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AVA ROSS



RAVAGED WORLD

SHATTERED GALAXIES



RAVAGED WORLD

SHATTERED GALAXIES/ALIEN WARRIOR ABDUCTED, BOOK 1

AVA ROSS



RAVAGED WORLD

Book 1 in the Alien Warrior Abandoned Series

(part of the Shattered Galaxies Shared World)

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FOREWORD

A note to the reader.

If you found this book outside of Amazon,
it's likely a stolen/pirated copy.
Authors make nothing when books are pirated.
If authors are not paid for their work,
they can't afford to keep writing.

*For my mom who
always believed I could do this.*

BOOKS BY AVA

MAIL-ORDER BRIDES OF CRAKAIR

Vork

Bryk

Jorg

Kral

Wulf

Lyel

Axil, Gaje

(Companion novellas)

BRIDES OF DRIEGON

Malac

Drace

Rashe

Teran

Kruze, Allor, Skoar

(Companion novellas)

FATED MATES OF THE FERLAERN WARRIORS

Enticed by an Alien Warlord

Tamed by an Alien Warlord

Seduced by an Alien Warlord

Tempted by an Alien Warlord

Craved by an Alien Warlord

FATED MATES OF THE XILAN WARRIORS

Alien Commander's Mate

Alien Prince's Bride

Alien Hunter's Fate

Alien Pirate's Plunder

HOLIDAY WITH A CU'ZOD WARRIOR

Snowed in with an Alien

Falling for an Alien Elf

GALAXY GAMES

Alien Warrior Unleashed

Alien Warrior Untamed

Alien Warrior Unbeaten

Alien Warrior Unclaimed

ALIEN WARRIOR ABANDONED

Ravaged World (Shattered Galaxies)

Ravaged Realm

Ravaged Land

You can find my books on [Amazon](#).

RAVAGED WORLD

**She came to me when I needed her most,
and it will kill me to let her go.**

When my ship crashed on a long-abandoned planet, I barely survived. Before the ship's computer failed, it rebuilt me, crafting my shattered body into a half-cyborg being. I'm a monster who's barely living. With no way of escaping this ravaged world, I've resigned myself to spending my days fighting off the feral inhabitants until I lose my final battle.

Then *she* appears...

She brings sweetness and light into my dark, cold world. Her determination to return to her home keeps her going, and I'll do all I can to make her dream come true. There might be a way, but it means I'll lose her forever.

The fates delivered her to me. Can I go back to being alone?

Ravaged World is Book 1 of the Alien Warrior Abandoned Series and part of the Scattered Galaxies shared world. Each of the Alien Warrior Abandoned Series features a stranded hero who finds a future with a woman from Earth.

Other books in the shared world:

Nancey Cummings, Book 1, Splintered Shadows
Ava Ross, Book 2, Ravaged World
Jade Waltz, Book 3, Scattered Petals
Samantha Rose, Book 4, Fractured Waves
Poppy Rhys, Book 5, Crushed Dominion
Harpie Alexa, Book 6, Broken Song
Liz Paffel, Book 7, Destroyed Desire



BEFORE

When an elite group of scientists cracked the code on a special artificial intelligence, it began to understand emotion and the mechanics to maintain itself. An A.I. as close to a human as humanly possible.

It was a mistake.

With unmeasured reach, it searched for other lifeforms, hoping to expand its knowledge about the universe beyond the boundaries its creators established.

The scientists shut it down before it could spiral into something they couldn't stop. The group went silent, shutting themselves off from the public as they set out to rebuild, hoping to regain control over their greatest creation.

The world moved on, the possibility of a special A.I. once more reserved for science fiction.

Until, a year later, it all went wrong . . .



CHAPTER 1

Being stood up on a third date with a guy you kinda liked sucked. I mean, this was the *do we do it tonight or don't we?* date. At this point, the answer was no.

I shifted on my black heels, wishing I'd worn comfortable shoes instead. The toes pinched, and my calves were burning.

But it was my thirtieth birthday, and I'd expected a night full of magic. We'd agreed to meet up outside one of the nicest restaurants in the city for a meal followed by dancing. I'd wanted to look hot.

I might look hot, but my ass was freezing, probably because I wore a sexy red number that barely came to my mid-thigh and plunged down enough to show that yes, I did have boobage.

The dress had resulted in more than one catcall while I waited for Aaron.

Sure, it was spring, but if we were lucky, it was fifty degrees outside. I should've worn more than a simple black shawl. Hell, I should've worn boots and a snowsuit.

I slipped my phone from my clutch and scrolled into it. The pesky update notice that had hounded me forever flashed in my face, but I didn't have time to do anything like that now. Actually, I avoided updating my phone as long as possible, because it gave the company a chance to work out the kinks without my phone being their test subject.

Opening my email, I hoped to find an "I'm on my way. Sorry!" note from Aaron, but nope, nope, nope. Nothing on Twitter or Facebook Messenger, either.

I couldn't believe I was being stood up.

“You’re twenty minutes late,” I hissed to no one in particular. “No way am I inviting you up to my apartment tonight, even if you pay for dinner and all my drinks.” He wasn’t *that* good a kisser, anyway. I was better off without him.

A dark car slowed in front of me, and my pulse jumped. Yay, he was here.

The passenger’s window zipped down, and a guy I *didn’t* know, dressed in a suit, pressed his face through the opening. “How much for the evening?”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m not a hooker.”

“You sure look like one, sweetheart.”

“Leave me alone.”

“Bitch. Wouldn’t hurt you to smile every now and then.”

My lips thinning, I turned my back on him. While the car took off with a squeal of the tires, I opened up my email again but found nothing except another flier from Kohls.

You Must Update Now! flashed across my screen. Pesky thing.

“I don’t want to update now,” I snarled at my phone.

I went to swipe the block away to be addressed later, and my phone freaked out.

An arc of light shot from it, passing through me and hitting the ground like a bolt of lightning.

The world as I knew it disappeared.

A blink, and I slammed down hard on a paved surface. I staggered, clutching my pounding head and nearly falling due to my stupid high heels. A glance around made my jaw drop.

“What the...?”

The sun had set hours before I started waiting for Aaron. Now it shone at the slant of dusk, though it struggled to send light through the thick coat of smog hovering over the city.

Wait. No. Not the sun—*two* suns. And I was no longer standing on Commercial Street in Portland, Maine.

My skin prickled with goosebumps, but I was no longer cold. In fact, sweat razored down my spine, making my skimpy dress stick to my flesh. I could feel my hair frizzing from the humidity already.

I peered around, taking in the tall, crumbling buildings towering over me. Hunks of concrete lay on the sidewalk, and at least half the glass had

been shattered in the windows.

Plants spiked up through cracks in the pavement. Hell, even a scraggly tree had found a way to grow in the middle of the street. Mounds of trash created lumps around me.

“Shit. This can’t be real.” I rubbed my eyes with my palm, but when I opened them again, I was still stuck in a bizarre alternate reality.

I stared down at the phone I still clutched, hoping it would give me an answer, but instead of insisting I update it, it showed no service.

An ominous feeling crawled through me.

With shaky hands, I turned the phone off and zipped it inside my clutch, looping the band over my wrist.

Burned-out vehicles a little bigger and flatter than minivans lay scattered on the street, their hatches opened as if they’d been ripped apart or abandoned. They were something straight out of a sci-fi movie.

My breath kept jerking out of me. I didn’t know what to think or believe. Was I dreaming?

Hoping to see someone who could ground me, I peered around, but there wasn’t another soul in sight.

Feeling exposed, I slunk over to one of the vehicles and poked my head inside. Cobwebs snagged on my hair, and I shuddered as I wrangled them aside. I turned and pressed my back against the dusty metal.

“I’m dreaming,” I said, my voice echoing eerily around me. “And this isn’t a spaceship,” I whispered. “I didn’t see an interior straight out of Star Trek. It can’t be.” Because . . . if this was a spaceship, that meant I was no longer on Earth. Or . . . the Earth I used to know.

Soot and grime covered everything, and silence trickled like an hourglass almost out of sand. I was tempted to break the quiet by yelling for help, but something inside me told me to keep my mouth shut or else.

A hoarse cry rang out, and I spun in that direction, my hair snagging on my fake lashes. I shoved it back and ripped off the lashes, peering around.

Everything inside me told me to hide.

The guttural cry was echoed by another. Then more, until the crumbling city erupted with their shrieks.

A shuffling sound sent me spinning. My heart rose into my throat, pounding in my ears.

“No,” I whimpered, my eyes widening.

I held my hand up as a cluster of creatures from my wildest nightmares hobbled toward me, their clawed feet clicking on the pavement and their long tusks gnashing. Big hunks of flesh hung from their skeletal bodies—like, I saw bones poking through their muscles and tendons. Literal bones revealed on beings that were still moving.

This wasn't possible. It couldn't be real. I had to be dreaming!

I backed up, hitting my hip against the vehicle. My breath caught at the pain, and I moaned.

Their heads snapped in my direction, and their glowing orange eyes locked on to me. One arched its spine and shrieked.

They raced toward me.



CHAPTER 2

KNAVE

Usually, when a pack of penrots hunted, their eerie cries echoing through the dead city, I went in the opposite direction. There was no one here other than myself worth saving, and far be it for me to deny the pack a meal.

When my ship crashed on this forsaken planet three years ago, my body was so broken, I believed I'd die. My finely crafted robotic ship gave the last of its energy to save my life. It rebuilt my upper arms, my left chest, and my right eye—though my eye enhancements no longer functioned. Using the last of its core strength, the ship brought me back from the brink of death with a jolt through my two hearts.

I found myself alone, despite seeing evidence my two crew members might've also survived. Though I'd sought them as far as I dared with penrots around, I hadn't found them and assumed they were dead. The computer ship kept me in suspension to heal so long, they could've lived long enough to escape the ship, only to run into the penrots.

My ship's batteries had melted, and nothing left on this desolate planet could be repaired enough to take me into orbit.

Before I came here, I was an explorer. An adventurer. Some might've even called me a pirate. But I was no mechanic.

Now I lived by the moment. Why waste time worrying about what might come next? Each day marched into the next. I'd resigned myself to continuing in this way until either a penrot pack caught me or I died from an injury.

I'd resigned myself to my lonely fate. Other than the numerous feral penrots, I would be alone on this planet for the rest of my days, and there

was nothing I could do about it.

More penrot hunting cries erupted from ahead of me. If I was wise, I'd return to my home and stay there until the pack moved on. I'd quickly learned I could only outmaneuver them for so long. If I didn't take care, they'd defeat me in battle one day because of their numbers alone.

For some reason, I couldn't let this go. The hoarse cries and yips made the skin on my lower arms crawl.

Hefting the spear I'd crafted from refuse steel, plus three blades, I sought the penrot pack. I'd watch, then leave them to it. Whatever beastie they'd caught would be dead soon, and I wouldn't stay around to watch them rip it apart.

A scream unlike anything I'd heard before on Likair reached my robotic left ear.

Humanoid?

It couldn't be a being like me. I was mistaken. But my original heart shuddered.

I leaped forward, determined to reach the person making the sound. To *save* them, though I wasn't completely sure why. It just felt right.

I didn't know what had happened to the people who'd built this now-crumbling city, but they were all gone. Perhaps they'd been eaten by the penrots, or they were the penrots, only changed. But if my robotic ear had translated the sound correctly, this was a person, a being like me. I couldn't let the pack kill them.

Another scream sent terror bolting through me. It called to me. Stark fear filled me, I ran faster, my robotically enhanced leg muscles twitching as they translated adrenaline into power. I leaped over one dead transport vehicle after another.

I rounded the corner and rushed down the crumbling remains of a street used before the inhabitants of this planet took to the skies.

The pack had pinned someone inside a transport vehicle, and all I caught was a flash of a red too bright to be blood.

Who was it and was it truly worth risking myself to save them? I hadn't come out today to hunt, merely to distract my mind for a little while. I'd long since learned it was unwise to reveal my location to the penrots.

But for some reason, I could not turn away. The thought of it filled me with so much desolation, I could barely stand it.

Holding my knives and spear tighter, I stalked around to the side of the pack, coming in at the back of the transport vehicle. They hadn't seen me yet, but they would soon.

Tension roared through me like a live wire. I had to save whatever they'd trapped.

I *knew* this with everything inside me.

The pack smelled me. There wasn't much time. While some of them leaped up onto the vehicle, their thick claws scrambling across the metal roof, I wrenched the back door open and stuck my head inside the opening.

A female huddled in the corner of the craft, her eyes wild and tears streaking down her face.

When she saw me, she swallowed and held up her hand to keep me away.

"Dun coom neer mae," she cried.

The left side of my brain that had been rebuilt by the computer would need to hear more of her language to understand. I hoped I'd be given that chance.

She scrambled backward, yelping when a penrot stabbed its elongated, single-clawed arm into the vehicle, its skeletal arm clattering on the side of the opening.

It would pluck her out and fling her into the open.

Then the rest of them would descend and consume her.

More joined the first, stretching their long, flesh-dripping arms into the craft. The opening was too small for them to fit through all at the same time, and while they could be persistent, they were not clever. It wouldn't occur to them to let one climb inside and grab her. Instead, they blocked the hatch with too many bodies, and none could get through.

"Leet mae aloon," she cried, drawing her legs up and wrapping her arms around them.

So strange to see only two arms instead of four like me, but despite her lack of appendages, plus the thin, silky brown strands hanging from her head, it was clear she was humanoid. Like me, yet unlike me.

I climbed inside the vehicle and, evading the penrot's claws, stretched a hand out to her. "Come with me. I'll keep you safe."

What if she refused?

Cringing, she stared at my hand as if she thought it would bite her.

“We have to get out of here,” I said. “Please. Take my hand.” I nudged it toward her and kept my eyes soft. I even pressed a smile on my face, though I worried it came out more like a leer. I couldn’t remember when I’d last laughed or smiled. Joy had been drained from me with each subsequent day I remained on this planet.

I touched the front of her leg, marveling at how smooth and pale her flesh was. My own green, scarred flesh felt sallow in comparison.

She flinched, but when I didn’t cause harm, her posture loosened.

Until one of the penrots stuck its head into the transport craft and released a hungry shriek.

Her breath caught, and she flashed her gaze from the beasts struggling to get inside to me.

With a heavy swallow, she lifted her hand toward mine, and I tried not to gape at how tiny she was compared to me. How delicate, frail, and pure.

I was a jumble of stitched flesh and metal components. No wonder she was afraid.

With a gulp, she placed her hand in mine. Her eyes winced closed for only a second, and I assumed she waited to see if I’d hurt her.

Harm was the last thing I wanted to do with her.

I tugged her to a crouch and urged her toward the back opening. So far, the penrots hadn’t seen how I’d reached her, but they weren’t that simple. They’d soon rush around to the back and trap us.

I wanted to give her the time she’d need to trust me, at least to help her get away, but within a few ticks, it would be too late.

Grasping her firmly, I pulled her into my arms.

Curling around her to prevent injury, I leaped through the opening in the back of vehicle, taking care to hold onto my spear. With it tucked close to my body, I tumbled onto the ground and rose to a crouch.

The penrots scrambled over and around the vehicle. They rambled toward us, releasing hoarse cries of excitement.

A glance behind me showed no easy access to the building on the other side of the street.

They’d trapped us.



CHAPTER 3

It was still unclear if I'd been saved or if I'd fallen from the frying pan into the fire. I truly worried it was the latter.

The robot guy had grabbed and ran with me, but the skeletal creatures gave chase, and they appeared eager to eat me.

He—and that was only a guess on my part—threw his spear at one of the skeletal beings rushing toward us, and it ripped all the way through the creature. A few running with it paused and turned to the creature pressing its hands against the hole in its chest. The others attacked the wounded one, ripping into their fallen comrade with claws and long, jagged tusks.

My belly lurched. I wasn't sheltered, but I'd never seen anything so raw and disgusting in my life.

I struggled to get away, but the alien robot held on tight, something not hard to do with four arms.

"Yestis toos cun mes," he said, and it might as well be gobbledygook.

I could be foolish, but something in the robot's mismatched eyes told me I could trust him.

Since I'd fallen down the rabbit hole and emerged in dystopian hell, I had no choice but to trust someone. I couldn't very well defend myself.

But the moment he looked away; I'd run.

"Held iskar," he shouted, bolting to the right, his feet thudding on the torn pavement. "Ess chu gurop."

A wall of skeleton beings lurched toward us from that direction, but a look past one of the robot's four—four! —arms told me an equally large group of them came at us from that side too. Others scrambled over the vehicle I'd hid inside, racing after us with a hungry gleam in their glowing eyes.

As I huddled inside the downed spaceship, I'd worried they'd rip off the roof and climb inside to kill me.

Now I had a new threat to worry about, this robot.

He leaped, soaring over the creatures who jumped, their long arms outstretched and their single, thick, curved claws raking at the air.

Landing solidly, he ran faster than I could ever imagine.

The skeletal creatures raced after us, but it was clear I'd been kidnapped—or rescued—by the bionic man. I suspected part of him was a being like me, if his scarred green skin was anything to go by.

His piston legs stomped on the ground, the black fabric covering his legs swishing with his actions.

Rounding a corner, he raced down a narrower street littered with more silver spaceships like the one I'd climbed inside. He leaped over them all, taking them with one bound.

The skeleton hunters slowed and snarled, snapping at each other in frustration, and I watched over his shoulder as the robot put more distance between us.

One of the creatures leaped on another. They skidded across the ground, claws flying and shrieks cutting through the air. Before the robot turned another corner, the skeleton on the top slashed out with its claw. In seconds, it was ripping the others apart. Bones flew, and the rest of the pack descended, snatching up pieces and running close to buildings to huddle and chew.

My belly lurched, but I held it back with strength of will alone. I had no idea where I was or when—if I'd ever make it back home. The last thing I needed was to lose the scant bit of liquid and food I'd put in my belly to tide me over until dinner.

The robot slowed to a speed walk and kept going, covering what felt like five miles in about ten minutes. Only then did he slow and lower me to my feet.

He held up one finger before I could speak and cocked his head, so his robotic left ear was tilted upward.

His face smoothed, and his eyes traveled down my body.

I licked my dry lower lip and let him look. If he tried anything nasty, I'd find out if a knee to the balls had the same effect on robot-aliens as it did on human males.

Frowning, he stooped down and lifted one of my feet. He removed my shoe and placed my foot on his knee while he tipped and twisted the shoe, examining it. He poked at the three-inch heel and grunting, pointed his finger at it. A tiny device projected from the tip of his finger and a whirring sound erupted.

He sliced off my heel, leaving me with a flat. Sort of. Shoes truly didn't work that way.

“What are you—”

He held up his hand, then placed the electric knife finger against his full, darker green lips. His gaze met mine as if he looked to see if I understood I was to remain quiet, so I nodded.

“You can't do that to my heels,” I whispered, though it was too late to protest now. “You'll ruin them.” Gulping, I noted he didn't wear shoes, though he had three thick toes, each with a sharp claw about two inches long.

He returned my shoe to my foot and did the same thing with the other.

Standing, he frowned down at me. He was at least two feet taller than my five-nine, and I still couldn't get over his four arms. Two appeared mechanical, but the lower ones were covered with scarred, green skin.

He let me stare, maybe because he did the same.

He took in my face and lifted one of his mechanical arms toward my hair. His was completely different than anything I'd seen on someone's head before outside of a science fiction movie. Thick ridges arched up from his forehead and across the top, and I wanted to check out the back to see if the strands as thick as my thumb were hair or part of his head. Steely gray, they matched his mechanical arms.

One of his eyes was a rich gold and appeared somewhat normal, while the other was obviously robotic, and how cool was that? Teal blue, it contained a sharpness that suggested he was not only checking me out like a man would, but also analyzing each of my body components. A thin metal device surrounded his left eye as if he wore a strange headset that he could use to communicate with his mother ship.

I peered up, not seeing a mother ship, before looking back at him.

It felt strangely good to have him study me, but I shut that slightly giddy feeling down, attributing it to spent adrenaline.

It didn't matter if I found him attractive—which I did.

It didn't matter if he took me home like a stray cat on the street. I was only here until I could find a way home, and no way in hell was I developing a relationship with a robot-alien just because he rescued me.

Although the jury was still out on his motives for the rescue.

"Are you going to eat me?" I asked softly, peering around him to make sure we were still alone. The yips and snarls from the skeleton dudes had faded. "Because the others sure looked hungry. Maybe you are too."

"Wae moostar gee," he said, holding out his hand again.

The language barrier was going to get tiresome if I hung around him much longer.

I pressed my fingers to my chest. "Sage."

"Siege," he repeated, half-gargling the word.

"Sage," I said again.

"Say-eege."

"Better." Despite the tenuous situation, I smiled. Even if we couldn't talk to each other, it would help to exchange names. He wouldn't hurt someone he'd made friends with, would he?

I tapped his chest and frowned. "What's your name?"

"Wass yewr neem?"

"I told you. I'm Sage. I know, it's an odd name. I can thank my mother and her back-to-nature phase."

My breathing shuddered from me. *Mom*. Would I ever see her again? I already missed her worn flannel shirts, her face weathered by fresh air and sunshine, and her big hugs. I lifted my chin and blinked fast to get rid of my tears. I needed to find someplace safe to hide. Then I could give into my stress.

I tapped my chest again. "Sage." Then I tapped his. "Name?"

His face cleared. "Name." His lips curled up, revealing fangs that made me gape. He appeared almost stunned by the motion as if he hadn't smiled in so long, he'd forgotten how. He tapped his chest. "Mae name Knave."



CHAPTER 4

KNAVE

This tiny female was the most amazing being I'd ever seen, and in my travels before crashing here, I'd seen plenty.

Sage.

The name didn't translate into anything in my mind, and it likely wouldn't unless she could somehow explain its meaning. But it was hers. She'd shared it. And I'd held it close, repeating it over and over.

My brain's computer components were beginning to work on her language, and I wished they were faster. I had so much to tell her, too much to share.

It had been too long since I'd had anyone but myself to talk to.

"We need to climb to my home," I said, waving to the tall building in front of us.

I could tell by the knitting of her forehead she didn't understand, and I growled with frustration.

She backed up a pace.

Dismayed I'd frightened her, I smoothed my face, hoping she'd find it pleasant and not that of the monster I'd seen when I spied my reflection in a window. "You will be safe with me at my home."

It had taken time to find and secure a location where I could let down my guard. With so little food outside rodents and a feline-like species I called a coot, the penrots hunted all the time. They'd tracked me to my first hiding place, a room on the second floor of a building. I'd blocked the door, but it wasn't enough. They'd beaten their way in and swarmed the place like the rodents they caught and ate in one bite.

I'd barely escaped and was on the run for days until I found my second location, one they also wormed their way into within a short time.

So far, I'd lived in my current place for the passage of three complete moons, and I continuously ensured they couldn't gain access.

Sage frowned. "Oi dune noo what youeer sa-ing."

I waved toward the street behind us. Penrots shrieks echoed, growing louder. They'd finished with their snack and had caught scent of their meal—us. "We have to get off the street. I will take us to a secure location, but we can only access it inside this building."

She shook her head. "Oi woosh oi knuue what youeer sa-ing."

Taking her hand, I led her through the broken-down front door and across the glass and refuse-strewn lobby. I'd surmised this building had once been a residence for travelers, though that wasn't clear. But each of the numerous rooms appeared almost identical to the last other than size and additional furniture in a few.

I'd commandeered the room at the top of the forty-story building, and I was going to be disappointed to leave it when the penrots invaded.

"Huair are whee goo-ing?" she whispered, and I was grateful she didn't pull away or cry out. So far, it didn't appear the penrots had tracked us to this location, though it wouldn't take them long.

I picked up my pace to a jog, tugging her behind me, and for the most part, she didn't resist. I wouldn't—couldn't—force her, but I'd be hard pressed not to push hard if she didn't come with me.

I'd never leave her for the penrots to devour.

Entering a hall through a locked door—my internal computer had exposed the access code after numerous tries—I hurried across the stained, torn carpet to the end of the hall.

A high-pitched shriek from behind told me our time was nearly out. They'd followed our scent inside the building.

I wrenched open the door at the end of the hall and urged Sage up two flights of stairs. We exited into another hall and ran partway down. I stopped at a door on the right and entered the numbers also decoded by my computer. The door opened, and I pulled Sage inside.

Her ragged breathing echoed in the dingy room. With the window broken, rain and snow had gotten in, and everything had rotted.

"Nice plaise yu haif heer," she said, her voice wry. "Oi hupe we-air not stae-ing heer loong."

I led her to the window, where I climbed out onto the ledge. Extending my hand into the room, I pressed an encouraging expression onto my face.

After so long, it wasn't easy. "Come. I promise you'll be all right. This is the only way to access the other levels."

"Oi coont," she said, backing away from the window. "Oi dune noo huair you-eer takin mae."

Shuffles and shrieks grew in volume, and my mechanical and real hearts thudded heavily. The penrots had never followed me this far, but she was exquisitely tempting. Lush in flesh and sweet-smelling, they'd track her farther than they would me. They more often left me alone. They may not be smart, but they learned, and I'd taught them many deadly lessons with spears and blades.

Sage peered toward the outer door, and her shocked gaze met mine. "Thay-er coom-ing. Fook. They-er coom-ing." She bolted forward, stopping at the glass-strewn windowsill. "Oi dune noo wat to doo. Oiem soo-ray." Her panic-stricken eyes met mine. "Ho-elp mae. Pleeze?"

I still didn't understand everything she said, but my computer processed everything. Help me came through clearly.

I held out my hand again because I still wouldn't force her. I'd never leave her to the penrots, but I'd find another way to safety if she wasn't comfortable climbing out onto the ledge.

She shoved back the fine strands hanging from her head and placed her hand in mine. "Oi troost yu. Oi doon noo huay, buht oi doo."

I tugged her through the jagged glass, making sure she didn't slice herself on the sharp edges, and out onto the ledge.

"Oiem noot look-ing doowon. Sheet. Noot look-ing doowon." She latched onto my arm and tipped her head back. "Loong wae oop. Pleeze teel mae whee earn't goo-ing oop."

I took her hands and linked them around the back of my neck and tapped her side, staring into her wide eyes locked on to mine. "We have to climb. Hold on. Please?"

She shook her head. "Fook. Whee goo-ing oop." A mix of fear and determination rattled her voice. "Buht oill hold oon. Proomeez."

I nodded, though I still didn't understand more than perhaps every third word she spoke.

Hurry, computer. I need her to understand.

It would take whatever time it needed. The more she spoke, the more her words were plugged into the program that would eventually generate a

translation component within my brain. After that, I'd understand her, and the component would translate my language into hers as best it could.

I didn't like testing her ability to hold on to me. Worst case, we could find our way to the top through an alternate route I never used, to keep my scent from lingering. Then if I truly needed it, it was unlikely the penrots would know about it.

