it be food and not—

I'm not thinking about that. Or why Quayl, or whatever that was, didn't just kill me and stuff me in a cargo container like the others—

Nonono!

Not thinking about that.

Thankfully, he tied my arms at the front and not the back. I lift them over my head, feeling for a roof. Nothing. I hobble to my feet, using my shoulder on the wall to hold my balance. It's cold in here, and I'm grateful for that or the smell would be much worse. Goose pimples cover the bare skin of my neck, though the skinsuit is keeping me warm enough I don't shiver. I reach up again, and my fingertips brush a ceiling.

That's something. So I know the rough dimensions of my prison.

I have to get out of here. I feel along the walls as best I can, avoiding the side where I felt the rotting meat—not thinking about that—hoping to find a button or seal. Anything to open this thing. But no luck. And also, there are no insects in here. Or rats. All ships have rats. So if they're not in here, that means this container is pretty well sealed. It also means I might be running out of oxygen, if they aren't pumping it in somehow.

Every time I think things can't get worse, they do.

Sit. Breathe.

What in the Stars? I hear the voice in my mind. It presses against my forehead like a comforting touch.

Sit. Breathe.

Might as well. It's not like I have any better ideas. So I sit and close my eyes, trying not to smell what I'm smelling as I breathe.

Focus.

I'm not sure what I'm focusing on, but I follow the sense of the voice, and some of my panic eases.

What are you?

Starshadow.

The ship?

Yes.

Can you help me?

Join.

In my mind, I see, no I feel, an outstretched hand. And I take it.

Communicate. The whisper is louder in my mind.

Help! Help! Help! I scream in my mind.

No.

Connect.

Connect.

Connect.

Okay, so I need to connect somehow. And help isn't doing it. I think of my connections here. My connection to the ship. To Tylan. To Tan.

Tan, my bokdazi.

I put all of my love and terror and hope for our future and bundle it together with as clear a sense as I can of my location.

Being a Janu is all about navigation. And I follow the spiderweb of that connection, reaching for Tan.

Tan.

Tan.

Connection initiated.

TAN

CONNECTION INITIATED.

The feeling slams into me like a hammer blow to my center, and I stumble. Ano, who is at my side as we head for the temporary security hub to prepare for the ship shutdown, grabs my arm.

“Tan?”

I barely hear him. My mind is reeling from a sense of love. Terror. Hope?

The feelings taste like Skylar, and as I sink into them, I smell rotting flesh.

Deities save me. Something is very wrong.

“Ano,” I gasp out. “Contact Skylar’s security detail. And her sistan.”

I lean against the nearest wall. There’s something more in this. A sense of something I can’t quite grip with my mental claws. My wrists and ankles ache like they are bound too tightly. And I am cold. And scared. And—

“I can’t reach the security detail,” Ano says.

My guts are ice, and I know something has gone terribly wrong. My mate is in danger, caged in the dark, and time is running out.

“Sistan Tylan?”

Ano nods and taps at his earpiece. The wash of emotions and sensations is getting stronger, along with it, the sense of a direction. I step toward it. Closer? Farther. I am uncertain, so I walk farther, trying to see if Skylar feels closer.

“They had been returning to your quarters but were called back to their family quarters for what appeared to be a home emergency. When Tylan arrived, the others did not know why they were there.”

A setup. It has to be. The Gice Kohath took Skylar, and now she is in danger. “She’s in the dark,” I explain, trying to understand the sensations I’m feeling and translate them into something we can use. “There are walls and a ceiling, but it is tight. That way.” I point. “I do not know how I know this, but it must be true.”

“She is your bokdazi.”

“Yes, but our mating is new. And her species does not have a known tendency to form telepathic bonds.”

“Maybe some do, like our Janu.”

I nod. “She is in a container, perhaps in the cargo bay?” Yes, that feels right. “She is there. She must be. Ano, I trust no one but you, my friend. Make a show of searching for the Gice Kohath in engineering, and the Janu sector. I will go to the cargo bay.”

“I dislike you going alone.”

“Until we find the Gice Kohath, I cannot trust anyone else. I know I can trust you because you have been with me for the past two hours, so you cannot have abducted my mate. But our ship instrumentation is off, our Janu are dying, and we are running out of time.” I hold out my hand, and he takes it, our hands clasping at each other’s forearms.