The fingers of my mechanical arms projected spikes, and I used them to grip between the flat stones making up the surface of the building. My feet did the same with retractable claws extending from the three toes on my right foot. My lower right leg was pure mechanics, my left still what I'd been born with.

With her clinging to my neck, her legs around my chest, I moved quickly, bracing myself with my mechanical foot while shifting my arms upward, using the clawed toes of my left foot only when necessary to maintain our balance.

"Oog," she whispered in my original ear. "Sceeree."

"You are doing well, female," I said, softening my voice to sound encouraging. She wouldn't understand my meaning, but perhaps she'd take heart from my tone. "Almost there."

"Oi can doo eet," she said, releasing a low laugh. "Oim goo-ing to peace me-self. Shooda takin cair of thet bak on ear-ith, buht heer whee air."

She has to void, my brain suggested. That could be tricky. In my current home, she could do so, but it wouldn't be wise to stop here.

Three stories up, I climbed in through another broken window.

Sage unlinked her hands and legs from around me and dropped to her feet. "Hume sweet hume?" Peering around, she didn't hide her distaste, and I couldn't blame her. This room was equally destroyed and rotted.

"Not . . . hume," I said, my computer jumping in with a small bit of translation.

"Hae." She flashed me a smile. "Yu speeken eng-loosh. Un leetle."

I shook my head, not understanding, and her smile fell.

She shrugged. "Eets oo-kay. Wheer not da saem speeshees."

I took her hand and led her out into the hall, ensuring the door locked behind us.

"Ho, luk." She dropped my hand and strode to the railing and peered into the open space in the center of the building. "Hay gear-don." She

tweaked a vine dangling down from above. Leaning out into the space, she looked up and down. "Mareveeloos."

I crossed the hall and stood beside her, seeing this place through her eyes. Lush and overgrown, it looked like a jungle. I'd cultivated plants here to grow things I could eat, and two fruit trees had survived whatever devastation hit this planet about twenty years ago. In the warm months, my trees bore a tart fruit I dried to eat during the harsh winters. Right now, it was spring, and everything was coming alive.

"We need to climb higher," I said, grateful I didn't hear the penrots. They weren't opposed to climbing, but my scent would be fainter on the outside of the building where the constant wind would blow it away.

I held out my hand.

"Toom ta goo?" she said with a sigh. "Oi geet eet. Te skeel-ee-tunes wheel kach oos."

I was beginning to understand her, but my computer was still processing. Translated speech on my part would come last.

"Yes, the penrots will follow if they can," I said. "But I'll take you where you'll be safe."

For how long, though? I'd been here longer than my prior homes. I ached to remain in this location. It was hard never having a permanent home.

The garden below supplemented the bits of meat I tore from the rodents, and I'd started to feel comfortable here.

Feeling comfortable would never do. If I relaxed my guard, they'd catch me.

I'd started to believe that wouldn't be so bad. With each day blending into the next, at least getting caught would feel different.

But now I had someone to live for. I might be taken down by the penrots, though I'd battle for my life, but I'd never sacrifice Sage.

Was it horrible to feel gratitude that I was no longer alone?

I jumped over the rail and landed lightly on the narrow ledge on the other side.

"Huow," Sage said, flashing me another smile. "Youeer ahmaething." She stretched her leg over the rail and tucked herself close against me, clinging to my mechanical arm. "Oi assoom whee goo-ing oop ageen?"

"Yes, I must climb again." More of her words were becoming clear.

She nodded and I turned my back to her, ducking down so she could climb on. When her hands and legs were secure around me, I leaped up, grabbing onto the bottom of the rail on the floor above. I worked my legs up, using the railing to hold myself steady, then repeated the action, slowly climbing up the thirty-five stories remaining to reach the top.

She pressed her face against the back of my neck, and her breath smelled sweet. Her arms and legs around me felt amazing.

It was wrong for me to feel anything sexual about her closeness, but I couldn't seem to help it. My enhanced cock twitched and reminded me that life sometimes brought pleasure. Even that part of my body had been changed by the computer. The ship's system repaired each injury and did what it could to make my body better.

Better being defined by the computer, not necessarily me.

I'd gaped in horror when I saw it, but it worked as it was intended, and I guess I had to be grateful for that.

What would a female think of it?

Brushing away the thought, I climbed over the rail and into the hall outside my home.

"Now, that waas ahmae-zing," Sage said, sliding down my spine.

My cock surged, and the tip did something it never had before. I started to wonder what else the ship's computer had done to my body.

Suppressing the thought, I took Sage's hand and led her down the hall and around the corner.

"Deed eend," she said. "Whee coont goo farther."

Now I understood almost everything she said. How long before my brain was in sync with the translator and I could reply with words she'd understand? I was impatient, eager to share everything.

I wanted to have a conversation with someone other than myself.

"Don't believe what you see," I said, my frustration growing. Not with her but with our inability to communicate. My irritation was fed by the crappy life I lived, the only one I could offer her.

Offer?

I'd be a fool to think this female would consider having much more to do with me than a basic friendship.

Lifting her with my two lower arms, I ducked down and scrambled into the mesh of furniture and barbed wire I'd created when I first claimed this

place as my home. Even holding her, I could crawl on my hands and knees using my upper arms.

Partway through the jumbled of broken, jagged objects, I stood and jumping, grabbed onto a bar I'd mounted on the ceiling. I swung my legs back and forth, picking up momentum, until I released, and we plunged forward.

I landed solidly on a tiny, smooth area in the middle of the second portion of the pile and ducked down again to crawl.

Emerging from the other side, I straightened, my two hearts slowing for the first time since I'd heard one of the penrots shriek on the street.

Bars covered the door to my home, and they released and swung downward when I pressed my mechanical thumb against the flat panel to the right of the door. My onboard computer helped with that.

With the bars gone, a second access panel was exposed. A press of my finger showed it was me, and the door clicked open.

I stepped inside and beckoned Sage to join me, quickly locking things up and engaging the bars on the inside.

As I turned to welcome her to my home, she shuffled closer to me.

Snatching one of my knives from a sheath, she brandished it in my face. "Don't touch me."



CHAPTER 5

So, maybe it was a stupid move on my part to grab his knife. But Knave was a robot guy. Or a cyborg. It hardly mattered which he was. I didn't know this alien's intentions.

Having a weapon gave me confidence even if I wasn't sure how to use it. How hard could it be? I'd cut up watermelon and meat. Use the sharp end and press hard. That seemed easy enough.

I still couldn't get over the fact that he had four arms, though I could see how valuable that would be.

He'd chucked a spear at a skeleton dude and taken the creature out with one blow. He probably knew more martial arts moves than a ninja.

I, on the other hand, hadn't even taken a self-defense course. The weight of the knife in my hand felt good, however. It was better than nothing.

I slashed it back and forth, feeling badass. "Don't come near me. I mean it."

"I will not harm you."

Blinking in confusion, my arm dropped, though I kept the tip leveled with his belly.

"I can understand you," I said.

"And I can understand you. Somewhat." His intent gaze remained on the knife. "I have no intention of hurting you."

"That's what they all say. For all I know, you plan to kill and eat me or maybe even rape me. You brought me here to your . . ." A quick glance around revealed a small entry. An open door on the right led to a living room. In too many ways, this place reminded me of home. A future Earth home, but still.

Fuck. My body sagged. “Have I been jolted into the future?”

“The future of what?”

“A future Earth.” If so, how would I get home? It might be silly of me to even dream of going home. I didn’t know how I got here. I doubted I’d ever find my way back.

“This planet is called Likair,” he said.

Not Earth. “How do you know that?”

“In the city’s headquarters, I found documentation about this planet, though I couldn’t read much. All I could learn was that it was abandoned twenty years ago.”

“Except by the skeleton beings roaming the streets. They’re still here.”

He dipped his head forward.

“Did you bring me to Likair?” I asked.

“Why would I do such a thing?” He scratched his head, and the thick, snakelike bands of dark steel hair lifted as if he could move them at will. “If I could bring you here, I could just as easily remove myself from here, something I’d almost kill to do.”

Leaving me in the entryway, he strode into the living room. I peered at the barred door. The living room. The door again.

While things might be tenuous inside the apartment, there was a good chance they were worse outside. Out there, I’d been lucky to last ten minutes.

So far, Knave hadn’t done anything but save me from a horrible fate.

I scooted into the living room and found him lounging in a big chair unlike anything I’d seen before, because it seemed molded to his shape. Maybe he bought it that way—a custom order.

A glance around showed a big living room with small chairs other than the one he sat in. Paintings hung on the walls and statues of posed aliens stood on a few surfaces. Intricate bowls brought the only color to the pale gray furniture.

“Are we alone here in your . . . apartment?” I asked.

“Yes. We are alone on Likair other than the penrots we just escaped.”

Pen-rot. An apt name. They *were* rotting.

Wait. “We’re completely alone on this planet?”

“Sadly, yes.”

Pain filled my chest. I’d not only been transported to an alien planet, but it was also an abandoned alien world. How would I ever get home?

My knees shook, and worried I'd fall so I leaned against a high table. "You really live here alone?" My voice came out thready.

"In this unit and for now? Yes." He waved to a smaller chair that appeared to hold a neutral position.

I remained by the table, though I doubted if I spun, eager to escape, I could lift the bars on the door and get them out of the way if Knave was determined to catch me.

Vulnerability didn't sit well on my bones, hence my lifting the knife. I edged over to the chair and perched on it.

It jerked backward, knocking me completely onto the cushions, then molded itself to accommodate my shape.

Gulping, I stabbed the knife into the chair arm. The chair shuddered and ejected me onto the floor.

I gaped up at Knave.

He laughed, low, deep, and surprisingly sexy. Robots weren't supposed to be sexy. They were . . . beings without feelings or emotions. That's what TV back home showed me.

And maybe things were different on Likair.

"Why did you attack the chair?" he finally asked, wiping at his left eye. The cyborg one didn't appear to produce tears.

"It attacked me first." I stood and yanked the knife from the arm. The material fused together and within seconds, it didn't look like I'd gouged it.

"It was accommodating to you to ensure your comfort."

"I'm in Oz. That's it. Or I fell down a rabbit hole." Weak-kneed, I slumped back into the chair, trying not to cringe when it shifted to ooze around me again. "Is this a living being?"

"A mechanical thing."

"Like you."

Whatever humor remained on his face disappeared, and both his eyes went steely. "I am mechanical, aren't I?" He lifted his upper arms and examined them as if he'd never seen them before.

"Are you a robot or cyborg?" I asked.

"Partly."

"What does that mean?"

He sucked in a breath and released it. "Suffice it to say, I have not always been made up of . . . mechanical parts."

“I see.” I didn’t, actually, but the droop to his lips and the hollow look in his left eye jerked at my heart, and I didn’t want to press him to reveal things that made him uncomfortable.

“I crashed on this planet just over three years ago,” he said, directing his attention to the floor. “I was broken, and the ship put me back together again in this form. Having no fleshy parts to use, the computer made substitutions.”

“Oh.” I swallowed back the lump of sympathy in my throat. “I’m sorry.”

“Why?” His penetrating right eye met mine. “Many would say I’m a better being now that I have cyborg components.”

“What do you say?” I asked softly.

He shrugged, and it was odd to see four arms instead of two shifting with the movement. “I have no say, actually. This is my body now, and I would be foolish to reject it.”

“Were there others on your ship with you?”

“Two crewmen.”

“Where are they now?” I peered around as if I expected to see green guys like him—without mechanical parts—strolling into the room to say howdy.

“I do not know. I believe the penrots got them.”

A shudder ripped through me. “They weren’t on your ship?”

“Not when I awoke. I found no evidence they survived, and I’ve looked.”

I would’ve too. He must be lonely, living here all by himself.

“Why are you still here if you have a ship?” I asked. That was me, just full of questions.

“The computer used all its energy to repair me. There was nothing left to launch, let alone carry me home.”

“Where is your home?” I asked.

“Not here. Never here.”

“I get it. This isn’t my home either. Never here. I’m from Earth. My full name is Sage Burley.” I leaned forward, holding out my hand for a shake, but he just stared down at it. I tucked it back by my thigh. “Do the people on your home planet know about Earth?”

“Perhaps, though I haven’t heard of that world.”

“It’s located in one of the spiral arms of the Milky Way Galaxy.”

He frowned. "What is a Milky Way?"

I frowned. Of course, another species wouldn't use the same name for the galaxy as us. "It's a spiral galaxy. We have nine planets in our solar system, though there's been some debate about Pluto. We have a really big black hole in the middle of our galaxy." I'd read about that recently.

"Describe the planets?"

How to do that? Hmm. "One is Saturn, and it has rings around it." My science knowledge was limited. "Earth has one moon. Mars is hot." I was rapidly running out of information.

"I might have heard of this location. Many have traveled great distances, and I believe I heard about an inhabited planet with a species we chose not to reach out to. Too much war, and their environment . . ."

"We need to take better care of it."

However, it didn't surprise me that he'd heard about Earth. Most of us believed aliens existed. They probably took one look and decided to avoid us. Sometimes, I felt like I would like to avoid my fellow mankind too.

"We're the third planet from our sun." And that was the extent of my astronomy knowledge. I avoided looking at the sun, especially in an eclipse, and I kept my feet grounded. Life was tough enough without worrying about what went on out there in the stars.

And . . . I sucked in a shuddering breath. *I* was now among the stars.

"I want to get home," I said, my voice creaky. I blinked fast, hating to shed tears.

He lifted one eyebrow. "So do I."

"Then we should do what we can to leave this planet."

"I'm afraid it's impossible."

My lungs ground to a halt. "What do you mean, it's impossible?"

"If there was a way off this planet, we wouldn't be speaking now. There is a . . ."

"A what?"

"It wouldn't work."

"I can't accept that there's no way off this planet. There has to be a way home." I'd hold onto that hope forever. My will was stronger than the devastation wrought on this world. It wouldn't catch up and consume me.

Of course, it was unlikely my willpower would play any role in sending me home.

"How are you speaking so well now?" I asked.

“The computer components in my brain are translating your words and they have taught me your language.”

“But I haven’t talked much.” Not too much. I did lend myself to chatter, but only when I was nervous. Why I wasn’t talking his . . . mechanical ear off was beyond me. Give me time. Give me time.

“It’s enough.” He rose. “I will feed you, and then we will rest.”

My belly said food might be nice, and I realized the suns had left the sky. I got up, surprised the molding chair let me go, and followed Knave into a kitchen as equally bizarre as the rest of the things in this apartment. Odd appliances were stacked together on one end of a long counter.

He lifted a steel panel mounted on the wall, and air drifted in from the broken window. Another building of equal height looked about twenty feet away, and a thin wire extended from this building to that one.

“Do you cook with fire?” I asked.

“I avoid cooking in that manner whenever possible. Smoke . . .”

“Will draw their attention.” A shiver went through me. I’d been camping with my mom. You don’t let anyone know you’re around unless you feel safe. “We don’t want to do that.”

He flashed me a smile that, despite his fangs, warmed me when it shouldn’t. Heat simmered inside me, but it couldn’t be from him. I barely knew him. “No, we do not wish to draw attention. Never fear. You are safe here from the penrots.”

“And you,” I said, mostly to reinforce it.

“Of course. Me as well.”

He opened a steel box on the floor and lifted out a deep pink, smooth-skinned thing that looked like an eggplant with four stubby legs.

“Was that alive?” I asked. I didn’t spy a head, but maybe he’d already cut it off.

“In some ways,” he said. “The bestar doesn’t have hearts or internal organs other than edible seeds, however.”

“Hearts?” I didn’t know why I focused on that part of his statement.

“Two, like most beings.”

“I only have one.”

“Odd.”

At least he didn’t say he found me deficient.

“What happens if one fails?” he asked, his voice alight with curiosity.

“We die. Or, I suppose, we could get a transplant.”

“Another heart. Computers can’t craft a new one for you?”

“Not yet.” Speaking of crafting, which was similar in this case to cutting . . . I tightened my grip on the knife and lifted it. “I’m keeping this.”

“You are welcome to it.” He nudged open a cabinet door with his foot, revealing an arsenal of weapons constructed from steel. “I have others.”

“You’re a regular army.”

He lowered the pink eggplant onto the counter and started slicing it into thick wedges. “This is a vegetable.” He extended a slice toward me as if he expected me to sniff it.

Why not?

It had a scent a bit like zucchini but with a meatier smell that wasn’t unpleasant.

“This will satisfy your hunger,” he said.

“What about yours? Do you eat meat?”

“Only a few rare bits. What other meat would I consume?”

Yeah, we weren’t barbecuing the penrots. I shrugged, a solid, neutral answer.

Opening a drawer, he pulled out something that looked like a hunk of quartz crystal and laid it in the empty metal sink. A thin device projected from the tip of his finger, and the crystal started glowing.

He rested a thin piece of metal on top of the crystal, then laid the slabs of vegetable on that.

As it sizzled, a heady aroma much like frying chicken drifted around me. My belly shouted hooyah, and I started salivating.

“You did something to the crystal,” I said.

“I forced the molecules to move faster.”

“Kind of like a microwave.”

He frowned and flipped the slices. After poking them with another device that slid out of his middle finger, he lifted them onto two thin slices of steel and presented one to me. His head tilted to a box on the table along the side of the kitchen

Dropping onto one of the two rough wooden seats, he lowered his plate onto the table, looking a bit like a giant inside a doll house. When he stood, he had to duck a bit, or his head would brush against the ceiling. I sat across from him, thankful this chair didn’t mold to my butt.

He nudged his chin toward the food. “Eat.”

Without waiting for me, he dug in, carefully biting and chewing through a slice of the vegetable.

I lifted and nibbled a piece, surprised to find it tasted rich and nutty. While hot sauce might be welcome, Knave didn't appear to be a condiment kind of guy.

He rose and brought metal cups and a jug of liquid over to the table, pouring us each a glassful.

"What is it?" I asked, skeptical. I'd begun to trust him, but everything here was so different. I was a mess of shakes, and the feeling wasn't going to settle.

"Water."

I lifted the cup, and my eyes stung with tears when I remembered what day it was. "Happy Birthday to me."

Knave wasn't the date I'd chosen, and who wanted Aaron anyway if he'd stood me up? But Knave was a living being, and he appeared to be the only person standing between me and death.

He frowned at my lifted cup. "Happy . . .?"

"I was getting ready to celebrate the day I was born when something happened, and I was sent here."

"I see."

"You're supposed to clink your cup against mine and wish me Happy Birthday."

"Oh. I apologize." He smacked his cup against mine, sloshing the water. "Happy Birthday."

"Hey, no problem," I said through my tears. "Some people might not celebrate it. I mean, *thirty*. That's old, right?"

"Thirty birth cycles of life?"

"Sure, that sounds about right."

"That is young."

"How many birth cycles of life have you lived?"

"Thirty-eight."

So he was older than me. It was relative, though. I lifted my cup again. "Happy Birthday to you too."

"This is not the day of my birth."

"But you didn't celebrate it when it happened last, now did you?"

He sighed. "I did not. I was alone. I did not feel like celebrating."

“I get it. I feel the same.” Sadness was a tsunami washing over me. If I wasn’t careful, it would drown me, and where would I be after that?

On Likair, it appeared.

Hopefully not forever.



CHAPTER 6

KNAVE

I hated seeing Sage sad.

Should I mention the escape pod I'd found during one of my travels beyond the city? No. I wasn't sure it would work. And even if it did, I couldn't program it to send her to her home planet. I'd only vaguely heard of this place. That wasn't enough information for a computer.

When she cried, it ripped me apart. I remembered tears, and they still occasionally fell from my original eye, though mostly due to the thick sky and foul smells on the streets if I passed near penrot carcasses.

We ate our meal in silence, though I watched her. I couldn't seem to look away. Her lush body made my cock jerk in my pants, but I did my best to ignore it. This wasn't a romantic relationship. We were two very different beings coming together because the rest of this shithole planet was out to kill us.

Given a choice, she'd return to her world with a brief goodbye.

When we'd finished, I placed our cups and plates on the counter. I'd clean them later.

"It is time to rest," I said from the entrance to the kitchen.

Fear flashed in her eyes, and the idea that she saw me as a threat made my belly jerk sideways.

"There are many resting places in this . . . apart-mint," I added. "You will have your own."

A smile flashed on her face, though it fell fast. "I like the idea of an apartment. And thank you." She rose and walked closer to me. "I'm sorry I'm behaving like a jerk. This is all unknown to me. If it helps, I trust you so far."

So far. "I appreciate that."

I left the kitchen and crossed the central area, taking the hall beyond. “There are two resting places. I have claimed one, and you may claim another.”

“Sounds good.” She swallowed and glanced around. “Is there a place where I can . . . I, um, I *really* need to pee.”

Pee . . . Ah, yes, void. She’d mentioned the need earlier.

I opened one of the doors and displayed the bathing chamber. “This is a unit you may use.” I gestured to it sitting in the corner.

“Perfect.” She eased past me, her light, fragrant scent spiking through my mind like the fresh cut flowers my mother used to bring in from outdoors.

My mother. My family must believe me dead. Perhaps I was.

The door shut in my face, reminding me I was hovering.

I couldn’t seem to help it, and my need to be near her didn’t solely come from the fact that I’d been alone for so long.

She was female, but that wasn’t quite the reason either.

I felt as if we were destined, and thoughts like that would only make this worse. Just because we were the only similar beings on this planet, it didn’t mean we’d develop . . . I didn’t know what this monstrous body I’d been crafted into could develop.

But I ached for something wondrous, hopeful, and lasting. Something that would give my existence meaning.

Perhaps that was it. For too long, I’d felt like I coasted along, waiting to slip up and become the penrot pack’s next meal. It felt inevitable.

But I didn’t want that for Sage, which meant I couldn’t allow it for myself.

She came out, wiping her hands together. “Well, that was an experience.” She pushed the thin strands off her face. “Can’t say I’m eager to do number two in there. Just crouching over . . .” She shuddered and flashed me a smile. “I’ll figure it out, I suppose. It’s not like I have much choice.”

I peered into the bathing chamber but didn’t see anything unusual. However, I’d found some of the devices on this planet not only small, but odd when I first arrived. Her world—Earth—must be different than this one, though some things appeared to be similar enough.

“Pick a room,” she said. “Any of them, you said?”

“Mine is the one at the end of the hall.”

“So I’ll avoid that. I assume you took the master suite and who can blame you?” Her laugh jerked out, high-pitched. “This one should do.” She opened the door opposite the bathing chamber and strode inside, turning to prop the door open and peer at me. “Good night. See you in the morning?”

“Day is shorter than night here, though not by much.”

“What exactly are you talking about here?”

“Days last ten or so spans of a hand while nights are fifteen.”

Her hand bracing the door shook. “I assume you don’t sleep for fifteen . . . spans of your hand.”

“I do not. Two or three is enough for me now.”

“I don’t even know what a span of a hand means,” she said sadly. “I assume hours, but how the hell should I know?” Her eyes teared and the wetness fell down her face, but she left them to plop on the floor. “I’m sorry. I guess it’s all catching up to me. I’m cracking. I feel so out of place here; everything is totally new and scary. All I know is I want to go home.” She sniffed. “I don’t mean to turn into a wreck. I’ll stiffen up soon.”

“I mourned for a long time after I woke from the repairs.”

“I imagine you did. This isn’t the life I would’ve chosen for myself.”

“I feel the same.” If only I could show her my home planet of Trulene, from its lush forests to its crystal-clear seas. And introduce her to my family and others like myself who were not a mismatch of mechanical parts and scarred flesh.

“I’ll be okay.” Her chin lifted. “I’ll see you in the morning.” She closed the door slowly.

I turned and leaned against the wall, tipping my head back to stare at the ceiling so close, my nose brushed.

One solitary tear rolled down my face, and I left it.



CHAPTER 7

The bed was much like the chairs in the living room and equally small, like the entire city had been crafted by people my height or a little shorter. Not tall aliens like Knave.

The tiny side table held a lamp that didn't turn on, and I spied a door on the wall by the bed that could be a closet. Maybe. Who knew with alien beings?

After I got used to the mattress moving beneath and around me, pretending I was sleeping on a ship that rocked, I drifted to sleep.

Things chased me in my dreams, but that was to be expected. I'd suffered a trauma, and I'd continue to suffer. The odds of me living much longer were slim.

I cried out and ran, but it felt like my legs were stuck in quicksand. I'd yank one foot out of the goo, but before I could thrust it forward, the other slipped, and I was tugged backward.

My heart raced, a furious thud in my chest. Sweat coiled down my spine.

I kept picturing the penrots catching me, their big, thick claws ripping down my body. My guts spilling out. My cries of pain as the rest of them leaped onto me and started eating.

My own shrill cry woke me, and I bolted upright, staring around the room that remained in darkness.

The door smacked opened, and Knave appeared, his gaze as feral as the penrot's. He hefted his spear and raced toward me.

I shrunk against the headboard. "What are you doing?" My voice came out edgy with anxiety.

He stopped by the bed, staring down at me, and his arm lowered. The spear clattered on the floor. “I apologize. I thought . . .”

“You thought something had grabbed me.”

“Yes.”

So much sorrow filled that one word, and it wasn’t only pity that made me speak.

I patted the bed beside me. “Have a seat.”

He remained where he was. “What do you mean?”

I patted the bed again. “I mean, have a seat. Sit beside me. Put your feet up and relax.”

“Why?”

Talk about rejection.

“If you’re not comfortable sitting with me, then don’t,” I huffed, unable to keep the insulted feeling from driving my voice.

He dropped down on his ass and shifted around until his back pressed against the headboard and his legs extended out, almost to the end of the bed. “It is not a matter of comfort.”

Curiosity was overwhelming me, of course. I wanted to ask why he’d hesitated. It wasn’t like I’d ripped off my clothing and invited him to lick every inch of my body.

My face flamed. I didn’t think of him that way, did I?

His sadness had wormed its way past my guards, though I didn’t have a tortured romantic past. Jerks like Aaron were not the norm. I’d thought myself in love a few times, but the partings had been mutual.

But I’d put guards up the moment I met him, partly due to the situation, though mostly because there was something unusual about him that called to me.

How could I contemplate romance at a time like this?

I lived, that was why. Call it hormones driving me or the fact that he was the only available match in sight. A name for it didn’t matter. I saw *him*, and he was special. He seemed to focus on his exterior, but I saw the vulnerable guy inside.

I liked him.

“What time is it?” I asked.

“Six point two spans since we laid down to rest.”

“Me, you mean.”

He cocked his head, and while I couldn't see much of his face in the dark, I could feel his attention on my face. I swore it drifted lower. I'd taken off my dress since it may be my only article of clothing and slept in my bra and panties. They were cute, red with little bows and the bra did that lift and thrust thing they talked about in ads.

I was chunky but that was okay. I knew I looked fantastic. I'd been excited to dress up for my birthday.

Did he think I looked fantastic too?