“As you command,” Ano says. “And keep your com open to my channel.”

“Yes.”

Ano releases his grip, and I start, half running, toward the lift. The cargo bay is four levels down and on the opposite side of

the ship from me. As I move, the sense of Skylar strengthens.

Her energy pulses with each frantic heartbeat as our bond translates her position into a clearer visceral awareness knowledge of where she is trapped.

With each step, her presence grows more tangible. Her fear and desperation wash over me, chilling me to the core. I feel the pain in her wrists as she struggles to free herself.

I am coming. I am coming. I am on my way.

I send the thought with a fierce urgency I hope she can feel.

Every second feels like an eternity. Skylar's presence in my mind is a beacon, guiding me even as her thoughts becoming more fragmented and desperate.

When I reach the cargo bay, the emergency lighting casts a red-yellow glow over stacks of cargo crates. The interior is pressurized. It should not be—a sign someone has tampered with the system. A sign that the connection between me and Skylar is real.

I break into a sprint, following the tether of my mate's terror between the massive cargo crates.

Which one?

Skylar?

Fear. Dark. Walls.

He is here.

I take a moment to parse her thought. The Gice Kohath is here. I throw myself into the air, wings spread. Which container? The array of cargo containers spreads below me.

Skylar's terror spikes as she screams.

I dive.

MANIPULATOR

SKARGATH

THE ASHERAAH SEARCH parties grow troublesome. They know I am here. Morthrix, the pathetic maggot, likely broke under the promise of torture.

Fool.

Better he died in that cell than I. But soon, the virus will shed its final bloom, and I will deliver this vessel, and the human prize, to our Hive.

Glory to the Hive, and Glory to the one whose service is true.

The song of my glory will hum through the walls and floors of the Great Hive. I will drink the honey of the Queens' favor. My spawn will be cared for, the Hive itself treasuring their skill in manipulation and infiltration.

I am the most skilled, the most powerful. The others, the fools, will be but shadows in the reflection of my legacy. But first, I must ensure the female and I escape. And this ship will not yet go into shutdown, not yet.

Opening the container, I smell the putrefying flesh of those whose identities we stole. Even frozen, the decay makes the meat stronger in taste than I like, but I kneel beside the freshest corpse, a healer technician, and eat.

On the other side of the container, the female screams, struggling against her bindings. I ignore her. The ship's systems have this bay showing as depressurized, and the ship's system has alerted me of the incoming inspection squads on the three occasions they searched the cargo bay.

“Are you—? Eating...?” The human retches. I smile, the juices of my meal clinging to the second skin of the Masg whose form I have taken. I would rather shed this pathetic, Asheraahn skin now that I am alone, but better to be cautious. And it is anathema to allow one not of our kind to see our true form.

“Did you want some?” I ask, just to smell the spike of terror wafting from her skin.

“Why? Why do this?”

There is no harm in telling her. “Ambition. Glory. You can see our true form. Or something of it. We will know how you have done this. And when we learn, our safety is once again assured.” I rise from my meal and start toward her. “Once the virus has finished its work, you will be helpless before us. Now, this will be easier if you tell me exactly what it is you see.”

“I— I don’t see anything.”

“You do not need all of your fingers to be of use to me,” I say. My mouth waters at the thought of taking one, fresh with her blood, and swallowing it down. “An appetizer, as they say.”

The female screams. I smile, advancing. Glory is important, but I have worked hard, and I deserve some small reward now.

I am too focused on my prize to note the light thump behind me until the Asheraah crashes into me, roaring.

Raiva Tan, is it?

Inconvenient, but I smell no others. Fool. He came alone. It will be good to finish this thing between us. In deference to that, I let my form melt and shift. When I rise, throwing him backward, I wear the form of his third, Subcommander Quayl.

“I thought you were dead,” Tan growls. “Or are you just another insect wearing my Subcommander’s face?”

The gall of him to compare me to one like Morthrix! Fury rises in a wave, and I lunge.

He evades.

“You are a fool, Raiva Tan. Your female is mine now. Your ship is ours. Your Janu are infected, and when your drive fails, our beacon will guide us here. But if you wish, fight me. You only prolong the inevitable.”

Tan’s gaze flicks to the female, and then back to me. His nostrils flare, and his wings flex, his muscles bunching. “You will die here. You will never have her or my ship.”