"What do you mean when you say me, you mean?" he asked, and I had to think for a second to remember what we were talking about. I'd noticed he'd removed the shirt he had on earlier. His chest was bare, and the definition I spied had to come from major workouts.

"You said you don't sleep long," I said.

"Yes, I did say that." He wore what looked like a scrap of fabric over his package, and the shadows made his cock look huge.

Asking him what his cock looked like would be inappropriate.

Down hormones. Down.

"I assume you had already woken up," I said.

"I laid on my bed. I could not sleep."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "I worry too much. I think about too much."

"It's hard to sleep when you're drowning in your thoughts."

He turned a bit to face me. "That is correct. I was drowning in my thoughts. They overwhelm me too often."

"I think it's natural when you're all alone. There's no one to vent to or bounce ideas off of. All you have is yourself. Back on Earth, a lot of elderly live alone. They get a pet, and it gives them someone to talk to. It makes them feel less lonely."

"I do not have a pet," he said.

My wry laugh snorted out. "It's not like you can adopt one of the penrots."

His smile flashed and damn, fangs were sexy. "That is correct. While they may wish to enter my apart-mint, they would be more interested in eating me than sitting down for a conversation."

"I think you're right." I smiled too, but it faded. "I'm sorry you've been alone so long."

"I am as well, but you are here now."

For as long as I was here. Somehow, it felt mean to bring that up now. He already knew I'd jump at the chance to go back to Earth. Who wouldn't? This was a dystopian planet, and I couldn't imagine remaining here for the rest of my days.

Yet Knavé would, and that crushed me.

Despite telling myself I shouldn't think of him romantically, I couldn't seem to stop my heart from falling in that direction.

"Yes," I said. "I'm here now."

"You being here means so much." One of his hands rose and hesitantly cupped my face. Since it was mechanical, I'd expected it to be cool. Warmth from his fingers coasted across my skin, and I swore I felt tingles, though I doubted his touch was electric.

I could pull away, and I was confident his hand would drop. I hadn't known him long, but I was one hundred percent sure he wouldn't take advantage of me. He was sweet and vulnerable and incredibly lonely. But he didn't appear to have a mean bone in his body.

His sadness called to me. We were more alike than he thought, both stranded in this hellish landscape with no way out.

I rose onto my knees and fully faced him.

His breathing accelerated, and I wondered if I was taking this in the wrong direction. My attraction could be one-sided. He might actually be repulsed by the thought of getting close to a human. After all, he was pretty much a superior being with his cyborg components. He had a computer in his brain, for heaven's sake.

His other upper hand rose to stroke my other cheek, and his lower hands rested on my waist, one of his thumbs subtly gliding across my skin.

Knavé's touch made me feel melty, and I wanted to sag against him and discover what it felt like to be held by him.

He tipped my face up as his head lowered. His lips remained above mine, and I sensed he waited, perhaps even expecting me to jerk backward. I got the feeling he didn't think highly of himself, and that made my chest ache. Bad enough he was left here alone, but if he couldn't find strength in himself, where did that leave him?

Very much alone.

I licked my lips, and his gaze followed the movement.

His lips parted, and he groaned. "Sage."

"Knavé."

“I want to kiss you.” He said with endless sorrow, as if he braced himself for my rejection.

“I want to kiss you too.”

“Ah.” His fingers traced down my neck to my shoulders, and he pulled me up against him. His mouth dropped to mine, light at first, then firmer and with growing need.

I pressed myself into him, savoring the feel of his hard muscles against my chest. My damn bra was in the way. I wanted to drag my nipples across his flesh.

His kiss was almost overwhelming with its need. A spark lit inside me, urging me to respond just as eagerly. I moaned, and his head jerked away from mine.

“I hurt you,” he said, his voice deep, gravelly, and containing a hint of shame.

“Not at all.” My voice was equally husky. “I like it. I . . .”

“What?”

I shrugged, feeling a touch of embarrassment. I only met him yesterday. How could I need more from him than just a kiss already?

“I would not wish to kiss a cyborg with scarred flesh,” he said, as if giving me a ready excuse to reject him.

“It’s not that at all.” Taking one of his unresisting hands, I placed it on my breast.

“Oh . . .” he said. His fingertips traced along the tops of my mounds, and one dipped beneath to stroke across my nipple.

I marveled at how nice mechanical hands felt on my skin.

“Do you have full sensation in your fingers?” I whispered.

“They feel everything.” He swallowed deeply; his gaze locked on my breasts. “It has been a long time since I felt gentle touch.”

My chest cracked wide open, and I counseled myself not to make this about pity. But I felt more than sympathy for him. I liked him. I loved his kiss. And maybe I’d been lonely a long time myself, despite living among so many people.

I unclasped the front of my bra and shrugged out of it, tossing it aside.

“Sage,” he sighed. “You are beautiful.”

How could I not be turned on by a guy who appeared to worship my body?

I didn't slouch or suck in my gut like I would've done with a man back home. Knave didn't seem to care about the extra pounds I often wished I could lose.

He traced his hands beneath my breasts, the thumbs and forefingers lifting to roll my nipples.

I dropped my head back, the braid I'd wound into my hair before bed brushing across my spine in a sensual manner. My eyes closed, but they snapped open when he leaned over and sucked my nipple into his mouth.

His lower arms went around me, his fingers gliding up and down my back, and then cupping my butt.

I moaned, really getting into this moment. I was wet for him, a crazy thing since I'd never been so turned on by a simple kiss and a few strokes of my nipples. I wanted so much more, but I wasn't brave enough to ask.

He lifted his head and smiled. "You taste amazing."

"It's just plain old skin."

"It is Sage skin, and that is the most wonderful thing in the world."

His hands continued to stroke up and down my back while his upper hands played with my nipples.

"If you keep at it, I'm going to come," I said, leaning my forehead against his chest, suddenly shy.

"Come, then. I want to feel it." His hand stilled on my butt.

I sensed he awaited my permission, but I'd never been the type to give a guy direction. I could partly blame myself for not enjoying sex as much as possible. How could I expect a guy to know how to please me if I couldn't speak the words?

With Knave, I felt bold.

I lifted one of his hands and guided it between my legs where I'd saturated my panties.

His gaze met mine. "You are wet."

I chuckled. "I sure am."

"Why?"

Such an odd question. "Because you arouse me."

"How have I done that?"

So sad that he couldn't see how attractive and appealing he was. "Your kiss, your touch. I want . . ." I shifted my hips against his fingers.

Then . . . I realized maybe he wasn't as into this as I was.

Oh, fuck. Talk about embarrassed. My skin cringed, and I hunched forward.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Why?”

“Because I’m pushing myself on you.” I started to ease away from him.

With a groan, he caught my arms and pulled me flush against him. His mouth caught mine, hot and hard. His eagerness made the flames explode inside me.

Four arms was amazing, because he could hold me with two of them while the others freely roamed my body.

He slid my underwear away, leaving me completely naked.

I wrapped my legs around him, pressing myself against his groin. There *was* something large hidden underneath that scrap of fabric.

I was eager, riding against him, and he sensed my need.

One of his fingers slid into me, and he groaned.

I panted, my face pressed against his chest, and shifted my hips back and forth, trying to take his finger deeper within me.

He added a second, and I knew right away they were two of his mechanical fingers, because I felt something extend from one of them. It stroked my inner walls, vibrating. Oh, hell, yeah.

I bucked against him, overcome with this moment. A thousand penrots could breach the apartment, and I wouldn’t care. As long as Knavé kept shoving his fingers into me and whatever toy surprise that he’d extended from the tip kept driving me closer to release.

He sucked on my nipple.

“Yes,” I sighed, jerking against him. I was a bucking broncho and him the ride of my life.

His thumb stroked my clit, and oh, man, did that ever feel good. And when the vibration of his fingers increased, I couldn’t take it anymore.

My body exploded with pleasure. Tipping my head back, I shrieked as I shattered around him.



CHAPTER 8

KNAVE

I wasn't an inexperienced lover. I'd had my share of willing females during my years traveling among the stars.

But no one had ever given herself to me so freely as Sage.

I nudged her back on the bed and dropped down between her legs, spreading them wide.

I had to taste her slick pleasure.

She was sweet and amazing. I'd never get enough. I licked and sucked, trying to claim all her juices.

With the thick bands of luckens on my head, I stroked her inner thighs, getting caught in my emotions.

I teased her inner walls by delving deeply within her with my tongue. With a lucken, I glided across her clit. She jerked her hips upward and moaned.

"Stop?" I asked, lifting my head. It would be difficult, but if she didn't want more, I'd forego licking every last drop.

Her hand flicked my way, and she moaned again.

Ah, was she beyond speech? That made my hearts swell.

My cock too, but it was too soon for that. It would have to wait. I needed to suck on her until she came once again.

After, I'd take the time I had before she left me to convince her that maybe, just maybe, her place was here with me and not on a distant world.

My feelings had grown suddenly, and perhaps they were fed by the utter loneliness that had haunted me for years, but I wouldn't deny my heart. She was everything I could've hoped for in a mate, and I'd fight the world to keep her.

If only she would meet me halfway.

Her head thrashed on the bed, a good sign.

I flashed her a smile—something so rare for me, I swore my face cracked with the gesture. While she shifted eagerly beneath me, I commenced licking her again, thrusting my tongue deep inside her. One of my lucken teased her clit, and her thigh muscles twitched in excitement.

Perhaps . . . other lucken? I eased two into her along with my tongue. Then more lucken, it became a challenge to keep licking with them in the way. They writhed within her while she pumped her hips up toward my mouth, her moans ripping through the room.

“What are you . . . Ah . . .” She panted and spread her legs wider. “Whatever it is, don’t stop!”

“Never.”

I drove my tongue within her, fighting the squirming lucken for space.

Her body tightened, and she orgasmed with a guttural cry.

I rode her inner spasms, licking and sucking in each drop of her satisfaction.

Smiling, I leaned back on my thighs to watch her face. “More?” I asked, my voice hoarse with need but also with satisfaction. Knowing I’d pleased her was all that truly mattered.

“I . . . I . . .” Her eyes pinched shut before they opened again. “You can do whatever you want with me, Knavé.”

I knew what I wanted. So many things. But I would be satisfied with this.

I crawled up beside her and dropped down, tugging her into my arms.

My cock ached, and I was tempted to reveal it. No, to find out if the computer enhancements actually worked.

“You wore me out,” she said with a soft, pleased sigh.

“You are amazing.” It was all I could do not to call her mate.

Because, in my hearts, we were already one.



CHAPTER 9

I woke to daylight, alone in the bed I'd claimed the night before. I felt . . . not quite embarrassed about what happened with Knave, but perhaps, uncertain. I wasn't ashamed of riding his fingers or what came next, though I wasn't exactly sure what he'd used to get me off the second time other than his tongue. Did he have more than one? Because it sure had felt like there were multiple things inside me, each touching a different place that only heightened my pleasure.

Should I be shocked or turned on by the fact that I'd shrieked in pleasure multiple times?

Turned on. Definitely. For sure.

For the first time since I found myself in this horrifying world, I'd relaxed. Maybe things wouldn't be too bad as long as Knave was with me.

I'd fallen asleep in his arms, but now he was gone. Back on Earth, this could mean a few things. I'd find a note in the kitchen telling me he had a great time, and he'd call me—which he either would or wouldn't. Or I'd find no note and no midnight lover.

Or . . . I scooted from the bed and tiptoed out into the hall, where I didn't hear anything to indicate where he could be. Should I check out his room? That felt too much like snooping. Which I'd totally do. I mean, I was in the early stages of a crush. It was only natural I wanted to learn everything I could about him.

Nope. Not doing it.

I entered the bathroom and used the toilet-like device, shuddering when it molded itself to my butt and looped around my thighs like they needed a massage. Who sat long enough to need anything like that? Frankly, I was more a Sudoku kind of girl, not anything like this.

Whoever lived here before Knave actually chose this. What were the original aliens of this world like? Small, if the furniture and fixtures were anything to go by.

I couldn't believe they'd morphed into penrots unless the penrots were the end result of some odd type of evolution. Or a plague. That's what happened in movies.

The penrots could be invaders or . . . I didn't know what. I wasn't a Hollywood screenwriter.

Leaving the bathroom, I dressed quickly in my room, though it was my good old red dress for the win and crossed the living room to enter the kitchen.

I found Knave cooking at the sink, shifting his hips and humming a very odd sounding tune.

Music wasn't solely a gift to humans. It made sense every species had something like it.

He wore only low-slung pants. They were quite ragged, and it hurt to realize how quickly my dress would look equally worn.

It wasn't like we could go shopping for something new.

I swallowed, unsure if I should interrupt him. He'd come across solemn and sad. I hated to break his moment of happiness.

He spun, his cooking implement lifting, though he lowered it when he saw me. His lips spread wide, revealing his fangs, and I got the impression it had been a long time since he'd smiled. I'd be the same if I was dumped into a similar situation. Actually, I had been, though I'd lucked out when Knave came to my rescue. I hadn't needed to figure this out all on my own.

"You slept well?" he asked, turning back to the sink. Something sizzled and the aroma made my belly shout yay.

"I did, thanks." I was grateful it didn't feel awkward. It wasn't like he'd bring it up or drape me over the counter and . . .

I needed to get my brain out of the gutter. He was cooking, not planning a big seduction.

He loaded slices of the same vegetable onto steel slabs and brought them to the table, adding cups of water.

It would be too much to hope for coffee.

My heart sighed. The things I'd enjoyed back on Earth could be gone forever. This may be my new life.

Other than Knave, it was a nightmare.

“Eat,” he said, sitting at the table.

I dropped down onto the seat opposite him and dug in, savoring the unique flavors all over again.

“What’s on the agenda today?” I asked.

“I need to gather more bestar from the garden in the center of the building.”

My hands stilled as I lifted a piece of bestar. “Isn’t that dangerous?”

“Yes.” His penetrating gaze met mine, and I flushed unexpectedly. I kept picturing myself lying with my legs spread wide while his hands and mouth dragged one orgasm after another from my soul.

I needed to eat, not think about sex.

“I’ll go with you to watch your back,” I said. With my trusty knife that I think I left in the living room. I wasn’t a very good warrior.

“I’d prefer you remain here, but it’s no safer here than there.”

And that was a lovely thought. “You have bars on the door, plus all that clutter in the hall to slow them down.”

“I have been forced to move many times since I crashed near this city. I was driven from each of my prior homes.”

“Oh.” I swallowed a bite of bestar. My appetite was iffy, and the thought of penrots breaking down the door put a pall on breakfast. “How long have you been in this apartment?”

“A few months. Long enough to worry they’ll find me.”

“How do you handle it?” I asked, placing my bestar slice back on my plate. It tasted as good as it had last night, but the realization that we could die today made it hard to think about food.

“I flee.” He nudged his head toward my food. “You must eat to remain strong. If you’re weak, you will not survive.”

“You’ll watch out for me.” I’d gone from not trusting him to feeling certain he’d risk his own life to keep me safe. I wasn’t sure how I felt about that. I barely knew him.

Though he knew me intimately . . .

“I may not always be here,” he said.

He spoke of dying, not leaving, and that drove the last bit of my appetite away. But he was right. I needed energy to survive. To run from the penrots.

“This isn’t fair,” I said, meaning everything. Not just my own situation but his as well.

“You are right, but it is all I have.”

“We need to find a way off this planet.”

“I’ve looked at all the options. I’m not a mechanic, and I’m unable to repair the ships littering the streets, though they will not travel to the stars, only a distance above ground.”

They were hovercraft, then, not spaceships.

“Have you looked for a space station?” Space airport. Whatever. I assumed there must be one here. How else had the people who used to live here leave?

Assuming they’d left. I worried now they’d been eaten.

“Not within one day’s travel from here. I haven’t dared go far.”

Because they’d catch and eat him.

If this was Earth, and I was in this situation, though, what were the odds I could get to a rocket launch site and figure out not only how to propel it into the sky but drive it after that?

Less than zero.

“There has to be a way.” Desperation edged into my voice. “I have to get home.”

“We don’t even know how you arrived here. Did you come in a ship?”

“I was standing on Earth, waiting for my date to show up. He’d stood me up, and I was getting impatient.” I frowned. “My phone . . .”

Rising, I ran to the living room and grabbed my clutch off the table where I’d dropped it when I got here. I wasn’t sure what it or my phone could tell me, but there might be some connection.

Like that made sense?

Sighing, I returned to the kitchen and dropped down onto the seat. I pulled out my phone and turned it on. No service, of course, and the battery was half dead. When it had used up the rest of its juice, it would never turn on again.

Somehow, that devastated me, like a dead phone would be the final cut-off from my life back on Earth.

“At least the stupid update warning is gone,” I whispered, scrolling through the apps. I wasn’t sure why I bothered. None would open. Still, I tapped them one by one, and they spun.

I dropped the phone onto the table. It clattered, but who cared if I broke the screen or damaged the device beyond repair?

Cupping my face, I sobbed. I couldn’t help it. It just came out of me.

Knave tugged me off my chair and into his arms. He held me while I cried and blabbered about no cell service, nonfunctioning email, and the horror I was beginning to realize was my only future.

When my tears dried to sniffles, he lifted my chin and gave me a soft kiss.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “So sorry that I can’t offer you anything better.”

“It’s not you.” He was actually the sole good thing about this situation. “I’d be dead if you weren’t here with me.” I shuddered at the thought of what would’ve happened back on the street.

“Know that I will protect you to my dying day.”

And that was the problem because it appeared the clock was ticking. It was only a matter of time before the penrots caught and ripped us apart.



CHAPTER 10

KNAVE

“I’m sorry I behaved like that,” Sage said stiffly as we crossed the living area to leave the apart-mint.

“I grieved a long time after I realized this was it for me,” I said.

I hated that she’d been dragged into this with me. I could bear this future for myself—or I’d resigned myself to it—but the thought of someone I was beginning to care for suffering . . . It was going to slowly shred through my resolve to make this work.

“We won’t be able to speak much while gathering food,” I said.

“The penrots followed us to the second story yesterday.” She worried her lower lip with her blunted, even teeth. My fangs must appear jagged and unsightly when compared to hers. This Earth female was different than me in every way. Better. How had she been able to give her body to me last night?

Fuck. Had I taken advantage of her sadness? That must be it. She hadn’t mentioned it today, and that meant she—

“Thank you for last night,” she said softly, placing her hand on one of my original arms, not my mechanical replacement. It was a little thing, but it mattered. “It meant the world to me. I hope you—”

“I hoped you didn’t regret it.”

She frowned up at me. “Why would you think that?”

We stood at the door, and I needed to listen before releasing the bars. Anything could be waiting in the hall, as I’d mistakenly discovered when I had to flee my first home. A pack had somehow followed my scent to my warren and waited to attack. Only quick movement on my part had saved my life, though I carried pale, jagged scars on my back that would never fade.

I'd had to leave everything I'd collected over the two months I'd made that place my home. It was silly to think I owned anything but myself, but I had.

Starting over with nothing felt like true defeat. It had taken me time not only to collect what I needed merely to survive, but to come to the realization I'd never find a place where I'd truly be safe.

"Knave," she said. "Why did you think I'd regret what happened?"

"Because I'm nothing like you," I said.

Her hand dropped away from my arm, and I missed it already. "Are you saying our differences are too great for you to . . ." She shrugged. "I don't know. Care for me?" A crack opened in her voice, widening to a seam I may never make my way across.

I nudged her against the wall and stroked her face. I carefully ran my claws through the bands of silky material sprouting from her head. I couldn't stop staring at them, because they differed so greatly from my lucken. "Last night was special. *You* are special." I couldn't hold her gaze; mine dropped away. "You are too special for me."

"Don't say that about yourself. I enjoyed last night. *It* was special." Her low laugh shot out. "I was fantasizing about you doing it again when I sat in the kitchen."

Before she'd mourned over her small possessions.

Wait . . .

"You didn't just . . ."

"Let you do things to me to cheer me up?" She eased forward and into my arms, where I was beginning to believe she would always belong. "It was amazing. Sure, I was sad, but I wanted you." Her lips quirked up. "I still want you."

Overcome with emotion, I didn't know what to say. We'd been thrown together and now we'd found . . . I wasn't sure what, but I wanted to do everything in my power to make it last.

I took her hand, unable to keep my cheeky grin off my face. Smiling was so much easier around Sage.

"We will collect food, and then we will see about your needs." Again, I didn't call her mate.

But I knew in my hearts she was destined to be mine.

After ensuring nothing waited for us in the hall, I unbarred the door and we stepped outside.

We crept through the mesh that blocked my entrance, my ears alert for any unusual sound. I'd long since stopped noticing the scrambling of feral coots.

"What's that?" Sage asked when the scrape of claws rang out ahead.

"Coots live in this building. They're everywhere. It's a competition between them and the rodents."

"What's a coot?"

"A feline-like creature. Some are more friendly than others."

"In what way?"

We really shouldn't talk, but our voices were low, and the coots often shrieked a warning when they saw penrots, because they were also hunted. But I wanted Sage to be aware of this world. Knowledge could save her life.

"They are this high," I tapped my knee, "and they have a thick coat of silk all over their bodies."

"Fur?" She fingered her hair.

"It is different than your fur."

She grinned. "We call this hair on Earth. And it's much different than your . . ." Jumping, she tapped a lucken and I stretched it toward her. "These."

"Lucken. They are appendages like my fingers."

"Yours or computer-created?"

"I was born with them."

"They're . . ." Color rose in her face. "I like them. They're unique. And coots sound a bit like pets we have at home called cats. I'm curious to see them."

"I doubt they will give you much chance. They run at the slightest sound."

Her smile faded. "I assume for the same reason as us."

I nodded. Taking her hand, I led her to the railing. "We need to climb down again, all the way to the bottom."

"I'll hold on."

I gathered her into my arms and couldn't resist stealing a kiss, though it wasn't true theft because she pressed herself against me and moaned at the touch of my lips. I would never believe she'd lie, but it was wonderful to see this proof that she truly did want me. She wasn't faking this. She wasn't even sad.

Not at the moment.

I hoped I'd never give her cause to feel pain, a big wish considering where we lived.

With her legs around my torso and holding her secure in my lower arms, I used my clawed feet and mechanical arms to climb over the rail and down through the inner part of the building.

I was going to hate to leave this location, though I knew that time would come. I'd found security on the top floor, and the inner section provide food and water. But the penrots would find me here like they had in each of my prior homes.

When I reached the ground level, I lowered Sage to her feet.

She stepped back and peered around. "It's a garden." Moving away from me, she strolled along the overgrown path weaving through the thick vegetation.

This planet had seen no rain since I arrived, and I didn't know if this was normal for this area or if the planet was dying. The thick air suggested the latter.

Sage jumped and tapped an abune, a pink-fleshed fruit I enjoyed as a treat.

I followed her as she wandered, partly to ensure she was safe, mostly because I couldn't bear to let her out of my sight.

"What sort of maintenance do you have to do here?" she asked over her shoulder.

"I keep the power cells deep within the basement functioning."

"We don't have lights in the apartment."

"I haven't been able to draw enough energy from the cells for such a thing, and I use what little power there is sparingly and for water. To keep the plants alive, I must water them. The water is stored in a reservoir deep beneath the surface, and I am careful how I use it as well. As for the rest, I pull the plants that don't belong, and I pick whatever I can. I dry some and eat the rest."

"It's a bit of utopia in this . . ." She shook her head. "I was going to say hellhole, but that's not completely correct. It can't be all bad if you're here too."

My hearts thudded heavily in my chest, and they hurt as if I'd been stabbed.

This female . . . I didn't know what to make of her, but I knew one thing.

If I could find a way to send her back to her home, I was going to miss her forever.



CHAPTER 11

We gathered fruit and vegetables in a variety of colors and shapes, placing them in sacks until they bulged. I'd help dry them for future use, and we'd feast tonight.

I felt almost like I'd woken up in a dystopian version of my country's wild west. Homesteading with alien zombies trying to eat you. What could be more fun?

Hot and sticky from my exertions, I sat on a large rock while he watered the garden. I pulled my hair off my face and lifted it, fanning my neck, but with so much moisture in the air, my movement made no difference.

What happened to the people who lived here first? The planet appeared to be dying. Had they fled in ships, or had they turned into the penrots? It was a mystery to me.

A sound behind me made me jump. I turned and gasped, my eyes widening.

"Aw," I sighed, checking out what looked like a fluffy orange kitten about the size of a toaster. Well, other than its long, spiked tail like a dragon's whipping back and forth, plus its inch long talons. I had a feeling if it was pissed, it could rip my arm to shreds. Its bright orange eyes watched me, and when I shifted on the rock, it backed toward the wall, hissing.

Knave's head jerked in my direction, and in one leap, he stood beside me brandishing a long blade he'd pulled from a sheath at his waist. He raced to the wall and snatched up the kitten by the scruff of its neck. While it spit and snarled, he held it aloft, his blade lifting.

"Wait," I cried, leaping to my feet. "Don't hurt the kitten."

“It’s a coot. They get into everything,” he said, frowning. “Of course I will kill it.”

“You can’t.”

“Why?”

I stretched out my hand toward the beastie, taking care to watch out for its swiping claws.

“Can we keep it?” I asked.

Knave’s head tilted, and his arm lowered, though he kept a tight grip on the coot. “Why would you wish to do that?”

“Have you ever had a pet?”

“No.” He swallowed. “I don’t even know what a poot is.”

“It’s an animal you raise and keep from harm. You feed and snuggle it, and you become good friends.”

“I don’t understand.” He lifted the coot again and stared at it while it ripped at his mechanical arm, though it couldn’t scratch through his rubbery skin. “You wish to make this creature a . . . poot?”

“Pet, and yeah, if you think it could be taught to like me.”

He stiffened. “If it does not like you, I will crush it.”

I grabbed his arm, though he’d sheathed his blade and didn’t appear as eager to slash the coot’s neck.

“Do you think I could touch it?” I asked, gazing in adoration at the small creature. I wasn’t going to stay here any longer than I had to. I shouldn’t contemplate taking on a pet. But for some reason, I couldn’t resist this little being’s glowing orange eyes. “It looks so sweet.”

One of Knave’s eyebrows lifted. “I do not believe it would taste sweet, though I admit I have not tried. They prove elusive, and their claws are sharp. It’s much easier to eat things from my garden than trap coots.”

I was grateful for that. I liked meat as much as anyone else, but the thought of eating coots or the rodents he’d mentioned before didn’t hold much appeal. The vegetable we’d eaten satisfied my hunger.

“We won’t eat it even if it’s not friend,” I said firmly.

He nodded. “What do you wish to do with it?” He dangled it between us and for now, the coot had stopped spitting.

It watched me and the intelligence in its eyes warmed me through. Tufts stuck up from its rounded ears, and pale orange whiskers sprouted off its plump cheeks. A white ruff encircled its neck, and its spiked tail curled up across its belly.

“I think it’s afraid,” I said. Maybe I should ask Knave to put it back on the floor. It must have family here, and I wouldn’t want to take it from whoever it loved.

Like me, losing my mom.

“It may not have seen one such as you before,” Knave said.

“Probably not.”

I’d see if I could pat it and take it from there.

I slowly reached toward its face, and it watched my finger approach, remaining still.

When it didn’t attack, I stroked its soft head and rubbed behind its ears like I’d done to win over cats back on Earth.

Its little chest rumbled, and I wasn’t sure who was more startled, me, the coot, or Knave. He nearly dropped it.

“It makes a threatening sound,” he said. “Allow me to dispose of it.”

“No way. I think it likes me.” I drew closer, still remaining out of reach of its claws and carefully used both hands to stroke behind its ears and across its head. Its purr grew louder, and I couldn’t hold back my grin. “It does like me.”

“I believe it is a he,” Knave said, still looking skeptical. “Are you sure you do not wish for me to toss it outside the garden?”

“Where the penrots can get it?” Even to my own ears, I sounded shocked.

“Well . . .”

It wasn’t like this would be the first coot the penrots caught and . . . ate. I couldn’t protect every single creature on this planet from their vicious attacks.

But maybe I could make a tiny difference. With the coot.

And with Knave.



CHAPTER 12

KNAVE

I still couldn't believe Sage wished to touch the coot. They were more a pest than anything else. Whenever I caught one in my garden, I placed it outside the building, though I made sure there were no penrots around.

This gave it a fighting chance. If I let them remain inside the garden, they'd decimate my crops. They'd done it before, and there was nothing but me to keep them from doing it again.

I watched as she stroked the tiny beast, and I had to admit, the coot wasn't completely unattractive. It would never be as sweet and gorgeous as Sage, but she shined like no other. To me, she always would. I accepted that.

"I must put it down," I said. "We need to leave." I wanted to get back to my apart-mint and preserve the vegetables we'd collected. I'd hide bags in the vicinity, my only way of ensuring I'd have food if I had to suddenly flee.

Sage's hands stilled on the coot, and her stricken gaze met mine. "They're coming?"

"Not so far. I can't hear penrots approaching, and they have yet to enter my garden since they preferred to eat meat."

She winced.

"But if we linger here too long, our scent will remain, and they'll discover it and wait for us to return." I nudged my head to the right wall. "I'll open the vents to allow the air to rush through the room before we leave. That will confuse them."

"This city sucks," she said, her hands dropping back to her sides. She gazed with longing at the coot. "We can't take him with us. He wouldn't be

safe.” The longing in her voice made my hearts ache. I’d give anything to keep her smiling, but she was right. The coot would be in greater danger with us than with its pack.

I lowered the creature to the ground, and it scampered behind a wisteeer bush. It peeked around the pale orange leaves, watching us.

Watching Sage mostly, but who could blame it?

Her lips curled up, but I could tell her heart wasn’t in it. “Back to the apartment?”

“Yes.” I lifted two of the bags and secured the ties to my waist. They’d dangle as I climbed. “I’ll come back for the rest after.”

“I can carry them if you can hold me, the two you have, and still get us up there.”

I nodded and she lifted them, looping the ties around her hands.

We walked over to the wall, and she pressed herself against me. I lifted her with my upper arms, pulling her close with my lower limbs. Her hands holding the bags went around me, and while the bags would bang on my back, I was confident they wouldn’t slow me down.

Her heels hitched onto my hips. “Ready.”

I’d started to scale the wall when a pitiful cry rang out below us.

“It’s the coot kitten,” Sage said, peering past me. “Poor thing.”

I returned to the ground and Sage slid down my body. She dropped the bags and lifted the coot, who rumbled and tried to lick her nose.

Sage laughed and turned sparkling eyes to me. “Maybe we could give this a chance?”

I wanted to grumble that I didn’t need another mouth to feed, that the tiny beastie would only make things complicated if we had to flee, but how could I deny Sage this one small pleasure?

“I think you are right,” I said. “The beastie needs to come with us.”

Sage’s smile became true, and it was a wondrous thing. “How are we going to bring him with us? I don’t want him to fall.”

Taking one of my empty bags, I ripped it, crafting it into a sling Sage could wear around her neck but also secure to her waist. I dropped the coot kit inside, and it curled up against her warmth, still rumbling.

“Thank you,” Sage said, stroking my face. “At least I have a friend.”

“You have me,” I said, my voice husky.

“That I do.” She flashed me a saucy smile. “That I do.”

I took her back to the apart-mint, and for the first time, I was excited to get inside and lock the door. So often in the past, I'd stood in the dark hallway feeling as if I was frozen in time. From morning until night, nothing ever changed except I grew older. It hit me hard when I'd been here about a year, when I realized I'd probably die here. I was only one serious injury away from being unable to find food or water or escape the penrots.

Now I was frozen with Sage, and that hurt even more. What if something happened to me? She was strong. I'd seen that already. But she wouldn't survive more than days without my protection.

I had to think of a new plan.

When we were locked inside, she lowered the coot to its feet.

"Now comes the test." She frowned. "What will he eat, and how will he go to the bathroom?"

"He will hunt for himself," I said. "And as for the bathroom . . ." I wasn't sure what she meant. Why would he need to enter the bathroom? It was used solely for bathing and . . . Ah. Yes. I saw now. "We will find a solution to this."

"Back on Earth, those who have indoor pets provide a pad for them to use or a litter box. I've heard of people training their cats to use the toilet, so maybe we could even try that." She eased around me and lowered the bags onto one of the chairs. "I'll show him the toilet, and we can keep reinforcing it for as long as he chooses to stay with us."

I was skeptical, but if she said it was possible, it must be so.

"When you instruct the coot," I said. "I will be in the dining quarter drying the food."

"I'll be there in a second to help," she said cheerfully. She scooped up the coot. "You're gonna need a name, little fella, if you're going to hang out with us for long. But first, would you like to go pee-pee? I'm sure you would." She strode down the hall to the bathing chamber.

No longer feeling frozen, I grinned.

I might not have much of a future, but for now, Sage would share it with me.



CHAPTER 13

The coot I'd named Fred took to the toilet like he'd used it his entire life. I set his little paws on the seat, and he padded around, sniffing, before squatting and doing his thing.

"Well, Fred," I said, patting his fluffy little head. "Aren't you a good little boy? I think you deserve a reward, don't you? Let's go get some chow." With him in my arms, his spiked tail whipping back and forth and his chest rumbling with a purr, I left the bathroom. I put him down in the living room, and he scampered after me to the kitchen.

Knave worked at the counter, slicing vegetables thinly. He'd created quite a pile nearby. He kept pausing to insert the slices into a device sitting on the counter unlike anything I'd seen before. When he shut the lid, he frowned, watching it. Within seconds, the lid popped open, revealing shriveled vegetables. He placed them on a slab of steel to cool. Slices he'd already dried sat in clear bags nearby. A pleasant, almost sweet scent filled the air, and my belly rumbled.

He impressed me with his determination to find a way to survive in a world on fire.

Yesterday morning, I'd found myself in a nightmare. Since then, I'd been rescued by a hot part-cyborg guy. I'd found a pet. And I felt relatively safe as long as we remained inside his apartment.

I was making friends and one might even say I was beginning to feel like I was settling in.

Returning to Earth was my sole goal. There was no denying that.

But if I had to remain on an alien planet, this might not be too bad. In fact, it might actually be amazing.

Assuming we remained safe in this apartment. I wasn't eager to tangle with the penrots again.

"Would you like help?" I asked, noting the sun dropping toward the horizon. The day had flown, but that was the norm on Likair. A long night would follow, and my skin tingled at the idea of spending the darkness exploring Knave.

Was I rushing into a relationship? Maybe.

Was I falling fast because there wasn't anyone else around? I was less sure about that.

Falling . . .?

That thought scared me.

Because if I could find a way back to Earth, I'd have to leave Knave behind.



CHAPTER 14

KNAVE

I was tempted to climb into Sage's bed. I wanted to hold her, pleasure her. Maybe even eventually find pleasure in her body myself.

When we stood in the hall that evening, laughing softly about Fred's antics in the bathing chamber, it was clear from the soft look in her eyes that she'd welcome me into her room.

While I wanted that more than anything, I also needed to think. The more I was with her, the more I saw how devastated I'd be if she left. She'd made it clear she didn't want to stay here, and who could blame her? *I* didn't wish to remain here, either.

But I had to consider how my life would be once she was gone. Committing fully to her when she wasn't able to do the same would only leave me in worse shape than I'd been in when I crashed on this forsaken planet.

It was hard enough contemplating going on without her, but if I loved her, it just might kill me.

So I needed to think. Nothing wrong with that. I wasn't pulling back from her.

"When I emerged from my ship about a month after my ship crashed," I said, "I was determined to find my way back home. Oh, I wanted it so much."

I was naïve to think it could ever happen.

"You understand how I feel," she breathed. "I mean, I didn't think you wanted to stay here, but," she flicked her hand to the living area, "it's obvious you've settled in."

"I had to."

She nodded.

Turning, I leaned against the wall beside her. “I had tried to find a way off this planet. At first, I examined the transport vehicles in the streets. They’ve been abandoned for more than twenty years, from what I could tell.”

“Could you get any to run?” she asked, hope in her voice.

“Not for more than a short distance. The energy they run on is difficult to obtain.”

“If it’s like our gasoline that runs combustible engines, you could siphon it out of other vehicles, combining it into cans to run one.”

“They use energy that is much like a charge. A spark? I am not sure of the term. I thought of trying to obtain some from other vehicles, but they were never constructed for taking a being off the planet.”

“Maybe you could use one to get away from the city. If you could find someplace without penrots, it would be a better life.”

“Perhaps. It’s a challenge to examine them with the penrots swarming around me.”

“They’re vicious,” she said, wrapping her arms around her waist. “I don’t know how you’ve survived this long without them hurting you.”

They had and more than once, but I didn’t want to share those desolate times when I’d huddled in whatever shelter I’d found, struggling to find the will to go on while pain from my wounds wracked my body. There had been no computer to heal me. I’d either live or die and it hurt to know I’d be alone when it happened. “I learned how to avoid them.”

Biting her lower lip, she sighed. She stared up at me as if I was her sole chance of survival, and while I was, I wanted her to look at me with true affection as well. Was that so wrong?

That was the catch. I could pleasure her body all night, but what about in the morning? A relationship could be built from sex alone, but I was falling in love with this female. I doubted I could offer her a way home, but a life could be had here on Likair.

I could show her everything I could offer, and she still might reject me. Who wouldn’t?

It would hurt if she decided we needed to go our separate ways.

I needed to show her there was something within my wrecked frame deserving of love.

My goal from now on should be teaching her to survive on Likair. Then if something happened to me, or she decided we needed to part, she’d stand

a chance of surviving. If she grew to care for me along the way . . . I huffed, unwilling to let that dream take hold in my mind.

Fred scooted out of the bathing chamber and leaped into her arms.

“I guess it’s bedtime, huh, little coot?” she crooned. She looked up at me, and the exhaustion on her face told me this was the right decision for this reason too. She needed to sleep, and she’d do that better without me beside her.

“Goodnight,” she said, and only a hint of hesitation came through in her voice.

“Tomorrow, I want to do something fun,” I said as she turned away.

She faced me again. “Is that possible here?”

No criticism came through in her voice; she was only being realistic. How could anyone have fun with packs of penrots determined to eat us alive?

“I know what you think,” I said. “That only danger exists in this Likair city, but there are things I want to show you. There’s beauty even here in this horrifying world.”

“All right.” She yawned. “I’m sleepy. Sorry. It’s not the conversation.”

I wasn’t sure how conversation connected to yawning, which was an involuntary reflex to control oxygen levels.

I stroked her hair off her face. I’d carefully run my fingers through it for much of last night, and I ached to do it again. There were so many things I wanted to do with her, show her, and all of them didn’t need to take place in bed.

“All right, then,” she said. “Tomorrow we’ll go on an adventure.”

“Yes, an adventure,” I said with a smile.

“Night.” She opened her door and stepped inside. “I can cook breakfast in the morning. You don’t need to always take care of me.”

“That would be nice,” I said. I actually did want to take care of her always, but only if she felt the same.

With a soft smile, she shut the door.

I moved down to my room and dropped onto my bed, staring at the ceiling.

I wasn’t being completely honest with her when I told her there was no way off this planet. There *was* a way—for someone smaller than me. Maybe.

On one of my forays, I'd found a downed shuttle outside the city. I'd basically ignored it because it was too small for me.

Sage's tiny body would fit inside perfectly.

And if I could find a way to fuel it, it could possibly program it to take her back to Earth.



CHAPTER 15

I woke before Knave did the next morning, which was my goal. He'd done so many things for me already. I wanted to do something nice for him.

Slinking from the bed, I dressed quietly and hurried out into the hall.

After using the bathroom, I strode to the kitchen with Fred trailing behind me, making little huffy-squeak noises. He loved to chatter. I loved to listen. It was nice to have a pet. It made my life here feel a tiny bit like home.

"How can I turn these vegetables into pancakes?" I asked, holding a fresh one up. This one looked a bit like an apple, only I discovered last night when I took a big bite that it was sour. Something sour probably wouldn't work for pancakes.

I dug through the cupboards, finally finding a packet of something that vaguely resembled flour, though it probably wasn't.

The big question was: was it edible? For all I knew, it could be rat poison—for whatever served as rats here. The coots had to eat something.

Knave said no one had lived here for at least twenty years, a hell of a long time. The last thing I needed to do was kill us by serving pancakes made from unknown ingredients.

I opened the bag and took a sniff. It smelled like it could be edible. Hmm. I frowned down at it.

Maybe I could ask him about it later. It might be best to stick to things that were familiar.

Some of the vegetables tasted sweet. I chopped them up, planning to cook them down into a sauce we could drizzle over other fried vegetables. We could pretend it was apple pie or something like that.

I sliced the vegetables I wanted to fry and set them beside the sink on a steel slab. You know what? With the sweet fruit on top, they'd almost taste like glazed donuts.

Who was I kidding? My laugh snorted out. Glazed donuts and apple pie were a thing of the past.

Welcome to the future and alien vegetables, Sage.

Okay. Time to finish preparing the meal, hopefully before Knave woke up.

That was when I realized I couldn't cook anything. Only Knave could make the crystals in the sink produce heat.

Sinking down in a chair, I struggled not to cry. It wasn't hard to acknowledge that I was a mess. Who wouldn't feel unsettled after all I'd been through?

But I'd had a good night's sleep. That should help keep me from feeling down.

My situation really hadn't changed. I was still stuck on this planet where I'd be lucky to survive for a week. I couldn't cook. I couldn't defend myself. And I sure as hell couldn't run fast enough to get away from the penrots.

Without Knave, I was a goner, and that scared me enough to dry my tears.

What would I do if something happened to him? I'd be left alone, basically defenseless.

This just showed me I had to do all I could to go home. Though the thought of leaving Knave behind felt like I took a knife in the chest.

I'd only known him a few days. Yes, he was amazing in bed—and we hadn't even had full sex yet! —but a person didn't fall in love this fast. I'd never believed in instalove.

So what did I feel for him? It wasn't pity. He was strong and determined. He was a survivor. He might suggest the penrots would destroy him in seconds, but he'd come across as savvy and able to protect himself from them.

Not pity, then.

It was affection, the start of something bigger.

And that scared me almost as much as the thought of never leaving Likair.

If—and this was a big if—I fully fell for him, could I accept living here with him?

Fred nuzzled my leg, and I picked him up, holding him close. I stroked him, and he purred. He was a sweet little guy, perfect actually.

“Would you come back to Earth with me?” I asked him softly. I didn’t want Knave to hear, because even if we found a way to send me home, he couldn’t come with me. They’d capture him and experiment on him. I’d never see him again.

Hell, they’d probably do the same thing to Fred.

I couldn’t take him with me, either.

It was silly to even consider this as an option. Knave said there was no way off this planet.

“You are awake,” he said from the doorway.

“Yes.” I put Fred down and got up, bustling over to the sink. “If you’ll light the crystal, I’ll cook. I’ve got a fun surprise planned for breakfast.”

He ignited the crystal or whatever he did to heat it up, and I sauteed the circular slices of veggies.

“Have a seat,” I said. “This one is on me. I’d offer coffee, but . . .”

“We do not have coffee,” he said.

“Sure we do.” I poured water from the jug into two cups and placed them on the table. “Your coffee is ready. Do you take cream or sugar?”

What had started as a slightly mocking game—not mocking him but finding a way to mock the situation—was actually becoming funny. I couldn’t stop smiling.

And I well knew part of the reason a grin had permanently set up residence on my face was because Knave watched me with soft eyes that I caught occasionally smoldering.

I got the feeling he liked looking at my ass.

I simmered the sweeter fruit until it condensed into a thicker liquid, fishing out the clumps that didn’t break down. Then I drizzled the “sauce” over the thick slices of vegetable, realizing I hadn’t seasoned them but hoping it tasted okay.

After bringing our meals to the table, I sat across from him.

“I hope you like it,” I said.

“I will.” He gazed down solemnly at my offering. “An interesting way of preparing soogam.”

“Is that what the sweeter one is called?”

“I usually eat it raw.”

“It’s okay to cook it, isn’t it?” For all I knew, heating it brought out a toxin. I’d heard of things like that back on Earth. There was a plant you needed to cook, or it could kill you. And I’d read about fish that had to be prepared in a special way or you’d die within minutes.

Russian roulette fish.

Or in this case, soogam.

“Yes, it can be cooked and eaten in that manner,” Knave said.

We had no eating implements. Or I didn’t. Knave seemed to have the equivalent to Swiss Army knives on his mechanical fingers.

They’d felt good inside me, though, whichever “tool” he’d used to give me pleasure.

I picked up a slice and bit into it. The tart-sweet soogam exploded on my tongue and it was just the right amount of sweetness to contrast with the doughy slice of vegetable.

“This is good,” Knave said, speaking around his bite. “Truly amazing.”

“Call this Likair glazed donuts,” I said, finishing off my slice and lifting another.

He ate his other slices quickly and glanced toward the sink. “Are there more?”

“Always,” I said, so happy I could do something helpful for Knave.

Maybe we could find a balance together after all.



CHAPTER 16

KNAVE

“Where are we going?” Sage asked as I led her to the living area.

“Remember? An adventure.”

“Ah, yeah.” She nibbled on her lower lip and glanced around. “I’m worried about leaving the apartment. I feel safe here, though I know that’s a relative term. Will we need to travel where the penrots hunt?”

They hunted everywhere, but I liked that she was finding a bit of security in my apart-mint.

“I want to show you something,” I said. Something that would show her there could be good among the bad. So much of this world terrified me, but I’d found balance. Not enough that I would stay if given a choice to leave, but enough that I could live in relative peace. “We will have to travel on the street, but not for long. I promise I will keep you safe.”

“Okay,” she said, giving me a pert nod. “I don’t mind going out, per se. As long as we’re not in too much danger.”

We were always in danger, even here in my home, but I’d learned if I remained inside all the time, I might be safer, but my mind churned. That wasn’t living; it was merely existing.

“I assume we should leave Fred here?” she said.

“It would be safest.”

After she put him down—and delivered numerous kisses his way—I led her to the span of windows facing the building next to ours and lifted the window.

“We’re climbing down the outside?” Sage asked, the furry lines above her eyes lifted. She didn’t sound panicked about the thought of clinging to

me while I climbed, which was nice. I wasn't sure how I'd feel if I had to put full control of my descent in another person.

"No, we are about to have fun." I hoped she'd consider it fun. I sure did. I climbed onto the windowsill and dangled my legs outside.

"We're jumping?" She grinned, teasing. "You've got a parachute somewhere on your back, and we'll float to the ground?"

"We will not." I patted my lap. "You need to cling to me like you've done when I climbed."

"I'm confused but game," she said, coming closer. She peered out the window and frowned. "There's a tiny wire connecting this building to the one on the other side of the street." Leaning out, she sucked in a quick breath. "And there's a window over there where the wire ends. Please don't tell me we're going ziplining."

"I do not know about this zip . . ."

"I should scream and run into my room and hide, but you know what?"

"What?" I asked.

"You offered me a fun adventure, and I'm taking you up on it." She climbed onto my lap, wrapping her legs around me. Her hands clung to my lower arms while I wrapped them around her. She peered over her shoulder. "No harness, but where's the pulley thing?"

"Pulley . . . Ah." I held up my upper hands and deployed the device I used to coast along the wire. "Will this do?"

"You've done this before, right?"

"I have."

"And how do we get back?"

I pointed to the wire strung to my left. "The one we'll ride now is slanted downward toward the building across from us and the other one does the opposite, returning us to my apart-mint."

"Awesome." She smiled up at me. "I'm ready when you are." Leaning around me, she shook her finger. "Stay here, Fred. *Stay.*"

Would the creature understand? I doubted it, but I also doubted it would dare cross the wire to follow. To ensure this, I stepped out onto the narrow ledge and closed the window.

Fred jumped up onto the sill and scratched at the pane, whimpering.

"Aw," Sage said. "I feel bad leaving him." Her voice rose. "We'll be back soon, little guy. Take a nap. Eat the rest of the donuts."

I'd enjoyed her doo-nuts this morning and hoped she made them again. I'd never thought of using some for condiments. I usually just sliced, cooked, and ate them.

"Fred will be fine," I said. "We will bring him something to help him feel better when we return."

"No," she said in awe. "We're going shopping?"

"What would you shop for?"

She pinched her lovely dress, holding it away from her body. "This is not going to work for much longer. For one, it's bright red and thus, a penrot target. Two, it's getting dirty. Three, I'm getting stinky beneath it."

"We can gather you new clothing." I'd add that to our adventure.

"All right, then. Let's do it."

I secured my mechanical hands to the wire with a wheeled device on the top and leaped off the building.



CHAPTER 17

We had to be hundreds of feet above the ground, and we were flying along a tiny wire. Only Knave and his magical fingers kept us from falling.

This was the most exhilarating experience of my life.

The wind sucked at my hair, and it cooled my overheated skin. I wanted to shriek out my joy, but the last thing I needed to do was draw attention. The penrots appeared to be wily creatures. No need to tip them off to our presence.

Knave landed on a narrow ledge below the window on the building opposite to ours and urged me to enter the open window. As I hitched my leg over the sill, he peered down at the street, grunting, but a glance showed me no penrots lurked about.

I found myself inside another apartment, this one a complete mess. Furniture lay askew, and shredded pillows and clothing had been scattered on the floor. Gouges and deep scratches riddled the walls.

“What happened here?” I whispered.

“Penrots.” He took my hand and led me to the door that was barred like his. “When we leave this apart-mint, we will need to remain quiet until we reach our destination.”

I nodded, not willing to say a peep now.

He moved the bars out of the way and cracked the door, listening. After a pause, he opened it wide, and we left the apartment, hurrying down a cleared hallway with closed doors on either side.

We took the stairwell to the bottom floor, and I marveled how alike Likair was to Earth. Buildings with stairs, kitchens, and apartments.

Yet other parts were completely different, including the technology. What happened to bring this world to an end?

My thighs burned by the time we reached the bottom, but so far, we hadn't seen or heard a single penrot. Perhaps we'd complete our adventure without running into any of them.

I was dreaming, but why not wish for the best?

With his hand on the knob, Knave placed a finger over his lips. I nodded, and he cracked the door, listening.

He widened the door, and we strode out into a lobby covered with broken glass, lumps I didn't want to examine, and more broken furniture. About half the glass panes across the front of the building had been shattered.

We stopped in the open doorway leading out onto the street.

My heart skipped a few beats. I'd been lulled by the relative safety of his apartment. I wasn't sure I wanted to go outside and draw the penrot's attention. It might be best to stay in the apartment and skip this adventure.

When I hesitated to follow him outside, he came back in and leaned close to my ear. "Are you all right?"

"Just nervous about the penrots." He could run faster than me. Fight better too. I was useless baggage.

"I understand. If it helps, we won't be out on the street long."

"We'll run."

"As fast as we can."

"And you'll hoist me over your shoulder if needed," I said.

A smile flashed briefly on his face. "I will."

"Then I'm ready." I held out my hand, and he took it. The convenience of four arms meant he could hold some of the weapons he kept on his person at all times—outside of bed. Three hands hefted blades of varying lengths. The fourth kept me tucked into his side. The savvy thing for me to do would be to step away from him. Then he could wield four weapons. But I needed his closeness.

I also liked it.

Hurrying along the gutted street, we avoided big holes in the pavement and downed vehicles. We turned right, rushing down the road littered with refuse as if whoever lived here before left in a hurry, leaving half their possessions behind.

Was there written history here that might tell us what happened? Maybe. I wouldn't be able to read it, but Knave might.

Four blocks down, Knave ducked into a multi-story building's entrance, tugging me behind him. He urged me to hide at his back while he peered through the sliver of glass in the door, studying the street.

His breathing slowed, and he turned to lean against the door, grinning. "We are here. Would you like to begin our adventure?"

I tilted my head, unsure what he meant, then turned to check out the location.

"A lobby," I said.

"Into a wondrous lobby," he said, snagging my hand as he passed me. "Because it leads to a wondrous place."

If he was excited, the least I could do was pretend to feel the same. But my spine crawled as if penrots loomed on the street, ready to beat down the doors and grab us.

My tension eased when we passed through a steel door and Knave barred it behind us.

"What is this place?" I asked. Darkness encased everything, and I couldn't see much farther than him standing in front of me.

"I will show you." He returned his blades to their sheaths except one, then took my hand, leading me down a long hall with no doors. "You may have noticed I collect things."

I hadn't. "Like what, weapons?"

His laugh snorted out. "I need to make more."

"You do?"

"There are never enough weapons."

He was probably right.

"Is this an armory? Are we here to pick out and take home a tank?" Actually, a tank could come in handy. At least we could roll through the streets with the hatch closed and savor relative safety.

Until we ran out of fuel.

"This is even better," he said.

At the end of the hall, he removed the bars from a door and opened it, urging me to enter ahead of him.

I found myself in what looked like an art gallery, with paintings of landscapes hanging on the walls. Waist-high podiums spotted the room as if waiting for someone to set down a glass of wine or a tiny plate of canapes.

The vaulted ceiling had been painted with creatures unlike any I'd seen before. Deep blue in color, they vaguely resembled slugs only with six stubby legs. Double heads erupted from the non-pointy end, and each head had only one eye. Three antennae jutted up from each head.

"Who are they?" I asked, waving to the petite beings lounging while drinking and partying. I assumed they were partying, based on their wide, fanged smiles and the glasses of purple liquid they lifted and seemed to be clinking together. Lush vegetation surrounded them, and flowers dotted the light blue meadow they lay on.

"I do not know," Knave said. "I suspect they are the original Likairians."

"The penrots got them."

"Or they fled."