I am almost impressed with the bluster. His flesh will taste sweet on my tongue.

Then Tan charges me, claws extended.

Fool.

I am ready for this.

Ducking under his blow, I catch him by the wings, slamming him to the ground. He falls with a cry, and I raise my claws to deliver the blow—

But he twists, the female’s screams echoing off the bulkhead as he grasps at my lower half with his upper.

He sweeps my legs from beneath me, and I land on my back. Tan has the advantage, and his claws slam down, missing my neck.

“Tan! Don’t kill him!” the female screams, running toward us.

What foolishness is this? I whip out with my stinger tail, but the female throws herself on top of it. If I release the venom, it will damage our prize. We must know how she can see us. So I retract the stinger just as Tan’s fist connects with my face, sending me sprawling.

Then he has his claws around my throat, the tips scraping against my carapace, feeling for the joints.

“Hold him!” the female shouts, and Tan maintains his grip, the pressure of it cutting my air as she places her palms on my bare shoulders. She shuts her eyes, and I hear a whisper in my mind.

Where is the beacon?

My mind flashes to the location, and I feel her glee.

A telepath? How? She gave no indication of this before, and her species is not known to have the ability. But my thoughts are not safe, not here.

“I know where the beacon is,” the human says after too short a time. “And I think I have a code to disable the virus. But he got a message off to the Kohath.”

How did she get so much from a simple touch?

I struggle, kicking and snapping, but the Raiva holds me fast and while we can survive without oxygen for a time, we do so by going into hibernation. I feel it coming over me as her questions batter at my unprotected mind.

It is almost a mercy when the Raiva snaps my neck.

SKYLAR

AFTER TAN KILLED the final Gice Kohath, I used my newly born telepathic skills to pry the location of the beacon from Manipulator Skargath's mind. We found the beacon, destroyed it, and between the data I'd pulled for Skargath and the hard work of the healers, the virus was neutralized.

Now, seven day-cycles later, Tan and I will finally have our ceremony of mating.

Bokzari. Joined by breath, hearts and spirit.

Not that I need the words to know the truth of our bond. I feel it in every touch. His love whispers along his scales. I feel it in his kisses, the heat of his body on mine, and the echo of his pleasure through me when we are together on his sleeping furs.

But it's good to make it official.

This is the start of a new alliance between humanity and the Asheraah. Together, we will end the Kohath. That, and my new joy in navigating with the support of the Starshadow.

The only thing missing is my sister Ishini. Now that all on the ship have proof of my loyalty, it wasn't too hard to get a message off in my escape pod. And we got vid confirmation she made it off the Titan with the other pods and onto the Federation rescue ship. No one knows what happened after. If that rescue trawler was anything like the Titan though, this is a recordkeeping issue, and she should come forward when she knows I'm looking for her.

Hopefully soon.

Tan has agreed to a second ceremony on his homeworld once we find Ishini and can bring her to join us. I think she'll like it here. And if nothing else, she'll get some new skills she can use if she goes back to the Federation after her visit.

As Tylan drapes a shimmering gold robe of joining over my shoulders, again, they apologize, "I should not have left you, and—"

"For the fiftieth time, none of it was your fault. And I'm glad you weren't there. That horrible creature would have killed you." My stomach twists, remembering how the thing posing as Subcommander Quayl had feasted on the corpse of his victim. If I'd had been trapped there with Tylan's corpse, I think I would have lost it. As it was, holding myself together had been a near thing.

But now, all I can see is my future together with Tan.

"I am glad to have you at my side," I reassure Tylan, squeezing their hands. Tylan carries the bracelets of joining, which is like being a ringbearer, but not in a kid way.

I even got Tylan to admit, grudgingly, we are now friends.

"My family is proud," Tylan says. "You give me a great honor."

I wave away their words. "Honor schmonor. I might not even say the vows right, and everyone will laugh when I promise to make Tan the very best toasted marshmallow to ever float between the stars."

I'd had to memorize the traditional vows so I could say them. Even with the help of telepathy, though, my accent is still pretty lousy.

"Your Asheraahn isn't that bad," Tylan protests, weakly, adding. "And marshmallow isn't even a word in our tongue. You'll probably promise him something like Yahila."

I laugh. "Could be worse. At least I've got the intonation right on that one." Since I ask the dispenser for it every morning

now. And not once since the Gice Kohath's death has it been seeds, thank the Stars.

The ceremony is breathtaking. It takes place in the same hold where Tylan first showed me Asheraah can fly. Now, all the crew that isn't needed to run the ship are here. Some standing around us, some perched on the walls. Soft, ethereal lights flicker above, casting a warm glow over the massive chamber. Incense fills the air as the Janu and lower priests and priestesses hum the song of joining.

I stand beside Tan, and I feel almost like I have two hearts. I am so full with love and gratitude. Tan looks magnificent in his ceremonial attire, his golden skin gleaming. His eyes meet mine, and I see the depth of his love and devotion reflected in their amber depths.

The Asheraah priestess stands before us, her voice resonating as she begins the ceremony. The ancient words wash over me. I get the gist. Love. Joining. Eternity. And I feel a profound connection to this moment, to Tan, and to the Asheraah people who have welcomed me as one of their own.

Tylan steps forward, holding the delicate bracelets that will symbolize our eternal bond. As they wind them about our wrists, tears of joy gather in my eyes.

Tan and I clasp hands and face each other, our gazes locked. The cool metal feels like a comforting embrace, a tangible representation of our love and commitment.

We repeat the last words of joining, and the cavern erupts in stomps and cheers. I lean up, pressing a kiss to Tan's mouth. This isn't a part of the ceremony, but he returns the kiss with enthusiasm as the sounds of joy and celebration echo around us.

AFTER THE CEREMONY AND FEAST, WE RETURN TO OUR quarters. As the door slides shut behind us, Tan pulls me into his arms, his eyes shining. "My beautiful mate," he whispers, his voice filled with reverence. "My bokdazi. I am the luckiest Asheraah in the universe to have you by my side."

“And I am the luckiest human to have found you.” I smile up at him. “You are my everything, my home among the stars.

Tan picks me up, as his fingers caress my cheek, sending a fission of desire through me. I lean into his touch, savoring the warmth of his skin against mine.

Slowly, Tan lowers his head, his lips brushing against mine in a soft, loving kiss. I melt into his embrace, my body molding to his. The kiss deepens, a delicate dance of passion and devotion.

As we break apart, Tan rests his forehead against mine, his breath mingling with my own. “I love you, bokdazi. With every fiber of my being, I love you.”

“And I love you, Tan. More than words could ever express.”

He starts toward the bedroom with me in his arms, his loving gaze growing more intense.

“Now, it is time for me to show you just how much I love you,” he rumbles. “Again... and again. I want to taste you.”

I laugh, wrapping my arms around his neck, my body already aching for him. “Yes, my love. Yes.”

I want him to make love to me, to say all the dirty things he knows I like to hear.

I want him to eat me, lick me and make me moan with pleasure.

But most of all, I want him to hold me tight and never let me go.

And as the door closes behind us, I know I have found my home.

Here, in the arms of my alien warrior, I am safe and loved.

I want to be his, now and forever.

I want him to claim my body, mind, and soul.

Because he already has my heart.

He does not disappoint. After stripping me bare and laying me on the bed, he devours me with his eyes. “Open your legs for

me. Show me what's mine."

I widen my legs as far as I can.

"That's my bokdazi," he murmurs, then crawls on the bed between my legs. That's what I love about him; he always takes care of my pleasure before his own. He kisses up my inner thighs as my arousal rises. Pressing a finger into my pussy, he smiles as I buck.

"You're so wet for me. So wet and ready," he says as he slides a second finger inside. I can't help but groan.

He licks my clit with a firm tongue, flicking the bud. My breath catches.

He looks up at me, eyes dark with lust. "Mine."

I'm panting now, desperate for his touch. "Yes, I'm yours. I've always been yours."

He continues licking me, adding a third finger. His fingers are thick, and he is careful, so careful with his claws, so all I feel is an exquisite fullness as my desire rises. But it is not enough.

I need him. All of him.

I grab his shoulders and pull him up.

"What's wrong?" he asks, concern etched on his handsome face.

"Nothing," I pant. "I just need you inside me."

He smiles, understanding dawning. "I will never get enough of this. Enough of you."

He presses his cock to my entrance, the blunt tip already slick with pre-cum. Then, he slides into me, inch by delicious inch, until he's fully sheathed.