"Or they morphed into the penrots." Though the penrots were much taller.

Squinting, I studied their lower bodies but none of their appendages looked more like legs than the others. While I was confident that they could scurry along the ground, I wasn't sure they were capable of walking upright.

"Maybe they're creatures from someone's imagination," I said.

"Maybe." He strode over to one of the paintings depicting the sun setting across the city. Transport vehicles flew through the air, and trash didn't litter the streets. "What do you think of this?"

"It's nice to see what this place must've looked like before things changed."

"Shall we take it?"

I lifted my eyebrows. "You mean like steal it?"

"Who would we steal it from? It will hang here until it rots."

"I suppose." Leaving it, I strolled to another painting, this one of a blue slug-like person similar to those on the ceiling. This one sat at a desk inside an office with a wall of glass looking out at the city. "These beings did live here at one time."

"I believe so too," Knave said, coming over to join me in front of the painting. "What about this one, then? Do you want it?"

"Not really, even if it isn't stealing." I wasn't sure where he was going with all this, but I'd play along.

“Perhaps a painting isn’t what you’re looking for. I understand.” Taking my hand, he led me to a door on the other side of the room. We stepped out into a big open area full of statues. Some were of coots, others of the slug creatures, while the rest were various kinds of alien beings.

We walked around them, admiring the artwork.

“Is this a museum?” I asked.

“My translator doesn’t know the term.”

“On Earth we have places where historical things are kept, anything from artwork to . . . I guess, armory. People pay an admission fee to stroll through the museum and admire things from the past. It’s also a chance to see priceless artwork that would otherwise be locked inside homes of the wealthy.”

“Yes,” he said. “This is a museum. Or a place like a museum where things were for sale.”

“An art gallery,” I said.

“Yes, that sounds correct.”

It finally hit me. “You collected the things in your apartment.”

“I did.” A hesitant smile flashed on his face. “I enjoy looking at them. Touching them.”

“And you come here and select new artwork to bring to your apartment.”

“I do.” His shoulders hunched a bit. “It is stealing, but I believe those who lived here before would forgive me. If I don’t admire this art, who will?”

Certainly not the penrots.

He strolled over to a statue of a coot sitting on the top of a podium. The coot was caught mid-pounce and was about the size of Fred.

I joined Knave, looking at the statue from all angles. “Beautiful. They captured the mischief on the coot’s face so well.” Stroking the cool stone, I could almost feel the fur and the rumble of a purr within its chest.

“Would you like this statue?” Knave asked with a grin.

“Hell, would I ever, but . . .” Turning, I walked slowly around the room.

Knave followed. “What?”

“Maybe I want something different. What else do they have available for adoption?”

His grin widened, and he took my hand and led me to another room full of textiles. They hung from the walls and ceilings in colorful splashes, and I

tipped my head back, taking them all in.

Knave was right. This was an adventure. I never thought I'd find something as appealing as this in the middle of an alien city and surrounded by creatures determined to eat me.



CHAPTER 18

KNAVE

My chest puffed as I watched Sage marvel at the artwork. I guided her through one room after another, each hosting different items.

“When I first found this place,” I said as Sage examined a series of dried plants mounted within frames. “I strolled around, gazing in wonder at each display. The jewelry amazed me. Some of the art was so glorious, it made my chest ache.”

“I can see why. It’s unusual yet familiar.” She shot me a smile over her shoulder. “This sounds funny, but I almost feel at home. I’m not scared of the penrots here. It’s like I paid admission, and I’m inside a museum on Earth.”

“Except you can possess anything you see.”

“Not the huge stone statues.”

“If you wish for one, I will bring it to the apart-mint.” I’d do anything she asked of me as long as she kept smiling. I was having a hard time reconciling my determination to keep her at arms’ length with my need to possess everything she might offer.

“Let’s look at other things.” She shot a pensive look toward the door. “How much time do we have?”

“As long as you’d like.”

“How long before the penrots smell us on the street and start looking for us?”

I didn’t want to ruin this for her, but I needed to be honest. “The odds are good they’re already waiting out on the street.”

She shuddered, wrapping her arms around her waist.

“But we’ll take a back entrance that leads to a different street. They haven’t figured out that I don’t use the same entrance and exit each time.”

“Yet,” she sighed. With a shudder, she started walking around the room again, this time with more purpose. “We don’t want to overstay our welcome.”

The phrase translated oddly, but I got the gist of what she meant.

“Tell me why you decided to take things from the museum?” she asked as she fingered an ornate tunic.

Speaking of which, I wanted to get her more clothing. She looked amazing in her red dress, but I could understand the desire to bathe and dress in something new. I could use some new things myself.

“On my third visit,” I said. “I removed a small painting of the stars from the wall and took it to my home. I hung it on the wall and tried not to feel guilty, because you’re right. These things don’t belong to me.”

“They belong to no one now.” Sadness came through in her voice. “Someday, these buildings will crumble and fall, and everything inside this museum will be crushed. Maybe ages from now, travelers will come to this planet and excavate the ruins, exclaiming over what they find. I assume they’ll take these things then, so why not you now?”

Her insight humbled me and made me feel better. “For a long time, I struggled when I took things, but now it no longer matters.”

“At least you’re enjoying them, breathing new life into them. When you hold them, the artist who made them still lives.”

I hadn’t thought of it quite like that, but I savored the thought.

“Pick something,” I said. “And you can breathe new life into it.”

She flashed me a smile. “I think I want the coot statue, and I bet you already knew.”

“I did.”

We walked back to the room housing it, and I lifted it and carefully placed it inside a cloth bag, taking care to wrap it well with bits of material I’d brought for that purpose. I’d only broken one item, banging it on the wall as I climbed, and I refused to let it happen again.

“Home, then?” she asked as I secured the bag to my waist. I still held a knife, something I did almost without thought. Despite the bars, I didn’t completely trust the penrots not to find me wherever I went.

“You said something about shopping?”

She nibbled on her lower lip, her brow knitting. “You said the penrots will know we’re here. They’ll follow. And we don’t know if there’s clothing on this planet that’ll fit me.”

“You can wear clothing like me,” I said. “Only smaller. I know of a place, and guess what?”

Her head tilted.

“Everything inside that store is also free.”



CHAPTER 19

We took one of the back exits, one Knave hadn't used in almost a year.

He was armed for a full battle with blades in each hand.

I held one of his smaller knives, and we both pretended I might actually be able to do something with it.

We scooted down an alleyway, and he peered around the corner, looking both ways. I clung to the back of his shirt, holding my breath.

He waved for me to follow, and we raced around the corner and down the street, hugging the buildings to help avoid detection.

I couldn't imagine why penrots didn't surround us. In my mind, they hunted everywhere and missed nothing.

Maybe, just maybe, we could find a way to survive in this place.

Three blocks down the road, he rushed through the broken door of a clothing store.

While he watched the street, I hurried around inside, trying to find something I might be able to wear. Everything looked like it had been made for the six-legged creatures. They hadn't been wearing clothing in the paintings, but what did I know? This could've been a new fashion trend.

In the back, I located three pairs of pants for four-legged beings about my size. If we could locate scissors and a needle and thread, I could adapt them to fit. I stuffed them into a bag, along with a few tunics with sleeve openings for multiple arms. They'd be too small for Knave, but I could make them work for me.

"Ready?" Knave asked, and I didn't miss the urgency in his voice.

Shit.

“Anything I can use to alter them?” I hissed. Once we returned to the apartment, I didn’t want to leave unless we had to.

“I have things in my apart-mint,” he whispered, his gaze scanning me and focusing on the bag. He held out a hand and took it from me, then urged me to join him at the door. “We run to the right. Don’t stop and don’t look behind us.”

My heart clenched before it bolted, pounding behind my ribs. “They found us.”

“They’ve picked up our scent. I don’t believe they know where we are.”

Yet. There was always a yet.

Our adventure had twisted from fun into a nightmare.

I nodded and hefted the knife I’d set on a table while I looked for something that might fit. “Ready.”

He opened the door, and we rushed onto the street, staying close to the buildings as we ran.

Behind us, a penrot shrieked.

Dull thuds roared after us.



CHAPTER 20

KNAVE

I hated that our adventure had turned into a run for our lives. She'd had fun. She'd been relaxed.

I'd had the chance to show her life here with me wouldn't be all about fear, that I was worthy of a place by her side.

I'd thought today could make a difference. Damn me for dreaming.

And damn the penrots for messing it up.

If I could trap them and keep them away from us, I would, but despite thinking hard about how I could do such a thing, I hadn't found a way in the years I'd lived on this planet.

All I could do was trap myself away from them.

And now, Sage.

This wasn't a real life. It was a torturous gap of time we shared that could end tomorrow.

We raced around a corner and down the road that would lead to the building next to mine.

I couldn't even keep from wearing her out. Look at her running with me, her face red and her hair flying behind her. She should be dressed in the finest gowns like the one she still wore, only clean and new. She should be pampered.

Instead, she had to carry a knife she'd one day need to use to fight for her life.

I led her down an alternate route. Each time I returned to whatever place I called home, I switched among multiple routes I'd mapped out in my mind.

We'd soon approach the entrance to a tunnel that swooped down below the street. When it returned to this level a block away, we'd only need to

run a short distance to reach the building with the wire connecting to my apart-mint. After we reached the building and hurried inside, we'd traverse the obstacle course I'd created to slow the penrots and give us a chance to escape. They always gave up before they made it even a quarter of the way through.

A pack of them rounded the corner behind us, shrieking. Their arms waved, and their claws sliced through the air. They hungered because it was getting harder for them to find food. That was why they turned on each other. When I first arrived, there were more coots around and other timid creatures I tried to save before I realized it was all I could do to save myself. The coots were savvier, and the timid creatures had been killed or fled the city.

Within days of leaving my ship, I was injured so badly by a penrot pack attack, it took weeks for me to recover.

"I know what you're thinking," she panted out as we slammed down into the tunnel. Dark and full of refuse, the cool air bathed our skin. I'd cleared a path through the middle months ago.

"What do you believe I am thinking?" I grumbled, angry about our situation and myself for keeping us locked within it.

"You're upset that our adventure is spoiled."

"It is, isn't it?"

We rushed up the slope and paused to ensure nothing waited outside the opening. When I determined it was clear, I urged her down the street and into an alley. At the end, I grabbed her and leaped, snagging a metal bar mounted on the side of the building.

She held on to me, and I used the bar and others I'd placed at regular intervals to ascend three stories.

"It's not," she said, and she actually smiled.

"Why are you not screaming or whimpering? Even now, the penrots are following us up the wall."

She shrugged. "Because I know you won't let anything happen to me."

"I won't," I groused, irritated they'd ruined the day I'd planned. I still had other things in mind to show her today.

"This place might be a nightmare at times, but beams of light shine through it, and they flicker like the purest fire."

I paused while climbing, stunned by her words.

She didn't hate it here, and perhaps, that meant she also didn't hate me by association.

The penrots drew closer, so I picked up my speed.

I entered the building on the third floor and holding her in my arms, ran across the room, leaping over the stone barrier I'd constructed. It had taken me a week to carry all the rocks up here, partly because the penrots hunted me each time I appeared outside my home. That was when I decided I needed to alternate my exits.

Shifting the bar off a door, I peered into a hall before rushing out and barring the door behind us.

I took the stairs to our right, running downward.

"Not up?" Sage asked, her hands gripping my lower arms that held her. Her bag of clothing and her coot statue bounced against my thighs as I moved.

"Up is next." Exiting the stairwell on the second floor, I ran down a hall and around the corner before entering a suite that had once held an office.

The more distance we put between the penrots and us, the more my mood lifted. Despite them disrupting our day, Sage had fun, and that was my goal. It was foolish to think any excursion would ever be free from penrots.

I led her through the office to the bathing chamber in the back and hitched open the window.

"Up now?" she asked, swiping hair off her face.

"Not yet." I climbed out and helped her onto the ledge.

"Whoa," she said, smacking her palms against the wall. "Long way down. And look! Some of our penrot friends are waving to us."

My laugh snorted out. I should be stern and concerned, solely focused on our escape, but I realized something I hadn't expected to gain from the day.

I was also having fun.



CHAPTER 21

The next day, I showed Knave how to play tic-tac-toe. And damn, but he caught on fast and started winning almost every round.

I know. It was a simple game. I shouldn't lose this often, but he was too cute when he cheered his win.

He was highly distracting.

By my fourth day here, we'd moved onto backgammon. I'd drawn a board on a table, and we used jewels for pieces. Among his collection, I'd found two six-sided stones, and he'd carved numbers into the sides while I gulped about the destruction of precious property.

"It belongs to us," he'd said, waving his mechanical hands to span the entire planet. "If we don't use them, who will?"

I appreciated how he could turn something tragic into a few precious moments of joy.

"I still can't believe we're using priceless objects for board pieces," I said, moving on my turn. Fred lay beside me on the chair that had molded to accommodate his tiny form as well. I'd gotten used to the oozing chairs, looking at them like beanbags, only better.

Knave looked up at me and flashed a smile that made my knees turn to mush.

We'd drawn closer over the past few days, and the more time I spent with him, the more I was falling in love with him. I had no choice but to stay here—there was no way home to Earth that I could discern—but maybe that wouldn't be so bad, because I could stay here with Knave. The thought of leaving him gutted me.

While I'd loosened and started to feel relaxed over the past few days, so had he. Sure, I caught him watching me every now and then, and when I

peeked through my lashes, I swore he looked at me with longing. But he hadn't made any move to kiss me or take things further.

I was beginning to think I'd dreamed of the night he'd joined me in bed and given me so much pleasure.

Maybe he didn't want to take things further. I understood that. We were two different species. He was strong and could survive here. I was a burden, though I didn't feel too down about that. I was me, and I couldn't change who I was. I'd do my best to get stronger, but I'd never be able to leap over walls or scale the sides of buildings with only my fingers and toes.

With a smile, he soundly beat me again at backgammon.

"Grr." I slumped back on the chair, but I really wasn't mad about the loss. It was my fault for being distracted, for thinking about all the places I'd like to touch and lick Knave.

I was falling in love with him, and there didn't seem to be anything I could do about it.

I worried he didn't want me the same way, that he'd had his fill the other night, and it was over. We'd remain friends but without benefits.

We'd never be true lovers.

It crushed me, but you couldn't force a person to love you back.

Could I stay with him knowing I'd never be with him fully? I wasn't sure, and I was grateful I didn't have to make that decision yet.

"I have another excursion planned for tomorrow," he said, rising to put the game pieces away.

"Another museum?" I said, yawning. We'd already had dinner, and it was dark out. But then, it was dark on Likair a lot of the time, and we played games by crystal light. With no electricity in the building, and no desire to draw the penrot's attention, we moved about the apartment after dark with only the light of a few crystals.

"Not another museum. Something different," he said, starting down the hall.

If this was like the last few nights, he'd wave and enter his room, closing the door behind him. I'd use the bathroom, then lie in my bed trying not to let my sexual frustration overwhelm me.

It wasn't his fault I was horny for him. And my horniness wasn't because he was the only guy around. Knave had wormed his way into my heart by showing me his bravery, stoicism, and loneliness. I wanted to

cherish him for as many days as I had. Sure, it would be great to find a way back to Earth, but this was my home now.

“Where are we going?” I called out to his back, feeling lonely already. Fred purred and leaned against my leg, so I picked him up and snuggled him.

“At least you want to sleep with me,” I whispered, my eyes stinging for no good reason.

It was hard longing for someone who’d never return my feelings.

“What did you say?” he asked, standing in his doorway. One of his mechanical arms braced on the frame, but he didn’t turn.

In for a penny, in for a pound, right?

“I said at least Fred wants to sleep with me.”

He jolted as if lightning shot through him.

Then he walked into his room and shut his door.

“Well,” I said to Fred. “That went well. I’ve offended him, but I’ll find a way to make things better tomorrow.”

Turning, I trudged into the bathroom.



CHAPTER 22

KNAVE

I hadn't heard her right. I was mistaken.

She had not implied she wanted me to join her in her bed.

Turning, I braced my palms against the door, pressing my forehead into the flat surface. My breathing had gone ragged, and my two hearts floundered.

Was she suggesting she didn't want to leave me now?

No. She'd made it clear she was determined to return to Earth. This was why I'd vowed to back away and give her the chance to decide if she wished to remain here with me.

She didn't know there may be a way to send her back to Earth. I was a dishonest fool who'd wanted to give her time to love me. I should realize no one ever would.

Look at my scarred form. I was part machine. No one could treasure a body like mine.

Meanwhile, I'd fallen so hard and fast for her, there would be no turning back. It would wrench my insides from me if she left.

I couldn't hold her here against her will, not if there was a chance that she could return to the life she loved.

"What if she cares for me truly?" I said softly. Turning, I crossed the room and dropped onto the bed on my back.

My cock ached. It always ached. It wouldn't stop until I was with her. But it was more than that. I longed for her touch. I shouldn't seek the validation of my flesh, but I couldn't seem to help it. I wanted to hold her all night, to be there if she had nightmares. To love her each dawn, drawing out her pleasure until it fused us together.

I'd been determined to wait, to see if I could convince her she wanted to be with me even if she had a way home.

Was it wrong to withhold the information about the escape pod from her?

Probably. I swiped my face with my palms.

Rising, I paced, still unsure what to do.

It would be wrong not to tell her about the craft, but I wasn't completely sure it would function. I'd found it during one of my forays from the city not long after I left my ship and seen right away it would not work for me, because it was too small.

It had powered up, but I wasn't sure it had enough fuel to take her where she needed to go. I wasn't even sure where Earth was. There was no way to send her to the galaxy she'd mentioned. Even if I had coordinates for the computer, she could end up lost, floating in space until she died.

It would be wrong not to tell her about the pod, however.

I'd do it tomorrow. Things were always best in daylight and after a solid night's sleep.

Laying down again, I tried to get some rest, but it was a long night.

I drifted off sometime before morning . . .

. . . and woke to the subtle sound of Sage moving around within the apart-mint.

Getting up, I hurried to the bathing chamber and washed my body. I was grateful I'd found this apart-mint as it still had limited power generated by cells deep within the basement. I'd found a way to get the water running, though I hadn't been able to make appliances in the kitchen function or generate enough for lighting. Those components might be too old to run any longer.

We'd settled into a pattern with our cooking. She made breakfast. I made lunch. And we prepared dinner together after taking care of the plants that fed us.

It wasn't a horrible life other than the relentless penrots.

How long before I had to move to my next location? I'd hate to leave this one, since it was the first that I'd found with food within the building.

I'd started setting up a new apart-mint, however, on the other side of the city. When the time came, I'd be ready.

I padded into the kitchen and admired her movements as she worked at the sink. I'd found another way to fire the crystals so she wouldn't need my

mechanical finger generator to do it for her.

“Something smells wonderful,” I said.

The light floral scent was pure her. I’d noted it the moment I met her. She’d altered the clothing we located, and the pants hugged her ass. I wanted to stride forward and strip off her clothing. Cup her delectable ass. Lift her onto the counter and bend down between her thighs. I’d lick and suck on her until she screamed, then do it all over again.

After that, I’d bend her over the table and—

She waved her hand in front of my face. “Knave? You in there?”

“I am in here.”

Her chuckle rang out. “Talk about being distracted.” She stroked my arm, and I tried to read something into the gesture, but it probably only meant friendship. “Did you sleep okay? You look tired.”

How could my scarred face look like anything but a nightmare?

Sucking in a deep breath, I released it with a sigh. “I slept adequately. I am not tired.”

Her smile fell, and she searched my face, though I had no idea what she hoped to find. “Maybe you’re just hungry. I experimented again.” Her hand swept toward the table. I’d been so lost in my daydream about licking and fucking her, I’d missed her serving and bringing the plates to the table. “Today, we’re having cheese danish.” She bustled to the table and took a seat.

I slumped in the one opposite her and studied the meal. It looked amazing, but how could I be hungry when my hearts hurt this much? I felt like I was about to lose her.

Probably because I was.

“I know we don’t have cheese, but I think the carapop tastes a bit like it, and it has a similar texture.”

Another plant.

“It even melts when it’s heated,” she continued. “I combined it with a bit of soogam to add sweetness, then drizzled it on the wisteeer roots that have a similar flavor to bread.” She lifted her eating implement. “Dig in. Let me know what you think?”

I ate, and I could tell by the tiny lines on her forehead and her solemn expression that my silence was upsetting her.

The last thing I wanted was to do something like that. How could I convince her to care for me—to wish to remain here with me—if I spent all

my time driving her away?

I needed to tell her about the pod but . . .

One more day. I'd show her more wonders of this world, and *then* I would tell her.

And I'd hope she'd tell me she wanted to stay.



CHAPTER 23

After cleaning up from the meal, we left the building and hurried along the road, clinging to the tall structures on our right.

He hadn't told me where we were going; he only stated it was fun and an adventure. I'd enjoyed visiting the museum and seeing the wonders of this world. At one time, this place must've been amazing. I didn't know why it had changed, but if I'd come here back when the original aliens lived in this city, I'd enjoy my stay.

Stay . . .

I'd spent half the night thinking. At first, I convinced myself Knave only wanted friendship. But I caught him watching me all the time, and I read lust in his eyes, not only the warmth you'd extend to a friend.

He wanted me, all right, I just didn't know why he didn't make any move to take me.

Because I was eager and willing to be taken.

Over the past few days, I'd fallen in love with him. How could I not? He was sexy as all get out, and he was sweet, kind, and thoughtful.

I loved how he treasured the art he'd found. I wished he'd treasure me in the same way.

As for leaving here, that wasn't an option, so I'd set the idea aside. If the chance came, well, then I'd decide what I'd do then.

But I didn't want to leave Knave, and that was beginning to outweigh any desire to return to my less-than-exciting life back on Earth.

A love like I felt for Knave might only come once in a lifetime. I'd be foolish to throw it away.

We approached a building the size of a sports arena, and he led me around to the back. So far, we hadn't seen any penrots, but I wouldn't put it

past them to be hiding, waiting to ambush us as we passed. They weren't highly clever, but they also weren't stupid. Otherwise, they wouldn't have driven Knave from three prior homes. Sure, he'd gotten savvier at hiding, but they'd found him, and I had a feeling it wasn't solely due to his scent.

At the back of the arena, he urged me close and lifted me into his lower arms. A leap, and he grabbed a spike jutting from the building about fifteen feet up.

I'd never be able to do anything like this, and I was coming to accept it. Remaining here meant relying on Knave.

I just hoped he didn't push me away.

Worse, I hoped he didn't keep me with him out of pity. He knew I'd be dead within twenty-four hours if I tried to make it on my own.

He climbed up to the third story of the building, where he poked his head into a narrow passage that must've been an air vent at one time. The cover had gone missing.

"Safe," he said softly, helping me climb into the opening. Joining me, he urged me to crawl forward. I couldn't see well, though enough to keep moving through the small metal tunnel.

When we reached the end and a grate covering, Knave eased around me. He peered around the slats, then grunted.

"Safe again," he said. He flashed me a grin that made my heart flop around in my chest.

The heady feeling was followed by longing that only grew as he stared at me. We were so close; I could lean forward and kiss him. Would he reject me? We'd been kind and caring with each other over the past days, but nothing that came close to loving.

I rose up onto my knees, bringing my face closer to his. Only a few inches separated us.

My mouth went dry. This was it. I'd make a move, and then I'd find out what he truly thought.

Leaning closer, I focused on his mouth. I wanted, no needed, to taste it.

He backed away, his eyes flicking everywhere except to me.

"Sage," he said, his voice deep and gravelly. "I—"

I placed my finger over his lips, unwilling to hear him tell me he wasn't interested in anything I had to offer.

"I get it," I said, my heart a bleeding, pulpy mass in my chest. "We're friends, and I'll figure out how to . . ." I shook my head. I had to stop

talking or I was going to cry.

Nothing sucked more than loving someone who didn't return my feelings.

"Figure out how to what?" he asked, watching me like whatever I might say could change his world. I truly had to be misreading him.

If I told him this was nothing, I might never know what he thought of me.

Too often, it was easier to brush something emotional aside. I'd shoved my hurt about my dad's death into a corner of my mind and locked it down with tears. When my mom tried to bring it up a few years ago, I brushed the conversation aside. I didn't want to open the wound back up and let it bleed.

Was I holding back from speaking because I'd find it easier to shove my hurt about Knave into the same corner?

I had a feeling there weren't enough tears to seal this wound closed. It would gape forever. I'd hurt forever.

So speak, already.

I looked him in the eye. "I like you . . ." After swallowing past the lump of pain in my throat, I raised my voice. "Actually, I more than like you. I'm falling in love with you Knave, but I don't want to push. The last thing I want is a pity relationship where you feel you have no choice but to—"

He grabbed my arms and hauled me against him. Not hard, but with need.

Then his mouth captured mine.



CHAPTER 24

KNAVE

She was falling in love with me. The words consumed me.
She was everything, and I had to show her.

I kissed her, drawing moans from her throat. Her feverish hands stroked my arms and neck, and she pressed herself against me.

This was the wrong place and time, but I couldn't do anything less than kiss her.

I was in a fever for her. I had to have it all, but here?

I lifted my head. "I am not fucking you inside a narrow tunnel."

Her laugh snorted out, and she pouted. "What if I want you to fuck me inside this narrow tunnel?"

I barked out a laugh and held her, resting my chin on the top of her head. "I want you so much. I . . . I'm falling in love with you too."

"Knave," she breathed, looking up at me. "You . . . I thought you only wanted friendship from me. You haven't shown me you want more."

And this was why I should've spoken. I'd let my worry about rejection become a wedge between us.

"I am sorry," I said. "I didn't wish to press you. You don't want to remain on Likair—"

"Who does? Even you can't say you love it here."

"I love wherever you are."

Her face softened, and tears shimmered in her eyes. "Knave. You're going to break me."

"My only wish is to make you happy."

"Well, I think fucking would make me happy," she said with a smirk.

She was so cute, I had to kiss her again.

Soon, she lay beneath me. *Writhed* beneath me. This might not be a good place to fuck her, but I wouldn't leave her aroused without ensuring she had full pleasure.

I helped her ease her pants down then scooted backward in the tunnel. Her legs parted, and I licked her.

"Yes," she sighed, her head shifting on the smooth metal.

My lucken were eager to taste her again. I was eager to taste her again. While stroking her clit with a lucken, I delved into her with my tongue, gliding across her inner walls. She pumped her hips up toward me. My mate would drive me out of my mind when I sunk my cock deep within her.

She latched onto two lucken, holding tight, gyrating and shifting while I continued to suck her. Her flavor exploded on my tongue, and I needed more. She was a feast I'd never tire of; a banquet made just for me.

I didn't know how she'd entered my life, but I would fight to the last penrot to make sure she wasn't taken from me.

I slid two lucken inside her, joining my tongue, and pumped them in separate motions so that there was always something stroking her inner walls. Another lucken continued to rub her clit, a hard bud I wanted to feast on next.