Yes. This feels so good. The orgasm builds.

Tan groans, his muscles tensing. "You're so tight. So perfect. My love. My *bokdazi*."

We move together, finding a rhythm that sends waves of pleasure crashing over me. He hits all the right spots, and I know I won't last long.

I dig my nails into his back, urging him on.

“More, Tan. More!”

He picks up the pace, his thrusts becoming more erratic as he nears his release.

“That’s it, nymara. Come for me,” he grunts, his voice husky with desire.

I can’t hold back any longer. I come screaming his name as my climax hits me.

He follows close behind, spilling his seed inside me in hot, glorious bursts as I spasm around him.

I’ve never felt more complete, more satisfied, than I do at this moment.

I am Tan’s, and he is mine. Forever.

We lay together in the afterglow, our bodies entwined, our hearts beating as one.

EPILOGUE

ISHINI

PURCHASING a used shuttle on credit and crossing the neutral zone into Mangrel space on the vague hope of tracking down your hopefully not dead sister maybe wasn't my best decision. But family is family, and Skylar would do the same for me.

Well, she'd do something smarter, but between the two of us, I got the guts and she got the brains. As they say, you gotta work with what you have.

This shuttle is supposed to have a rudimentary stealth system. Hopefully it works. I activate it.

According to the last ping between what has to have been her escape pod and the rest of the group's, her course should have put her near this habitable planet.

Sky would have gone there. If she made it—and I know she did—she'll have had enough ration bars to last three 10-day cycles. It took me two to contact my hacker friend and get a burner card so I could pay for this ship. I'll be in a heap of trouble when I return to Federation space. But Sky is worth it.

I will not let my sister die out here. Even if it means I have to spend ten years in the mines paying off my debts.

“Sky,” I whisper into the empty cockpit. “Hold on, sis, I'm coming for you.”

The End.

We hope you enjoyed this book and the characters! This one was fun for both of us (me and Jade) to write together, and we

really loved how the world grew into something really interesting! Also, wings! So much fun!

If you're interested in reading more, I recommend you start with *Grr!: An Alien Warrior Romance*, which is free in Kindle Unlimited. In addition to human and alien romantic hijinks, you'll get to meet some fun animal friends like Nibbles, a giant blue striped hamster.

And if you'd like updates about new releases and discounts from us and also you'd like a FREE copy of *Home for the Holidays with Grr* (a fun filled holiday romp with oodles of Nibblets and other special guests), check out Zeta's reader club here: <https://dl.bookfunnel.com/88chybr91j>

I promise I won't blow up your inbox. I'd rather write books than emails (and frankly, I'm much better at books than emails.)

If you'd rather skip the newsletter, that's also fine.

Jade and I are so happy to have you as a reader, and we can't wait to share more books with you!

Best,

Zeta (& Jade)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND SPECIAL THANKS

FROM ZETA

First, I want to thank my mother who fomented a love of science fiction and creativity in me since I was a small child, my grandmother who taught me the importance of always being true to myself, and my grandfather who showed me anything was possible with grit and determination.

Next, my slew of wonderful writer friends who supported me by being enthusiastic, offering me plot suggestions when I painted myself into a corner, fixed my cover design, and beta-read the book before I subjected you to it. Karen, Noelle, Brenda, and Leela, and special thanks to Miranda Bridges who encouraged me to start a new series with Jade Io, who has been a delight to work with!

ABOUT ZETA STAR

Greetings and salutations. I'm a lifelong sci-fi and fantasy fan. It's generational, really, as my mom took me with her to sci-fi conventions when I was a kid. Some of my best memories are playing laser tag in the hotel hallways. Since writing my first (very) short story in grade school about three dragons fleeing by car from a nameless enemy, I've had characters and worlds clamoring for attention in my mind. Now I get to share them with readers like you, and I'm so excited!

When I'm not writing, you'll find me playing with my cats, doing karaoke, and occasionally dressing up as Ziggy Stardust. If you want to get notified about future releases from me and get random snippets of what I'm working on (or sort of working on), and get a free copy of Home for the Holidays with Grr FREE when you join my reader club! This is a fun filled holiday romp featuring Grr, Zoe, her family, a horde of Nibbles and some very special new arrivals :)

Check it out here: <https://dl.bookfunnel.com/88chybr91j>