Leaving three lucken to her passage, I sucked her clit inside my mouth, running my tongue across it while she moaned and panted.

Her body tightened, and I wanted to taste her pleasure, because she found it with me.

A sharp cry escaped her mouth, and she convulsed around me.

I continued to suck her clit while it quivered, my lucken pumping faster.

I didn't stop until her pleasure built again and she collapsed, hoarsely crying my name.



CHAPTER 25

My legs had turned to rubber. Actually, all of me had turned to a mass of rubbery goo, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

"You're sure you don't want to fuck me inside the tunnel?" I said, only half-teasing, as he urged me out onto a twelve-inch ledge beneath the vent opening.

He replaced the screen and shot me a grin. "I want to fuck you everywhere. This morning? I dreamed of sucking on you until you came, then bending you over the dining area table."

"Hmm," I said with a smirk. "Maybe you should cook breakfast tomorrow."

Something had changed between us. The tension that had been building the past few days was gone, but it was more than that.

A wall he'd started to erect between us had fallen.

I wasn't sure why he'd been working so hard to build it, but now I felt confident he'd tell me when he was ready. He'd lived here alone for a long time. I was sure my presence had caused some disruption. Maybe he'd needed time to settle into the idea of having someone else around.

"Where are we going?" I asked as he led me along the ledge.

"Down once I've determined no penrots linger. I've never found them inside this building, but it would be wrong to assume they won't find their way in today."

My skin quivered, and I peered around, only finding a long corridor below us and a high wall opposite this one. It curved around what I was calling the arena based on the outside appearance, but I had no idea what I'd find inside.

I didn't hear anything, though the penrot's distinctive shuffle and shriek would echo in my ears forever.

"And what are we going to do here?" I asked.

"This is another adventure."

"Look, life on Likair is an adventure already. You don't need to find ways to make it better."

His penetrating gaze met mine, and I realized he had no pupils, just circles of gleaming color. "Yes, I do need to find ways to make this better. Then you won't want to leave me." The ledge ended at a two-story door, and he leaped down to the floor tiles, lifting his arms toward me. "Jump. I will catch you."

Without hesitation, I plunged off the ledge, and his arms wrapped around me. He lowered me to my feet.

"I haven't said I want to leave you," I said.

"You wish to return to Earth, and I don't blame you. There's nothing here for you on Likair."

I grabbed his arm as he started to walk down the hall. "That's not true, and you know it. There's you, Knave. You. You're the reason I want to stay on Likair."

He turned and cupped my face, his heavy emotions transmitting through his arms holding me close and his mouth on mine. His tongue—that glorious tongue that had just brought me pleasure not only once but twice—teased across mine.

When he lifted his head, he smiled. "You distract me from showing you another amazing part of Likair."

I wasn't letting this go. He seemed to think there was nothing holding me here, not even him, and that was so untrue.

Would I choose to stay here if I was alone and had a chance of escape? Absolutely. But escape wasn't an option.

I let him lead me down the hall. At the end, he removed bars from the door and peered beyond. I couldn't see, but whatever he did seemed to satisfy him.

He swept open the door and squeezed my hand. "Your next adventure awaits, mate." As if he realized what he'd said, his smile faltered.

"Mate," I said, sashaying past him. "I like that. If it's okay, I'll call you mate too." Whoa. I came to a startled stop inside. "It's . . ." I stepped

forward, still unable to believe what had been locked in the middle of this big building. “A carnival?”

He tapped the side of his head, frowning. “I do not know that term. This is a place where I believe those who lived here before brought their young for entertainment.” His frown deepened. “I believe this is entertaining.”

I kept swiveling my head to take it all in. I worried it would corkscrew completely around. Nothing I saw resembled a carnival back on Earth. It was completely alien.

But equally fascinating.

“Is it safe here?” I asked, as eager as a kid to run around and check everything out. But I didn’t want to slam into a pack of penrots while gaping at the . . . Okay, it wasn’t exactly a Ferris wheel, but it was close. Surely, I could stand inside one of the buckets if we could get the device to run.

“Wait here,” Knave said.

I backed against the door while he jogged around the room and wove his way back through it to me.

“My doors remain barred,” he said. “I see no sign the penrots have gotten inside.”

“Will they hear us?” A silly question since we’d barely made a sound above a whisper when we’d left the apartment.

However, it would be foolish to trust we were safe except behind steel doors.

He shrugged. “I don’t think so, and if they did, I haven’t seen them drawn to music.”

I frowned, looking around. “Music?”

He strode over to the wall and lifted a foot-long bar. A click was followed by a low hum, and the alien carnival came to life.



CHAPTER 26

KNAVE

I'd wanted to impress Sage, to show her there was wonder to be found even in this nightmarish world.

It appeared I'd succeeded.

Her fingers stroked her lips as she stared around. "This is amazing." She started forward toward one of the amusements but turned back and grabbed my hand. "You're riding, too, right?"

"I, um, planned to watch."

She pouted. "Watch?" Her hand swept out. "With all this fun to be had?"

"I don't believe I'm young any longer."

Striding right up to me, she grinned. "And that's where you're wrong. You're always young inside here." She tapped my chest. "If you feel old, it's because you've let life get you down instead of savoring each moment."

"How did you get so wise?" I asked, sometimes stunned by the things she says.

"I was born this way." She tugged me toward a vehicle-like device that was obviously made for someone smaller than me. "How about this one first?"

"First?" I tried to back away, but she held tight. Realistically, she couldn't stop me from doing anything with her tiny body. If I wanted to hang out by the wall, I would.

Still . . .

She was smiling. Happiness glowed on her skin.

This was something I could give her when I had so little to offer.

When she got close to the tiny pretend transport craft revolving device, it came to a stop.

She shot me a grin then climbed into one of the open-top cars. “You take the one behind me.”

I grumbled but did as she asked, perching on it with my feet inside, my hands braced on the front, and my ass pointing into the air. Frankly, I wanted to be in front of her so I could turn around and watch her.

The device started moving, lifting up, then plunging down as if the transport vehicles were flying. It kept going, around and around, and I had to wonder why anyone found this entertaining.

Sage kept laughing. It warmed me to hear that sound.

Finally, she started to rise. The device immediately slowed and came to a stop, dropping down to the ground.

Sage climbed out and peered around while I joined her.

“What next?” she asked, her voice high-pitched and utterly thrilled. She spontaneously leaned against me, hugging me. “Thank you for this. I never dreamed a place like this existed on Likair.”

Before I could reply, she took my hand and tugged me toward another device.

“It looks a bit like a merry-go-round,” she said. “I always wanted to ride on one, but my mom got carsick too easily, and she forbid it. I languished on the paddleboat rides and the train, watching the other kids squeal and have fun with the rest.”

While I didn’t understand much of what she said, one thing was clear. Sage was enjoying herself.

There was hope for us yet.



CHAPTER 27

This place was so much fun. Who would've thought I'd go to an amusement park on an alien world? No lines. Ride as much as I wanted. This must be what it was like when Michael Jackson rented Disney for a day for friends and family.

To think Knave brought me here when it was clear he didn't enjoy going on the rides. It made me feel squishy inside.

I wanted him. The heat he'd generated inside the air duct had simmered below the surface, and if we didn't do something about it soon, I was going to boil over.

Every time he touched me, my skin tingled and his eyes darkened.

We climbed into what I believed would be my last ride of the day, the alien Ferris wheel. We'd been here for hours—spans of hands in his world that was now mine—and I'd started feeling like we were on borrowed time.

I wanted to stay here on Likair with Knave, but would our lives be spent running from penrots until something happened and we didn't get away? It wasn't a good way to live.

But I didn't want to think of that now. I wanted to enjoy this moment. He was falling for me, and I felt the same about him. This was something to be savored.

As the wheel started cranking us slowly up toward the top of the arena, I climbed into his lap, facing him with my arms and legs around him.

His eyes gleamed, and he shyly flashed his fangs my way. I assumed he'd had sex before crashing on this planet, but it had been years. I hadn't slept with anyone in at least a year myself.

This was going to feel brand new in so many ways.

Rising onto my knees, I kissed him. His arms pulled me closer, and he groaned.

I lost all focus on anything but him. His touch, his heat, and the thump of his hearts.

In a fever, I undid his shirt and stroked his scarred flesh. I got the feeling he despised his current form, but I adored each square inch. This was Knave, and I wouldn't have him any other way.

Heat built between us, a rush centering between my legs. He'd given me so much pleasure already, but I needed everything he was willing to offer.

I lifted my head and watched his face as I traced my fingers down his taut abs. His body quivered, and he licked his lips.

Yes, I loved that tongue. Loved this guy too.

When I reached the fastener of his pants, I undid the top button.

He continued to watch me with a hooded look that told me he approved of my actions, so I undid the second button. I slowly undid his pants, and his cock sprang out from the opening, big and hard.

And partly made up of metal.

His intent gaze met mine, and from the thinning of his lips, I could tell he would accept my rejection if I voiced it. He'd been rebuilt essentially against his will, and so much of him had been damaged.

"You're perfect," I said, my voice husky. I stroked my finger down the metal ribs encircling his cock, wondering how this would feel inside me. Wonderful, I was completely sure.

When a bead of precum appeared on the fleshy, ball-like tip of his cock, I couldn't resist.

The Ferris wheel kept going, taking us higher and higher, but my mind was flying all the way to the stars already. I moved down to crouch between Knave's legs and took the end of his cock into my mouth. My tongue teased the tip, and I savored his salty-sweet flavor.

He groaned, and his fingers wove into my hair.

I took in more of him as his cock surged upward, hardening further.

The metal felt cool yet flexible, and the nubs vibrated softly.

When I pulled back and looked up at him, his head was tipped back, his lucken writhed, and his eyes had closed. He groaned again, and looked down at me with so much wonder, it made my heart ache. "Mate," he said hoarsely. "I . . ."

“I want you,” I said, climbing up over him. I yanked off my improvised pants and spread my legs wide around him. “Is that okay?”

“It is very much oh-key.”

Holding his cock, I pumped it with my hands.

The bulb on the end split and peeled back to reveal a mass of tiny luckens that wiggled. Oh, yes, they’d feel amazing inside, stroking my inner walls while he rocked against me.

“I am yours, mate. All yours.” He watched my face, but the fear of rejection I’d seen was gone. He trusted me, and that meant the world. Love was about holding out your hand while knowing the other person would always take it.

I centered his cock at my opening, and the bulb closed. I imagined that would make it easier to get it inside me. He was big—proportional to his size—and it was going to be a challenge to take him all.

Dropping, I pushed against his rigid cock, determined to get that glorious, thick bulb inside me.

I groaned when it passed my entrance. Yes.

I sunk farther until he was fully seated inside me.

I felt the bulb open and the tiny luckens caressed high within me.

Those subtle metal nubs lining the length of his cock . . . Oh, my gosh, they were going to drive me out of my mind.

“Oh-key?” he asked.

I grinned up at him. “Amazing.”

His posture loosened. “You are amazing.” His voice came out growly and pleased, and I was glad I could make that happen.

He held my hips as I lifted and dropped back down onto him, savoring everything that was Knave.

As my breathing grew ragged, he groaned and jerked his hips up to meet me, impaling me as I dropped down onto him.

The small lucken stroked my inner walls, reminding me of when the bigger ones on his head had writhed within me. The ribs and nubs made sure not one bit of me wasn’t caressed.

Moaning, I went faster, and he drove himself upward. Our flesh slapped together.

He reached under my shirt and latched onto my nipples, pinching and rolling them until I was a wild mess jerking around on top of him. With four arms, he could stroke my breasts, my clit, and still hold me.

An orgasm ripped through me, and I felt his hot seed bathe my inner walls as he joined me.

I felt the bulb on the tip of his cock close and swell, knotting us together.



CHAPTER 28

KNAVE

“Knotting?” she whispered with a smile. “Who would’ve thought?”
“It is our way,” I said, scrunching my body down so I could kiss her.

“Houston,” she said in all seriousness, though a twinkle shone in her eyes. “We have a problem.”

I lifted my head, frowning. “What is the problem?”

“I assume you’ll knot each time we do it.”

“Naturally. Don’t human males knot inside their mates to ensure fertilization?” I hadn’t thought to ask much about humans. I’d learned about them solely from my interactions with Sage.

“Nope. No knotting humans to be found.” she laughed, giddy and relaxed at the same time. “My problem is that I want you again already, and that means more knotting.”

“It does,” I growled, feeling my cock hardening. I wanted to fuck her forever, taking her over and over again until we’d worn each other out. “I believe we have time for more knotting.”

The wheel of Ferris, as Sage called it, stopped at the base where we’d mounted.

Still mounted within Sage, I stood, holding her in position. She clung to my arms and looked up at me as I stepped out of the basket.

I approached a metal box containing the mechanical parts of the wheel of Ferris, and when I reached it, I carefully pivoted Sage around until her ass faced me. Such a glorious, plump ass it was too. I wanted to stroke it, but that would come later. Right now, the bulb at the tip of my cock was opening to release my smaller lucken and ready my body to take her again.

“Time to fuck you this way, mate,” I said with hoarse need. I lowered her carefully onto the box with her legs dangling over the side, her body spread to receive me. I could feel her juices releasing within her, and my small lucken secreted their own fluid to make her even more slippery.

“Do it, Knave,” she panted, reaching out to cling to the side of the box. “Give it all to me.”

I started slowly, gliding within her, but a fever claimed me, and I could not hold myself back. Arching over her, I grazed her neck with my fangs. “Too rough?” I asked, moving faster. I felt the bulb widen, the petals moving back and forth to rub her inner walls while the small lucken spread out, some spiking, others writhing.

“No. More,” she growled.

My precious mate. She didn’t reject me. No, she loved me despite my body being broken and put back together again with metal parts and pieces.

Feelings overwhelmed me. I wanted to make this as good as I could for her. I needed to make her come many times and would hold out until she did. Once locked, I would have to wait a few ticks before pleasuring her again.

I’d never get enough of her. I knew that now.

“I’m going to bite you mate,” I ground out.

“Do it. I want it.”

“When I do, it will change you.”

She writhed beneath me. “Do it! I don’t care.”

“I will not change you without your permission.” I should’ve asked this before fucking her, but the mating ritual had overcome me. There was no stopping me now unless she refused. “Please listen.” Even as I spoke, I couldn’t resist driving my cock into her sweet, hot cunt.

“I’m listening.” She stilled, and despite the pleasure building within her, I sensed she fully heard me. This wasn’t how a male of my species would normally do this, but females understood almost from birth how the mating process went for our species.

“When I bite you, you will be mine fully. My fangs will release a serum that will make changes within your body.”

“I don’t mind. Really.” Her voice was hoarse with need.

“The changes will make your body able to accept my seed.”

“Babies. You’re talking about babies, and there’s nothing hotter than that.” Her laugh snorted out. “Other than your cyborg cock. I want it. Bite

me. Take me. Make me change so I can fully be yours.”

My mate. She amazed me.

Nuzzling along her neck, I ground my hips against her, letting my inner lucken stroke her as I bit down on the side of her neck.

She shrieked in pleasure and lifted her hips to demand more. Biting would solidify our bond, and it would not be broken until one of us passed beyond. She was mine now, as much as I was hers.

I drove my hips against her, impaling her with my cock so hard that her legs lifted. She spread them wider, urging me to fill her cunt to overflowing. I wanted to give her all, my heart, my body, my soul. I would brand her as mine so the world would never doubt our bond.

My fangs sunk deeper as I rode her harder.

She cried out. “Fuck, fuck. Yes.” Her body started spasming around my cock as the first of the mating orgasms consumed her. The serum was working through her. I’d been unsure her species could take it.

It would heal the wound quickly and remove all pain.

She moaned, and my groans deepened. My fangs secreted more matebond serum. One day, her body would be able to use my seed. It would take time for her body to change and be ready to fully accept a quickening—the way my species produced young.

I released her neck and straightened. Holding her hips, I pumped harder while her body gave into another orgasm.

“More, mate,” I cried.

“I . . . Yes . . .” She spasmed again.

I couldn’t hold back any longer. Later, I’d claim her again, and this time, I’d ensure she found pleasure more than three times before I shot my seed within her. But I couldn’t hold back. I needed it.

My cock tightened, my balls lifted and started to spasm.

As she cried out, my seed shot within her.



CHAPTER 29

We were one, and there was nothing better than that. He'd done something to me when he bit me, and I despite his determination to ensure I agreed, I had no regrets. I was his. He was mine. And we were mated. There was nothing I needed more than that.

And it didn't hurt. When I touched the area, it had sealed over already. Was quick healing and no pain after part of his species' mating process?

I had to wait by the Ferris wheel for the car we'd ridden in to come back around. After claiming my pants and dressing, we wandered around the amusement area, holding hands.

"Any more rides, mate?" he asked, and there was so much happiness in his voice, it made me want to dance around him and grin. I settled for just grinning.

"There's only one ride I need, and I plan to ride it all night long."

His eyes smoldered. "Then we should head back to our home, don't you think?"

Our home. I liked that. "Fred must be missing us."

"I'm sure he is."

"Barbecued bestar steaks tonight?"

"If you'll make smashed wisteeer to go with them," he said.

Nothing tasted like what I was used to on Earth, but I was becoming accustomed to the substitutions. They were satisfying and highly nutritious, and besides, it wasn't like we had other options. I'd found a few herbs in the gardens, some savory and others spicy, and we'd started experimenting with recipes based on those I remembered from back home.

It was going to be okay. We were going to be okay.

We left the carnival area, turning off the lights first, and strolled down the hall.

“Are we taking a different way out?” I asked.

“We’ll see if we need to.”

When we reached the wall below the air duct, I leaped into his arms. He climbed up to the tunnel and helped me crawl inside.

In no time, we reached the end.

A peek outside showed the coast was clear. I didn’t trust we wouldn’t run into penrots on the street. We’d been lucky not to encounter any on our way here.

They were becoming part of my new life, though a hinderance rather than an asset. But like someone living in a very cold climate on Earth or in a tropical area with poisonous snakes and insects, a person adjusted.

It wasn’t like we had much choice.

Back on the ground, we hurried along the street, but when we reached the end of the alley, Knave placed his finger on my arm, bringing me to a standstill. He jerked his thumb in the opposite direction to home, his eyebrows lifted, and I nodded.

Sure, I was up for a little more adventure.

He took me down a few streets then around to the back of a small building with a glass front. Like so many others, the glass had been shattered. I couldn’t tell from the darkness what might be inside, however.

At the back door, he toyed with the lock before it would open. We stepped inside, and he handed me a bag hanging from a peg on the wall.

I looked down at it. “It’s empty.” There must be more to this part of the adventure, but I couldn’t tell what it could be.

“Things are old here,” he said very quietly. We’d gotten used to speaking barely above a whisper and using hand gestures part of the time to avoid making sounds in areas where the penrots more often lingered.

“Is this another museum?” Maybe an antique shop. Nothing would surprise me.

“No, but I think you will enjoy it as much as the museum.” He urged me forward, down a narrow hall with an office on my left and what looked like a small break room on the right, complete with a table crafted for small aliens, plus a few devices like the ones I’d seen in our kitchen.

At the end of the hall, I stepped into a large room with long rows of shelves.

“A grocery store?” I asked in awe.

“It is small, and many things will no longer be edible, but I’ve only come here once, so there is still a good variety of items we might find useful.”

“When I was little, there was a TV show where people were given a shopping cart and about five minutes to collect all they could. Everything they put in the cart during that time was theirs. This feels the same.”

“You have at least five . . . minutes. That is like ticks, correct?”

“A little longer, but yes, ticks.”

“We can’t linger much longer than that.” He gestured to the broken windows across the front. “If a penrot passes, they’ll see or smell us.”

My skin quivered, and I backed against the wall. “Maybe we should just go home.”

“I will watch,” he said. “You fill your bag, mate. You have five . . . ticks.” His smile sent reassurance, and I knew he didn’t want me fretting.

He strode to the front of the store and ducked behind a wall where he could watch the street without being seen.

I hurried up and down the aisles, selecting very odd appearing things that didn’t look rotted. Spices we’d have to sample and packages of dried things that looked vaguely like apricots but could taste like just about anything. I avoided canned and jarred items, not trusting it to be safe after all these years.

When I’d filled the bag, I joined him at the front, tucking myself behind him.

“Done,” I whispered.

He nodded. Taking the bag, he knotted it at the top. He pointed to the back of the store. Before we stepped outside, he secured the bag to his back.

With knives in two of his four hands, he peered through a crack in the back door.

“Fuck,” he hissed.

I didn’t have to look to know why he was upset, but I peeked through the tiny opening.

A pack of penrots waited in the back alley.

We ran for the front entrance only to find more packs converging on the street.

They’d found us, and it looked like there was no way out.



CHAPTER 30

KNAVE

I wasn't going down or surrendering my mate without taking at least half of the penrots with me. But I'd avoid battling them as long as possible.

"Upstairs," I whispered, and we hurried to the back of the store and took the stairs I'd discovered during my first visit.

Never relax unless you're confident you have multiple exits—a lesson I'd learned within a month of leaving my ship.

While I could move almost soundlessly with my bare feet, Sage's shoes made dull thuds on the wooden treads.

In the back alley, the penrots shrieked. Within a fraction of a tick, they were slamming themselves against the door. I could hear others rushing into the store from the front, no doubt leaping through the open windows. They screamed and slammed through the aisles, and goods fell from the shelves, smashing and breaking on the floor. If I knew the penrots, some would pause to consume the exposed food while the rest came after us.

At the top of the stairs, I urged Sage down a hall to the room on the side I'd barred months ago to prevent access. It took me about six months to add bars to various steel doors throughout the city. If you weren't prepared at all times, you died.

With the front of the store open, this was my only option. During my first year here, I'd spent a lot of time finding safe locations and securing them.

Inside, I hurried across the room and opened the window.

"I'll need to carry you," I said, my voice barely audible above the shrieks erupting on the street below. How had they found us so fast?

If I didn't know better, I'd believed they hid until we were inside, and then descended. I hadn't seen them on the street, though, and I'd looked.

That would mean they knew I watched them, and they'd remained hiding, waiting to creep closer after we left the secured arena.

Chills wracked through me. I'd never assumed the penrots were stupid, but they'd also never come across as clever, either. If they were organizing a way to catch us, it meant I'd been wrong about them all along.

Or they were evolving.

I didn't have time to worry about that now. We needed to get away from them and hide. We could strategize after that.

When I lifted her, Sage wrapped her arms as far around me as she could, her legs locking on my hips. I held her with my lower arms for added security.

"I'm going outside, and then I'm going to jump," I said softly. "Hold on."

I stepped out onto the thin strip of ledge, using my long toe claws for added leverage. Turning partway, I leaped upward, spanning the alley and aiming for the building on the opposite side.

Landing hard on my knees on the sloped roof of the structure, I scrambled to my feet and raced across the angled surface of the long building. Without stopping, I jumped again toward one of the taller buildings on the other side of the street.

I missed and smacked into the wall.

As I slid, Sage grunted and clung to my shoulders, curling herself into my body to make this as easy for me as possible.

Her back must be scraping on the hard stone surface, but there wasn't anything I could do about it. In the street below, multiple packs of penrots waited, staring up at us with feral anticipation in their eyes.

My toe claws scrambled across the surface, and I grappled with spikes ejecting from my mechanical fingers, but I couldn't find purchase.

I kept sliding, grating my toe claws as I fell.

I bit back a groan when my right mechanical hand was sliced open. The computer had not only crafted my new limbs, but it had also incorporated my vascular and nervous system. The nerves in my mechanical limbs were even more sensitive than my original. The slice hurt, but that was the least of my worries.

Blood smeared across the building's surface as I slid, and my biggest fear was that the limb would cease to function before I found a place to grab on.

When I was only a story above the street, Sage yelped and buried her face in my chest. She'd seen the packs waiting below with hunger in their eyes. They'd rip us apart within half a tick.

My hand snagged on a narrow crack in the wall, and we came to a stop. I dangled, my feet scrambling for purchase on the smooth surface.

A penrot jumped and tried to grab my leg. Its claw raked down the back of my calf, and I groaned as it sliced deeply. I could feel my blood dripping, and the plops on the street were greeted with urgent shrieks. Some penrots leaped onto the wetness, licking it, while others looked up and, seeing me hanging so close, slammed themselves against the wall and began to climb.

I'd never seen them climb before. I'd never seen them congregate in such a large group before, either. In the past, when one pack spied another, they'd give chase, but they often waited for one of their own to stumble. They'd rip apart any vulnerable member of their species.

Looking around, I spied another crack in the wall. I flung my left arm up and drove the mechanical spike projecting from the tip of my finger into the fissure. It wedged deeply, and I used it to climb the wall, bracing my feet against the too slippery surface and stabbing one spike at a time.

A penrot leaped up and wrangled with my left heel, its claws digging and scraping. More blood dropped away from me, making the others feverish with anticipation. They shrieked and jumped onto the wall, knocking some of their brethren down while trying to get to me. Others clambered up the ones on the wall and those piling below, using them to reach us.

Using the thin blades stabbing out from my mechanical fingers, and grateful my right hand still worked, I slowly made my way up the wall. Eventually, I reached the area I'd been aiming for, where I'd embedded steel spikes at regular intervals. Using them, I picked up speed, aiming for the roof three stories above.

A chanced glance down made my hearts stall.

The penrots were climbing quickly, and four were only a few body lengths behind us.

When I reached the roof, I scrambled to my feet and ran across the smooth surface.

“Knave,” Sage said, and I heard both relief and panic in her voice. “What’s happening? Something’s changed with the penrots.”

So, she’d noticed the difference as well. We’d talk about it when we were safe.

“It’s all right,” I said, hoping she heard reassurance in my voice and not the fear jerking down my spine like a jagged knife.

We needed to decide what we’d do, because this change could make the difference between death and survival. We already perched on the edge.

I’d become complacent, trusting them to stumble around and eat each other rather than put up much effort to catch me. I couldn’t be complacent any longer.

I jumped onto the next roof, relieved to find fewer penrots waiting in the street below.

But I heard them shrieking on the streets to my left and right.

They followed, moving along the passage, keeping us in view. Did they know where we were going? Just in case, I opted to use an entrance to my building I hadn’t approached in months. It was my most secure way in.

And I’d intended it to be my last option.

I fled across three more buildings, feeling the blood dripping from both of my legs and hand. I was leaving a trail, but I hoped the penrots climbing the building would become distracted by my blood long enough for us to get away, that they’d lose the trail and be unable to follow.

Eventually, I reached a building across the street from mine. I climbed down the outer wall and entered through the window on the tenth floor, where I raced across the room to the barred door. When I studied the hall, I was relieved to find no penrots waiting. I wasn’t sure why I believed they’d be there, other than they were behaving in a way they’d never displayed before.

“This isn’t your building,” Sage whispered. “I don’t recognize where we are.”

“We’re near. Almost home.”

Home was such a fluid thing. I’d lost track of which number home this one was, though I’d hoped it would be my last. I’d secured it and used all the stealth I’d learned over the past three years to ensure they’d never find it. I hated that we’d have to abandon it soon.

It might be time to plan a more permanent solution to the ongoing penrot problem. I could tolerate the ongoing fear of being eaten for myself,

but I refused to hand that to my mate.

And what if we produced young? I'd started a true matebond with my bite. Nature would soon find a way. The thought of my younglings being in danger chilled me straight to the bone. They would be little and vulnerable for a very long time.

What kind of life was this for a child?

What kind of a life was it for us? I could only balance the horror of their attacks with carnivals and shopping for so long before the weight of the danger we were in dragged us into stark desperation.

I lowered Sage to the floor, and we raced down the hall. At the corner, I peered around to ensure we were still alone, then urged her halfway down, stopping below a square access panel in the ceiling. A jump, and I'd knocked it out of the way. Another, and I'd latched onto the bar I'd installed years ago. I scrambled up into the ceiling. Turning, I braced my body, reaching down to help Sage.

One quick haul, and she'd joined me. I replaced the panel and secured it with bars I'd left here for this very purpose.

We had to stoop forward—even Sage—as we scurried through the access passage, carefully stepping on the support posts to avoid falling through the thin ceiling beneath us.

At the end, a vent allowed me to look outside. My pulse dropped a fraction when I didn't spy any penrots waiting.

Were they hidden and watching? My mouth went dry. Short of revealing myself, there was no way of knowing, and I didn't like this. It was a change that was not sustainable.

But I hadn't intended to exit through the vent.

I helped Sage along an even tinier passage to the right that sloped upward. At the top, we were now one floor above where we'd entered. I shifted a plate in the wall to the side. We crawled through the opening and could stand upright.

"Looks like a big attic," Sage said, her voice echoing.

Trusses marched along a three-story opening all the way to the other side of the building. We'd have to remain on the triangular structures, or we'd fall through, but I'd done it a few times in the past to ensure this route worked.

"Oh, you're hurt." She gaped at the long slice in my hand. Her eyes widened when she saw my torn heel and the cut on my calf that fortunately,

had stopped bleeding. “We need to take care of those before running farther.” Her penetrating gaze met mine. “If we can stop for a few ticks.”

“We can. We’re safe here for the time being.”

“We can take a breather, then. You, since I did none of the running or climbing.” She ripped part of her shirt into strips and tied bands around my hand, leg, and heel. It felt good to have her take care of me. I’d handled everything alone for too long.

“We’re near the apartment?” she said, peering around.

“It’s on the opposite side of the street.” My heel ached, as did my hand, but they felt better already.

“I assume you’ve mapped out a route and we’re partway there.”

“Yes. As for this at-eeek, I assume this space was created for future use,” I said. “They constructed the building and intended to continue to add offices and apart-mints as needed, but . . .”

“Something happened to everyone who lived here. Do you know what?”

I shook my head. “I found a few books, but I couldn’t read them. The chip in my brain translated a few words, enough to identify the planet, but it couldn’t help me decipher the rest. All I learned was something happened, and the penrots were here, growing in numbers. Many who lived on Likair boarded ships and departed.”

“On Earth, we watched movies for entertainment, and strangely enough, ones featuring a dystopian world are pretty popular. The usual premise is disease sweeping across the land and changing some of those living on the planet, or a spaceship crashing and releasing a predator.” She wrapped her arms around her waist and quivered. “I guess it doesn’t matter how they got here. Whoever built this city and populated this part of Likair is gone. I assume they took all their ships with them.”

“I’ve looked for others but haven’t found them. I haven’t dared venture more than part of a day’s travel from the city, however, because I had to get back before dark.”

“You traveled on foot?”

“That and I located a few transport vehicles with functioning fuel cells not long after I left my ship. I took them as far as they’d go then abandoned them in the long plain beyond the city.”

“You’re sure your ship can’t be recharged?”

“We have no access to power and . . .” I hated having to name it because I wanted to be everything Sage needed. “I’m not skilled in mechanics. I

couldn't repair the transport crafts and figuring out how to turn on power here and somehow connect it to my ship without blowing it to pieces wasn't an option."

She moved forward and wrapped her arms around me. "No one can do everything. You've amazed me over and over with what you've accomplished here. If I'd crashed on this planet, I would've been dead within a day."

We could both be dead within a day, but I didn't say that. My confidence in my ability to keep us safe was shaken but sharing that would only make this worse.

"Let's get across this room," I said. "It's not long from there. Once we're inside our apart-mint, we can talk about options."

Her grim gaze met mine, and she didn't have to speak for me to know what she was thinking.

With the suspected change in the penrots, we might be out of viable options.



CHAPTER 31

He had to carry me across the attic area because the spacing between the trusses was too far for me to safely leap on my own. At the end, he jumped up and dangled while removing another panel in the ceiling, tugging me up to the next level after he'd poked his head up and ensured nothing lurked.

We hurried down a series of halls, pausing to carefully look out windows, but we spied no penrots nearby. Had they given up? I'd like to think this chapter was over, that we could go home and relax, knowing we were secure for another day, but unease was creeping across my skin, raising goosebumps.

I felt like I stood on the top of the cliff and the ground beneath me had been saturated with rain. Soon, it would give way, and I'd fall.

I didn't like that feeling, and I could tell Knave worried about this even more than me.

We hurried through another tunnel that spanned the length of the building. At the end, he used a tool from his finger to remove the vent.

"Back outside," he said softly. He eased through the small opening and perched on the ledge.

I tried not to gulp when I saw how high we were. After I'd joined him, clinging to a metal bar secured to the wall to hold my balance, he replaced the vent and tightened the fasteners.

He constantly impressed me with his ingenuity. This was why he'd survived this long on such a hostile planet.

But were we on borrowed time?

Don't think about that, I told myself. This wasn't the time. I had to focus on getting back to our apartment.

We zipped along a wire to a building that wasn't ours and entered through a window, traveling down a series of halls until we'd reached the other side. Another zip, and we'd reached the roof of our building.

Knave approached a circular panel in the roof and removed it, revealing our kitchen below. With his help, I dropped down onto the counter and sat, scooting onto the floor. He joined me inside and secured the panel I hadn't noticed before. I needed to pay more attention. This was access not only for us but for penrots if they figured it out.

But a panel like this could also provide a means of escape.

Fred scampered into the kitchen, mewling, and I scooped him up, holding him close. I was grateful we hadn't taken him with us. There was no way he could run through the streets or zip along wires, and if he struggled in my grip, the thought of him . . .

I didn't want to go there, and when my gaze met Knave's, I knew he had the same thought.

We could barely keep ourselves safe, let alone a pet.

A pall hung over us. We silently made a meal and ate, but our hearts weren't in it. Even feeding Fred bits of it didn't cheer me up.

After we'd cleaned up, Knave took my hand and led me to his bedroom. He shut the door and tugged me into his arms, holding me while I quivered. I didn't cry. My tears had long-since dried. But he could tell I was stressed.

"We will talk tomorrow," he said, and his words came out grim, but I guess they would.

We had to make some decisions that would greatly impact our life here on Likair.

"For tonight, mate," he said, cupping my face and giving me a lingering kiss. "I just want to love you. I believe we have that bit of time."

"I want that too," I said. It felt like it had been years since we were together. Had it only been a few spans of our hands?

We stripped each other in a fever, and he lifted me off my feet and carried me to his—*our*—bed, because I was never leaving it. The surface initially molded to our combined frames, but after we kept shifting—writhing as we stroked each other and kissed—it gave up and went flat.

His mouth lit a fire within me, and I couldn't get enough. I rose above him, stroking his arms and face, while he pinched my nipples. He lifted and

sucked one into his mouth, licking it and grazing it with his fangs.

I moaned and went to rise over him, to impale myself on his rock-hard cock, but he eased me around beneath him.

I locked my legs on his hips and pulled him close as he centered himself at my core.

One thrust, and he'd embedded himself deep within me. I felt the bulb open and the tiny luckens stroking, and my sigh of pleasure echoed around us.

He moved slowly, thrusting in a way that drove me closer to the edge.

Desperation filled us, and I felt as if he wanted to savor each moan I released, each groan of satisfaction.

My voice grew hoarse from my cries, and I thrust my hips up to meet him. I needed it all. His lucken stroked my breasts and quivered across the nipples. The bulb of his cock swelled while he bathed my inner walls with his seed.

If a baby came of this, it should be a gift, but did I dare bring a child into this dangerous place? We didn't know if we'd live beyond tomorrow.

I didn't know what to think about being pregnant, and I didn't want thoughts like that intruding on this special moment between us. But the shadow haunted me, lurking in the back of my mind.

It fed me the need to feel everything, to take all Knavé had to give.

"More," I said, gripping his arms tighter.

His hand moved between us, and he released a device that rubbed my clit while vibrating.

No. It was too soon. I wanted this to last all night.

I rocked up against him, urging him to go faster, to take everything that was me, knit it together with his soul, then share back with me. We had to become one if only this final time.

My orgasm was a tidal wave heading for shore. It crashed, and I rode along with it, my body a mass of quakes and cries.

Knavé gave into his own pleasure, shooting hotness within me.

Then the bulb at the tip locked us together.



CHAPTER 32

KNAVE

“I have to leave you for a short time, mate,” I whispered in the perfect shell of Sage’s ear. She mumbled and shifted on our bed.

Unable to resist, I braced myself over her and kissed her. She roused beneath me, moaning in my mouth, and there was no better way to wake up than that.

I’d planned to leave right away, but I couldn’t resist her lure. She was the light in my life, and I couldn’t allow anything to happen to her or I’d slip into permanent darkness.

I stroked her breasts with my lucken, and she came fully awake with a smile. “Don’t stop. Never stop.” Her arms went around me, holding me close.

A sharp desperation filled me. I wanted to love her completely, to imprint myself in her mind in case . . .

No, I wouldn’t allow myself to think this. I’d told her we’d talk today, and we still would, but there were things I had to put in place before we enacted a new plan.

Her nipples formed pebbles, and nothing could keep me away. While I sucked one then the other into my mouth, stroking with my tongue then biting down gently with my fangs because I knew it drove her wild, I pushed aside my fears.

Now was for Sage and nothing else.

I kissed down her body, savoring each bit of her flesh. By the time I reached the juncture between her thighs, she was jerking up, seeking my touch. Her sighs fed me like no meal could, but I had to savor her one more time.

Spreading her wide, I took in how perfect she was. There would be no other for me even if I somehow found my way off this hellacious planet and landed on one full of beings.

I was made for her and her for me.

I glided my tongue along her, licking her slit before her wetness could escape. One of my luckens stroked her clit while cries of pleasure erupted from her throat. I delved within her, tonguing her inner walls. Adding three lucken, I made sure not a bit of her missed out on my love.

She pumped her hips up to my touch, moaning. Her hands rose to her nipples, and she rubbed them between a finger and thumb. There was nothing more arousing than that.

When her body started quivering, I knew she was close. Good, because it was all I could do to keep myself from coming. Her pleasure fed mine. I swore I could get off just watching her explode from my touch, with no physical contact from my cock.

I rolled her over and lifted her hips. She spread herself for me, and her slit dripped with more juices.

I licked her once more, needing another taste, then centered myself at her core and plunged into her.

Pushing back, she met me, groaning at the stretch. Each time I took her, I marveled at how tight and wet she was for me. If I were a guy who prided himself on such a thing, my head would be floating among the stars.

“Fast, Knave,” she called, and I eagerly gave into her demand, bracing her hips with two of my hands while my others found her nipple and clit.

She was a fever growing within me. She was all mine.

And when she shouted out and her body quaked, I joined her in ecstasy, locking myself deep within her.

“I need to leave for a while,” I said later, holding her in my arms. Fred was scratching at the door, and I should get up and let him join us. No, I needed to rise, let Fred in to join her, and leave her for as short a time as possible.

She tensed in my arms. “Where are you going?”

“To take care of a few things. I won’t be gone long.”

“I want to go with you.”

And I wanted to take her with me. I didn't like letting her out of my sight for more than a few ticks. I worried with good reason. "I will be quicker alone."

"Where are you going?" she repeated.

Rolling her onto her back, I kissed her deeply. I was so tempted to love away her questions, but that was unfair. "I want to make sure our next safe place is still secure." And replace the food I'd left weeks ago. Make sure the bars remained across the access doors.

And see if I could determine the penrot's plan, assuming they had one.

"I'll be freaking out the entire time you're gone," she said softly, clinging to me.

"I promise I won't be long. When I get back, we'll talk. Plan."

"We need to," she said sadly. "I don't think we'll be able to remain here for more than a day or so."

My thought exactly.

When she released me, I got up and let Fred into the room. He clambered up onto the bed and Sage grabbed him and hugged him. His purr echoed in the room, and I was grateful she wouldn't be completely alone. A coot was not protection, though they were savvy around penrots to ensure their survival. Their numbers might be smaller than when I crashed, but those remaining had learned how to evade capture.

"A span of a hand?" she said, rising onto her elbows.

Fred scooted across the bedding on his belly, wiggling his legs and releasing tiny squeaks of excitement.

She patted him but was distracted by me.

"Give me two. Three, perhaps. No longer than that."

Her eyes shimmered and she sniffed, but she nodded. "I'll make you your favorite breakfast. We can eat it when you get back."

I leaned over her and kissed her again, needing more kisses than we had time for.

Then I dressed quickly and left her.

I waited in the hall until I heard her secure the bars, locking her safely—I hoped—inside.



CHAPTER 33

I didn't like him leaving without me, and it wasn't because I would be alone in the apartment. I worried something horrible would happen to him, that he'd be hurt, and I wouldn't be able to help him.

Thoughts like that were going to drive me out of my mind, however.

I got up, bathed, and dressed, and went to the kitchen, focusing on creating a big serving of alien donuts with soogam topping. One of the spices we'd collected in the store before the penrots found us had a sweet flavor reminiscent to cinnamon, and I added a bit to change up the flavor.

After the meal was ready, I sat at the table waiting, staring at the overloaded plate while Fred nuzzled my ankles before scooting out of the room. He loved to nap on my improvised pillow.

The food grew cold, and I felt stupid for making it right away. I should've waited a few spans of my hand so it would be hot when Knave came back.

Assuming he made it back.

My heart kept saying hang in there, that he promised he'd return, that he wasn't in danger. But my brain reminded me of the change in the penrots, how they appeared to have figured us out. And that made my bones chill to the point that when I rose, my legs nearly gave out.

That's when I realized the sun was setting. It had been many spans of the hand, and Knave hadn't returned.

Should I go after him?

He wouldn't like that, but what if he was injured somewhere and couldn't perform the parkour moves needed to get back to me? He'd limp through the streets, going as fast as he could while shooting worried glances around him.

The penrots would wait and . . .

“Stop it,” I said, my voice breaking the silence that had expanded to the point I could hardly breathe.

I placed the plateful of improvised donuts on the counter. They’d congealed, but I could make Knave a new batch when he returned.

If he returned.

“I said stop it,” I hissed, leaving the kitchen. I sunk onto the chair he always used, leaning my face into the cushions to catch his scent. It calmed all my fears. When he was with me, I was safe.

“Knave,” I whispered. “Hurry back. Please.”

I drew my legs up and wrapped my arms around them, staring at the door as if I could will it to open.

It wasn’t until what I deemed midnight that there was a sound out in the hall. I prayed it was Knave and not a clever penrot.

Rising, I tiptoed to the entrance, and Fred scampered along with me. He’d know if it was Knave or someone else outside the door, right?

There was no peephole, and I should’ve asked Knave to make one. It might be an Earth thing, but it would come in handy on Likair.

“Sage?” Knave said softly outside. “It is me.”

I sagged against the door, my body limp with relief. Then I scrambled to remove the bars, dropping them against the wall with dull thuds.

I wrenched the door open, and he rushed inside. He replaced the bars and gathered me close, holding me while I shook.

“I was worried,” I said. My eyes stung, and tears trickled down my face. “I thought you were hurt.”

“I was not hurt.”

“I pictured you in danger.”

He paused before speaking. “I was not in danger.”

“And I was scared you wouldn’t make it back to me.”

“I will always make it back to you, mate. You are my home. My everything. My only reason for existing.”

It wasn’t good to rely so much on someone else, but I couldn’t seem to help it. I needed him to breathe.

I’d be a shell of myself without him.

He lifted me off my feet and strode toward the bedroom. Laying me gently on the surface, he ripped off his clothing while I scrambled out of mine.

Then he joined me.

He loved me all night, and it made up for my worry somewhat.

But my fear was brought to the surface when we woke during the night to penrots slamming themselves against the entrance door.



CHAPTER 34

KNAVE

“Grab your clothing, mate,” I said, urgency lending flight to my limbs.

They’d found us. Had they followed me? I’d taken a route I’d never used before, dropping down into the hall on this side of the blockage. Before that, I’d watched to make sure they weren’t near. I’d waited much longer than I liked before entering the obstacle course that would eventually bring me here.

They shouldn’t be here, yet they were.

We leaped from the bed, and while she packed, I grabbed my prepared escape bag and a few things I wanted to keep, stuffing everything inside and strapping one big bag to my back.

“Fred,” Sage whispered. “Fred!”

I didn’t spy the little guy around, but he was inside the apart-mint somewhere. Leaving the bedroom, I rushed down the hall, peering into the bathing chamber and the other room. I found him standing by the door, his fur standing upright, a growl rumbling in his throat.

Such a brave little beastie. He’d protect us with his life if he could.

Despite my care in approaching him, the penrots in the hallway heard my movement.

Their shrieks grew in volume, their claws impaling the door’s surface. We had only a few handfuls of ticks before they ripped their way through.

Scooping up Fred, I returned to Sage. She took the coot from me and held him close.

We rushed to the window, and I lifted the panel. But when I thrust one foot outside, onto the ledge, shrieks erupted from below and . . .

. . . across the way. A glance showed them waiting at the window on the opposite side of my wire.

“We can’t go this way,” I said, backing into the room.

We ran to the kitchen, and I jumped up onto the counter. I placed my hand on the panel, feeling for vibrations, listening.

A claw embedded itself in the soft panel. They were right above us.

My hearts surged.

Sage sucked in a breath and backed toward the entrance of the kitchen; her eyes wide. “They’ve surrounded us. There’s no way out!”

At her shrill cry, more claws scraped at the panel. There must be three or four of them immediately above us.

Peering out the window, I saw penrots walking across the thin strand of wire, their brethren dangling while clinging with their claws. One fell and within ticks, it smacked onto the street below. The waiting pack cried out and descended, but there were too many of them to be distracted by a few fallen.

The rest continued across the wire, clinging with their claws. They’d be here within a few ticks.

I grabbed Sage’s hand and ran into the living area, where I shoved my chair to the side.

I hadn’t used this exit since I put it in place, knowing I might one day need a way out that I hadn’t used in so long, my scent would no longer linger. May the fates ensure it was still safe.

I lifted the flooring, scattering the pieces of tile aside with a clatter, revealing a small opening that dropped down to a rough metal surface far enough below, we’d have to jump.

“In,” I told Sage, taking Fred from her so she’d have the use of both hands.

She sat on the side, gaping up at me. “It’s a long way down. I’ll . . . dangle then let go?”

“Yes.”

The entrance door shuddered. They’d almost clawed their way through. The bars would hold a solid panel but if they shredded the door, they could climb over or under the bands of metal. It was a deterrent, not an indestructible barrier.

Sage leaped, landing hard on the metal subfloor below. My hearts eased when she straightened and waved. “I’m okay.”

For now. I had to ensure she remained that way.

I'd give my life for hers, but what would happen to her after that? This situation was too tenuous to sustain. We had to do something permanent, though I wasn't sure what it could be.

Holding Fred against my chest to protect him, I sat on the edge and tugged the chair over, tipping it so when I dropped down, it would take its old place and cover the hole. I didn't expect this to hold the penrots back long, but our scent was everywhere in the apart-mint. My hope was they'd be confused long enough to buy us a few ticks.

Enough to reach my new safe space.

Landing beside Sage, I grabbed her hand and bolted. She valiantly kept up, but I knew she'd tire before me. I was bigger and stronger, but that meant I could help her.

My right leg stung where the penrot clawed it the day before, and I worried the wound would open and start bleeding again. Our usual scent might linger in the apartment and confuse the penrot invaders, but blood would draw them like fleets to raw meat.

We barreled through the narrow passage to the end where I stopped at a panel that would access an apart-mint below. I cracked it and listened, peering into the darkened space. Hearing nothing, I lifted the square and slid it to the side.

"Here you go," I told Sage, lifting her with a free hand. Fred wiggled in the other, but I held tight. On my knees, I lowered her to the floor below.

"Secure," she said, releasing my hand. She peered around, but I was confident this location would be penrot-free for a few ticks. Hopefully long enough for us to flee to the next section of the escape route.

I dropped through the opening ensuring the panel settled into place behind me, then hurried across the long-abandoned apartment to the bathing chamber with Sage following.

Fred remained motionless in my clutch, clearly knowing his struggling would make this more of a challenge. I was grateful the computer had reconstructed my severed upper arms. I couldn't imagine going through life with only two like Sage.

I lifted the tall bathing unit to the side, revealing the opening I'd carefully enlarged months ago. A metal ladder I'd found during one of my explorations in maintenance rooms dropped into the dark opening.

“Do you want me to go first?” Sage asked, on her knees, peering into the hole. She was as brave as the coot, doing what I asked without question. Smart, she might very well survive without me, but I couldn’t bear the thought of such a future. Not because my life was that worthy, but because hers was.

“Yes,” I said softly. “At the bottom, wait.”

“How far down does it go?”

“Three stories, through three bathing units.”

She flashed me a tense smile. “You constantly amaze me. You thought of everything.”

I hadn’t thought through this one enough. How had the penrots found us and when had they started stalking me?

When Sage arrived. A chill shot through my bones. Did they also hope for a mate? I’d never considered penrot gender, and in many species, it was fluid, but what if they needed a female to reproduce? That suggested they could die out like any other species.

I didn’t have time to analyze this, and it was purely speculation.

Regardless, if they sought a mate, they wouldn’t steal mine.

Sage began descending, and I could tell it wasn’t easy for her with the rope and bar ladder swinging from her movements. But she continued downward, and again, before I followed, I ensured the bathing unit lowered into place to hide our location. It wasn’t foolproof—nothing with penrots ever was—but it would buy time, and that was all I could ask for.

Just enough time to escape. Just enough time to give us a chance to think.

Three floors down, we left the bathing chamber and hurried across the apart-mint to the barred door. I listened and used the slat I’d placed in the panel to peer out into the hall. I’d purposefully avoided creating one in the upper apart-mint, because it would make it easier for the penrots to rip the door apart.

Seeing nothing lurking, I lifted the bars. We left, and I secured the apart-mint from the outside in case the penrots were able to follow. A week ago, I’d been convinced that could never happen. Now? The hard lump in my gut told me they could. They’d find the ladder a challenge, but if enough of them leaped through the opening, a pile would build up that the others would use to descend.

Even a pile of fresh meat may not slow them down. These organized packs were relentless.

We hurried down the hall and took the stairs all the way to the underground basement.

Exiting into the garage, we wound around abandoned transport vehicles, plus piles of things I'd long since chosen not to examine, aiming for the exit that would take us to street level.

"Will any of these work?" Sage asked in a low voice, waving to the vehicles.

"I examined so many after I left my ship, but I only found a few that still functioned. It's not a fuel issue like you eluded to on Earth but one of power. These vehicles need a charge, and I've never been able to figure out how to restart the city's grid."

"It's too bad there isn't a place where some might be sitting, fully charged."

"I don't think there is . . ." Pausing, I frowned.

"What?"

I shook my head, my lucken shifting across my neck and spine. "I would need to check this out, but . . ."

She grinned, not a sunny smile that warmed me inside, but a harsh gesture of solidarity. "But you think there could be an option."

"I do." I picked up my pace, and she remained with me. "Let's get to the new location, and then I can leave to check it out."

"I'm going with you this time."

I could tell there was no arguing with her about this, and perhaps leaving her was no longer an option.

There was no trusting how the penrots would behave.

Leaving her for even a span of one hand could mean her death.



CHAPTER 35

After a convoluted obstacle course where we thankfully saw only a few penrots who didn't see us, and no full packs, we arrived at Knave's hidden location. I took in the barricaded area in the back of a maintenance room in the basement of what looked like a government building. Even in this alien world, they'd built an ornately decorated structure that would've fit right in with big old libraries and capitol buildings on Earth.

I dropped down onto the thin cushion of a wide bench lining a wall, wondering if this would be our new bed. The place looked like a bachelor pad. Few appliances. A toilet in the corner. And the bench I saw on that would have to serve as a recliner and bed. The only thing missing was a TV.

No TVs on Likair that I'd seen.

"Are we safe for a few ticks?" I asked, cuddling Fred who'd leaped from Knave's arms once we'd shut and barred the door to this single room.

"Yes." He dropped down beside me on the bed and tugged me into his arms. "I'm sorry. This is not as welcoming a home as the apart-mint."

"It's temporary." I assumed. "And we'll be safe. I can't ask for anything more than that."

"But you deserve more. So much more than I can provide for you here."

"You're doing your best." I put Fred on the cushion beside us and turned so I could climb into his lap. I wrapped my legs around him and watched his face. His scars had frightened me at first, let alone his cyborg eye and mechanical arms. But now everything about him was familiar and deeply loved because they made up the guy I'd fallen for.

"It's not enough."

“It always will be. Don’t you know?” I made sure he didn’t break eye contact. “I love you. No matter what happens, that’s not going to change.”

“I haven’t been completely honest with you.”

He didn’t wrench his gaze away, but as my pulse jumped, I caught the sorrow and shame in his eyes.

“Tell me,” I said, going into this with my heart wide open. I couldn’t imagine what he could say that would change my feelings for him.

“There is a pod that might help you escape this planet.”

Oh. So that was . . .

No. It didn’t change my feelings. “You had a reason not to tell me.”

“At first, because I was greedy. I was lonely here.” His voice deepened, husky with pain. “And I wanted to keep you with me.” His chin lifted. “But it’s wrong.”

“You said at first.” How could I fault him for falling for me and wanting to keep me with him? If our positions were reversed, it would be hard to let him go. I understood, but I’d hold back the words until he’d finished speaking. “If there’s an escape pod, why haven’t you used it yourself?”

“It’s made for a being much smaller than me. I’d never fit, but you would.”

“I see.” My heart ached but more for him than myself. Yes, I’d wanted to leave when I first got here. Who wouldn’t? This place was a nightmare most of the time.

Except when I was with Knavé.

“But there’s more,” he said before I could speak. “I don’t know if the pod has enough energy to get you where you want to go.”

“That’s just it. I chose. I don’t want to leave you.”

“Earth is your home.” He said so stoically, as if he assumed I’d jump at the chance to leave him. Sure, I felt torn. How could I not?

I shrugged. “Earth’s not all it’s cracked up to be. I’ll admit when I first got here, I would’ve done almost anything to go home, but I don’t want that now. I only want to be with you.”

“Mate,” he breathed. “That may not be an option.”

“Sure it is. I make the final choice, and I already have. Deep in my soul, I only need you to feel complete.”

“I love you, Sage,” he said reverently. This guy would take care of me until his dying day. I only prayed that moment wouldn’t come for many more years.

“And I love you,” I said.

He nudged Fred onto the floor and turned so I lay beneath him. He had to contort himself because the bed was small. *I* was small when compared to him. But he twisted himself so he could kiss me, his mouth hot and urgent on mine.

I was soon a moaning mess, and he took care of that too. That was Knave.

My everything.

I must’ve dozed after. I woke to him rising from the narrow bed.

Time had passed and through the tiny slice of the sole window on the outer wall, I could see night had fallen.

“We need to talk about a plan,” I whispered.

He stilled, his back to me. “We do. I want to go see if something will work.”

“I want to go with you.” I swung my legs over the side, feeling tiny when compared to this bed. Despite my five-nine frame, my feet couldn’t touch the floor. I hopped down and dressed.

“Could I convince you to remain here?”

“I don’t think we should risk it. The penrots have changed. I don’t trust them not to somehow follow our trail despite all the precautions we took to get here.” I wouldn’t be able to fight them off if they breached the maintenance room. “I’m safer with you.”

He sighed, and if he truly insisted, I wouldn’t fight this. I was afraid to stay here alone, but I was more afraid something would happen to him while he was gone, and I’d never know.

I’d never find him or see him again.

Living in this city was only bearable because we shared it.

“You’re right,” he finally said, turning. “I hate this. I don’t want you in danger, but I can’t figure out how to keep you completely safe.”

I thought about the pod, but it wasn’t a true option. I wouldn’t leave him, ever.

Wrapping my arms around him from behind, I pressed my face against his back. His two hearts—he had two! —thudded steadily and it was soothing. If only we could find a place where we could always be safe. I feared a place like that didn’t exist on Likair, and there was no way both of us could escape.

“It’ll be okay,” I said, though there was no way of knowing that. Each tick we had together needed to be treasured as if it could be our last. My eyes stung, and I wiped them, not wanting him to see my tears. I cried for our situation, the life we couldn’t escape.

For us.

“We should leave Fred here,” he said. “I don’t know if this is going to result in any options, but I want him safe.”

“I agree.” I patted the little coot, and he purred. Such a sweet guy. I couldn’t imagine life without him. “We’ll be back soon,” I said in a cutesy voice. “Take a nap, baby. Have a snack.”

I made sure he had water and food before we left.

Leaving our hidden location, we slowly made our way to the front of the maintenance room, using a raised platform mounted along one side. I didn’t know if Knavé attached it or it was in place when he found this location, but it gave us a second route to follow rather than running down the middle of the room. It wasn’t much, but I’d learned from him something as simple as this could make a difference.

Outside the maintenance room, we took the hall sloping up to ground level. We didn’t speak. He hadn’t told me where we were going, but it didn’t truly matter. He’d lead, and I’d follow. No need to chat about that. I was along for the ride. I was here to watch out for him.

Fuck, I might also be here to witness whatever came next.

When we’d arrived, we’d accessed the building from the roof. Now we’d exit on ground level and from the back, if my internal map was correct.

He pressed his back against the wall beside the door with a single clear panel running down the center and inched his head forward only enough to peer outside. A long pause followed before air whooshed from his lungs.

“Nothing so far,” he said, reaching for the bars snaking across the back.

“You spent a long time securing multiple locations,” I said as he lifted one and laid it to the side, reaching for another.

“I did. Every time I needed to move, I made sure I had two new places ahead where I could hide. I didn’t dare trust I could remain anywhere for long.”

“You’re smart. This is why you’ve survived here this long.”

He nodded, and I sensed he felt pride. He should. I’d never be able to do what he’d done. I would’ve cracked within a few months.

I'd be dead by now.

"Someday, I want to hear more about how you turned into the guy I know today," I said.

"The old Knave was flighty," he said wryly. "I was a diplomat to those who thought of me kindly. A pirate to those who saw through my façade."

"You stole?"

"Never from anyone in need."

"Did you keep what you took?"

"I shared." He flashed his fangs my way. "I see where you're going with this, mate. Perhaps I was not as horrible as I remember."

On Likair, he'd been molded into someone new, though it sounded as if he'd kept a bit of the person he used to be.

"I imagine you're still the person you always were, living here has just smoothed out the rough edges."

"Or hardened them." He lifted the final bar and set it with the others, then pulled more weapons until three of his hands were armed. He'd carry a bar to lock the door on the outside.

I tightened my grip on my knife, though I'd yet to use it. I hoped I was never called to use it. I'd kill to protect him, Fred, or myself. Hell, to protect anyone who couldn't do it for themselves. But I didn't like the idea of killing. Despite their feral nature, even the penrots deserved some sort of life.

After ensuring again nothing lurked within view, he opened the door, and we hurried through the opening.

Once the bar was in place, we raced across the street and hid in an alcove of another building, watching the street.

Shrieks rang out from our left, but I didn't hear their shuffling steps coming our way. A random cry or a herald?

When stomps grew louder, our eyes met.

He took my hand, and we bolted to our right.



CHAPTER 36

KNAVE

Hugging the walls on our right, I urged Sage down the street at a full-out run. When we reached the corner, I peered carefully into the street beyond. Nothing.

Racing again, we traveled halfway down the next street before I led her into a building. From here, we stared along yet another route I'd mapped out in my mind.

We took three flights of stairs before exiting into a long hall. No penrots, and I didn't believe any had followed so far. At the end of the hall, we climbed up through a hole in the ceiling, replacing the panel behind us.

Many of my routes were similar. There were only so many ways to traverse a building. Through the ceilings and floors, the stairwell, air ducts. Running through the halls themselves wasn't the safest option, something I'd learned within weeks of leaving my ship.

I'd thought of hiding within the ship itself, but the penrots found it not long after I left, and a pack settled in that area as if to watch for my return.

I was beginning to think they'd do that at each location I abandoned. They'd hunt me until I had no place left to hide, no place where I could keep Sage safe.

What would happen when I grew too old to protect us?

Hopefully, the solution I'd thought of would work.

We rushed through the duct until it ended, then I carried her, scaling the outside of the building to the roof, where I jumped across a series of buildings, leaving the shrieks of a hunting penrot pack behind.

Silence descended as I crept down the wall of the building I'd sought.

We entered through the back door. I hadn't been here in years, and it should be relatively safe. Even the front windows were still intact.

"What is this place?" Sage asked as I placed a bar across the door. This one had already been here; I hadn't affixed it myself. But then, there were precious objects waiting on the ground level.

"I'll show you," I said, trying to keep the eagerness from my voice. This could give us hope or prove there was no way to ever be free.

At the end of the hall, I listened at the door before opening it. Seeing no threats, I swept my arm out, urging Sage to enter ahead of me.

"Oh," she said, stopping, her fingers rising to her mouth. She turned gleaming eyes my way. "A transport craft dealership? New cars!"



CHAPTER 37

“Wow,” I said, walking through the enormous room holding at least ten brand spanking new transport crafts. “They’re not destroyed.”

“They are not,” Knave said, following me. “But they may be of no more use to us than the ones abandoned on the street.”

“Do you think the penrots did that?” I could easily picture them dragging the six-legged Likairians out of the vehicles. Consuming them.

“I don’t know. We’ll never know unless we escape Likair and find some of the beings like those depicted in the museum.”

And the odds of that were next to nothing.

“How can we tell if any of the ships will fly?” I asked. “You said they can’t leave the planet?”

“They’re not equipped to travel beyond the outer atmosphere. I think these were merely used for ground transportation.”

“We assume they left, taking every spaceship with them.”

“They’d be too expensive to build and not use them all. But if we can escape the city, we might eventually locate the place where they built their ships. We could look.”

“Would you know how to fly someone else’s ship?”

He shook his head. “I could only try.”

It might be worth the risk to escape this world. “Where would we go?”

His smile warmed me through. “Wherever you wanted.”

“We couldn’t go to Earth. Not you. My people would be too eager to cut you up to discover how you function. They’d capture you, and I’d never see you again.”

“Then we will not travel to Earth.”

“What about your home?” I asked.

“Trulene?” His head tilted, and I could tell he was thinking. “I own a modest home there, one I bought with honest earnings.”

“Maybe me, you, and Fred could go there, then.” Here I went, creating dreams of a life that could never come true. I couldn’t help it. Sometimes you had to dream of something better to help bridge between the horror of your everyday existence. It gave you hope.

“Perhaps.”

I stepped back from him, sucking in a breath and releasing it. “Let’s see if any will fly.” I peered around. “How can we tell?”

“We’d have to power each up, or try to, then look at the gauge.”

“Like on Earth,” I said with a soft laugh. “We have to see if the tank’s full.”

“They use energy.”

“Like electricity, I assume.” I started toward the closest vehicle, looking for a way to open the hatch.

Knave touched a panel on the side, and it lit up. A few beeps and the hatch lifted.

“There’s some power in this one,” I said.

“In most of them,” he said. “I tested them years ago but didn’t find any with enough juice to fly more than a few blocks. I’m hoping I missed something; that’s why I came here today.”

“Not yesterday.” I watched the shadows crossing his face.

“Yesterday, I ensured our new home was still safe and set up two new ones.”

He’d done this with the idea of living here forever, moving when the penrots got too close. Then doing it again until something bad happened.

My skin peppered with goosebumps. Nothing bad was going to happen. We were going to escape the city and find a place where there were no penrots, a place where we could live out the rest of our days without fear.

He showed me how to examine the gauge, and we split up to do this faster, each covering one side of the dealership. I stayed well away from the windows, darting from one shadow to the next, my heart on fire and my skin prickling with unease. Whenever we left a safe space—though the idea of that was unrealistic as no space was truly safe here—I worried we’d be discovered.

No, I worried the next time, we wouldn't get away.

Living with this much stress had to be toxic, but what could we do? We had to eat and look for goods every now and then. We couldn't hide forever.

We barely lived, though this life beat being dead.

I found a craft that showed the gauge at one-quarter full. Or three-quarters empty, but I was a glass half full kinda gal.

Leaving it, I sought Knave.

"No luck?" he asked.

"Is one-quarter enough?"

He frowned. "I don't know how far that will travel but if we could fly far from the city, it might be. I really don't know what's beyond half a day's travel by foot."

"When you walked that far from the city, why didn't you keep going?"

"A vast, open plain extends beyond the city. There was no place to hide. At least here, I can barricade myself inside a room."

Were all the cities on Likair like this? I might never know.

"How did they fill the vehicle tanks with energy?" I asked.

"I'm not sure." He peered around. "Perhaps we should see if we can discover how they did it."

"On Earth, some of our vehicles run on electricity, while we fill others with gasoline, a product made from petroleum, which is basically an oil we mine in the ground. There are gasoline stations that sell the refined product. If these craft use some sort of energy, and for this, I'm thinking of electric cars, there may be a place within this building where we can fill the tank."

"You are very wise, mate," he said.

I smiled; glad I could contribute something. Most of the time, I was helpless, and it wasn't a good way to feel. I was getting savvier. And while I probably wouldn't be able to follow many of Knave's escape routes, if I had to, I bet I could find a way to escape a pack and hide, at least for a short time.

I'd be like Knave was when he first arrived. Naïve but on a steep learning curve driven by self-preservation.

"What about this?" I pointed to a hose mounted on the wall. It couldn't be that simple, could it?

He unraveled it and extended it to the vehicle with a bit of energy still remaining in its tank. We walked around, peering underneath, and he even jumped on top to see if we could find a way to connect it.

I hoped we wouldn't blow the place up or ruin the vehicle. For all I knew, this was a hose to wash the vehicles or spray them with . . . something. Who knew what?

"This might be a good place to connect," he said, pointing to a narrow panel with four small holes. The end of the hose had a metal bar with four holes in about the same pattern.

"All we can do is try," I said, my pulse surging. This could be it. We might fill the tank, pick up Fred, and leave this horrible existence forever.

When he brought the end of the hose close, it was drawn to the panel as if magnetized. It snapped into place, and we looked at each other, wondering what might come next.

Nothing appeared to be happening. I walked over to the wall with the hose mounting and stared at a series of buttons.

"Pick," Knave said. "No matter what, we're doing something."

"What if I choose the wrong one?"

"We don't even know if this will fill the trunk."

Trunk. Ha. Close enough.

"And if this doesn't work or we make a mistake," he said. "We will try with the others."

I pushed one of the buttons, but silence echoed in the room.

Spying a small bar along the wall that looked like it would lift, I tugged it up. A grinding sound rang out, and lights flickered overhead.

"Houston, we have lift-off," I whispered.

The panel connecting to the hose hummed.

Now that we had power within this building, it might be a securer location than the maintenance area. We could move here if there was a room we could bar.

Knave left me and climbed into the transport vehicle, sitting in one of the two seats in the main compartment. The vehicle wasn't much bigger than an oversized minivan, and it had a bench seat in the second row. I spied a few compartments along the outer walls for storage, but that was it.

"It's rising," he called out, his voice lifting. "The gauge is going up."

"Cool." I joined him, and we watched as the dial crept to halfway. But when it reached that spot, the hum in the wall stopped.

"Do you think it's full?" I asked.

He pointed to the right side with another marker. "I think this would be full."

“But it stopped.” I went over and tapped the panel, but nothing happened. We unlocked the hose and connected it again. Pushing the button didn’t restart the device.

That’s when I noticed the lights had gone out.

I wiggled the bar on the wall but couldn’t seem to engage the power again.

“Everything is old in the city,” he said. “We’re fortunate we got it to work as long as we did.”

“Will half a tank be enough?” I asked.

“It is better than one-quarter of a trunk.”

I put my arm around him, leaning into his side. “It is.”

“Let’s go back, grab our things and Fred, and leave this place forever,” he said.

My heart soared. I couldn’t imagine not worrying about penrots. But we weren’t out of the woods, so to speak. We’d leave the city, but I didn’t know what we’d find beyond that.

“If we run out of fuel and penrots are near, will they be able to get into the transport craft?” I knew the answer before I’d finished the question.

His gaze drifted to the street where numerous vehicles lay askew, their hatches open.

Chills wracked my frame. Of course they could get into the vehicles. They’d extract us like sardines from a can.

“Maybe we should stay here, where we’re safe,” I said.

Were we truly safe anywhere on Likair?

The penrots were relentless, and they’d changed. They watched us, waiting for the chance to grab us. Our situation was untenable. We’d be lucky to survive a few more months.

“Let’s go,” Knavé said.

We took an alternate route away from the transport “dealership,” and soon arrived at the government building.

As we stood on a roof nearby, my breath caught. Horror filled me.

The building was surrounded by hundreds of penrots. They were beating down the door and crashing the windows to get inside.

And Fred was in there.



CHAPTER 38

KNAVE

“Wait here,” I said, my hearts on fire. Our tiny friend . . . I couldn’t leave him to face the penrots. He was trapped. Alone. Likely frightened.

Sage grabbed my arm. “No. You can’t.” Tears streamed down her face. “Fred. Poor Fred. We have to help him but how?”

“There’s no other way than going in and getting him.” I cupped her face and kissed her for what could be the last time. Was I foolish to endanger myself for a coot? Some would say yes.

I said no. He was our friend. He trusted us to keep him safe. I couldn’t leave him to be . . . I wouldn’t imagine the horror.

I’d remained too long in the city. I’d become complacent, believing I could move from one location to the next, staying ahead of the penrots. My time was up. We had to chance leaving with the hope we’d find a better place, where we could be safe.

Where we could live.

“I need to come with you,” Sage said, openly weeping. “You need my help.” She lifted her knife. My brave, brave mate. She’d give her life to save mine, just as I would do for her. But I couldn’t allow this. If someone died, it would be me.

“I will take care.” I pointed across the open space separating this building to the other. “I will jump and use a route I haven’t for ages. I will grab Fred and our things and return to you. This I promise you, mate.”

“I want to come.” Her voice came out firm, but I sensed she wavered.

“I will be faster without you. You know this. You amaze me. I love you. But I ask you to remain here.”

She sucked in a breath and released it. “Come back to me soon. Please come back to me.”

“I will.” I pressed my fist against my chest to strengthen my vow. “Nothing will keep me from you.”

Nodding, she wiped her eyes. Her hands gripped my arms, and I kissed her. If only I could love her one last time. I would have to carry the memory of last night, of her sweet touch and her sighs of pleasure as we found a welcome escape in each other.

She backed away and dropped down to the roof, leaning against a pipe sticking out of the surface. Here, she’d be invisible to the penrots on the street. We were high enough so they wouldn’t locate her by her scent. If I were fortunate, I could get to the other building, retrieve Fred, and return to my mate without the penrots being aware.

A grim satisfaction filled me at the thought of leaving this city forever, of leaving the penrots behind to attack each other.

I crouched on the edge of the roof, and when most of the penrots appeared to be focused on accessing the building, I leaped, landing lightly on top of the other.

Hearing no shrieks reassured me. They may not have seen me cross the open alley.

I hurried to the air vent arching up from the roof and climbed inside it, sliding down until I reached the screen at the base. With my feet braced on the sides, I lifted the screen I’d secured with a few fasteners years ago and set the screen aside.

Dropping, I landed on the flat surface of the connecting vent. I secured the screen in place and crawled through the vent that spanned the building with multiple tunnels splitting off to connect to various rooms.

The one I wanted was near the end. I lifted the vent and peered into the room below. Hearing and seeing nothing, I lowered myself inside, trying to remain as quiet as possible.

Usually, I’d secure the ceiling panel, and I rotated the access or exit routes, but I sensed I’d need a quick escape route. Once I had Fred and our bags, I’d flee the same way I’d come in. I’d only “locked” the initial entrance.

Leaving the room, I raced down the hall. This building was only four stories, but I needed to get to the basement. There were three ways. The back stairs, through ceiling panels one level at a time, or climbing the

outside wall and using a hatch that accessed the ground at the back of the building.

Time was of the essence. Each tick could be the one where the penrots reached our hiding place. They'd smell that we'd been there, and they'd follow the trail. Fred would be waiting, vulnerable. He was savvy, or he wouldn't have lived this long, but he was trapped in an unfamiliar environment.

I took the back stairs. If I heard the penrots climbing, I could easily exit and use the panels to access each level. The stairs were quicker.

Fortunately, I didn't run into any penrots. I crept from the stairwell on the underground level and raced down the hall. At the corner, I peered around it.

Fuck. A cluster of penrots scraped and clawed at the door to the maintenance room. Since it was metal, it would take them time to get in.

Running back to the stairs, I climbed to the first floor and bolted down the hall to the room above the maintenance room. I lifted the panel I'd cut into the tile and set it aside, then dropped into the big open room outside the small section I'd cordoned off in the back.

When I lifted the bar to our hiding spot, I heard Fred whimper. He knew what waited out here for him, and he was scared.

My chest ached as I set the bar aside.

I opened the door, and he leaped into my arms, nuzzling my neck.

"I've got you," I said, so relieved he was safe.

After grabbing our bags and securing them to my back, I hefted the weapons and darted out into the maintenance room.

Penrots shrieked from the hole they'd clawed in the door. One scrambled through the narrow space, landing hard on the floor. It leaped to its feet, and while the others entered, the first lumbered toward me.

Fred trembled, and I tightened my grip. If he got loose, I might not have time to grab him again.

I ran to the opening in the ceiling and, without stopping, jumped, grabbed the edges and pulled myself through. I dropped the flooring back in place and dragged a desk over on top of it.

The penrots clawed and scraped from below, and before I reached the door to the hall, the desk bumped upward and toppled. They shrieked and clambered through the hole, coming after me.

I took the hall to the stairs and raced up them, my breathing ragged and my hearts aflame in my chest.

Fred cowered against me, but I got the feeling he trusted me to see this through. I'd do it for him and Sage. I'd do it for me.

When I reached the top floor, I ran down the hall. The penrots screamed as they followed up the stairs.

I'd climbed into the duct and was securing the screen when they reached the room below. They leaped, grabbing onto the lip of the opening.

Fuck, this was going to be close.

Turning, I crawled through the tiny space until I reached the roof access. Not stopping to loosen the panel, I fisted it out of the way and lifted myself up. I toppled out onto the roof and didn't stop, jumping to my feet and roaring across the flat surface. At the edge, I leaped, landing on the roof of the other building.

Sage got up and ran to us, hugging me and stroking Fred.

I peered over my shoulder.

Penrots streamed out of the vent and across the roof.

They could jump, and they'd be here within ticks.

I swept Sage up and ran, flinging myself across an open area to another roof with the penrots in hot pursuit. Eventually, I reached the building with the transport craft.

By then, penrots followed on the roofs and on the streets, shrieking and crying out in hunger.

I wasn't sure we were going to make it, but it was now or never. We had to try.

I climbed down the wall and kicked my way through a third-story window.

Sage pressed her face against my chest and held on, trembling with Fred secure between us.

Barreling down the stairs, I reached the ground level.

Penrots coated the windows, banging and clawing, desperate to get in.

I jumped into the transport craft and Sage dropped to her feet. After shucking our bags and securing the hatch, I took the control seat with Sage beside me. She held Fred and watched me with complete trust in her eyes. Hopefully, her trust would be rewarded.

When I hit the switch to power up the craft, a hum shook the vehicle. It stalled.

“Fuck,” I said, peering through the clear panel, toward the front of the building. The penrots had gotten the door open and at least ten had made it inside. They shambled toward the vehicle we hid in. They’d pry the hatch open and extract us within ticks.

We had to get away now.

I hit the switch again, and the motor came to life. This time, it didn’t stall. I pinched my eyes shut for a tick, praying this would work.

Then I pushed for power and released the hold bar. The vehicle lifted and wavered.

More power.

The craft roared forward and smashed through the front windows.



CHAPTER 39

The vehicle shuddered as we slammed through the front of the building. It lurched through the jagged opening and skidded across its bottom on the street. The lower hull screamed, and I was thrown out of my chair and onto the small bit of floor in front. Keeping a tight grip on Fred, I climbed back into the seat and located a buckle, securing it.

“Are you all right?” Knave, gritted out, his gaze trained on his driving. Penrots flew away from us in all directions, hit by the craft.

Knave’s arms strained at the controls, and he growled as he turned the vehicle sharply to the right to avoid plunging into a downed craft.

He righted the vehicle and engaged more power. It lifted, and we flew above the other vehicles and leaping penrots, aiming for the edge of the city.

I peered over my shoulder, groaning to see hundreds of penrots rushing after us.

“Can they run far?” I asked.

“Too far.” He kept his attention on holding the craft above the creatures, veering down streets and up and over piles of rubble.

The city was enormous, and it took what I deemed at least thirty minutes to reach the edge. Even then, the suburbs sprawled around us, a mishmash of homes and taller buildings. More transport vehicles laid strewn here and there, their hatches open and . . . I shuddered to think of what might’ve happened to the inhabitants.

“Did you notice?” I asked, putting Fred down on my lap. Despite the penrots still chasing us, I wasn’t as worried we’d hit something any longer. “The seats in this vehicle are small. I barely fit and you’re . . .” I pointed to how his butt hung over the flat seat.

“You think those who lived here before were smaller than us.”

“It fits with the ship you found. You said you couldn’t get inside it, but I might.”

“We’ll pass it. I’m taking us in the direction I already traveled and beyond.”

“I wondered. I pretty much guessed the blue, six-legged creatures were the original Likairians.” I squinted through the clear screen, spying open fields beyond the last bit of houses.

The field stretched for as far as I could see, unbroken by trees or anything else.

“You don’t know what we’ll find beyond the fields,” I said.

“I hope a place free from penrots.”

A glance out the back screen showed them swarming from the city and across the suburbs. They still gave chase. How long could they keep running? I worried for longer than we had fuel to travel.

“I want to find us a place where we can build a life without fear,” he said.

I took his hand and squeezed it. “I hope that place exists, and we find it.”

The ship shuddered but picked up speed, zipping along again. Knave and I exchanged concerned looks, but he shook his head. He didn’t know what happened either.

“We scraped along the ground before lifting,” I said. “Do you think . . .” I didn’t want to name it, but what if something on the underside had been damaged?

We left the last few houses and flew out over the field made up of waving grasses. I didn’t see a single creature, and I was surprised. No wild animals?

Oh . . .

“The penrots have left the city before,” I said. “That’s why they’re still giving chase. They’ve eaten other things out here and see us as their best chance of a meal.”

“I believe so.”

“I hope we have enough fuel to outdistance them.” At this point, that was all I could wish for, that we’d put enough distance between them and us until we could find somewhere to hide.

My guts shriveled. If only we could find a location where the penrots couldn't reach. If they didn't swim, we could settle on an island, assuming islands existed on Likair. Or a mountain cliff, though the penrots could climb.

"We need to find another city," I said. "Right?"

"I hope not." He kept his gaze trained on the area ahead. "It will be no different."

The vehicle shuddered again.

I didn't like this, but I kept the words to myself. Knave had enough to worry about already.

A glance behind showed the penrots were gaining, closing the distance between us. But the transport vehicle was barely crawling.

"Can you make it go faster?" I asked. I bit down on my lower lip, using the pain to remind myself I was here, inside the craft, and not outside where the penrots could get me.

"It's giving us max power." He slammed his palm on the dash.

Frowning, I leaned forward. My gasp rang out when I saw the gauge. "We're almost out of power."

"Either the craft eats it quickly or—"

"We damaged something when we fled."

He shot a grim look my way. "I will get us to safety."

I knew he'd try, but we were surrounded with fields. There was no building to hide in or underground bunker with a door we could bar as far as I could see. Hell, we needed a bomb to take out this threat. Or more than one bomb, I noted when I looked out the back window.

Hundreds of penrots followed. Did they know the craft was nearly out of energy, that soon we'd be stranded and at their mercy? Perhaps. They were cleverer than I'd believed.

This was an old game for them. Chase the craft and when it runs out of fuel, open the hatch, and scoop out the goodies inside.

A shudder ripped through me.

I turned to face forward and spied something lying on the ground ahead.

"What's that?" I asked, pointing.

Knave said nothing, just kept driving, aiming for the silver cylinder.

When he got close and he slowed the craft, angling it downward, I realized what it must be.

“No,” I said, my heart cringing. “I’m not getting into that spaceship without you.”

He still said nothing, just gritted his teeth and guided the vehicle closer. We’d gained some distance on the penrots, but we’d have only a few minutes if and when we landed.

And I knew what he planned to do. The knowledge settled over me like the heavy, smothering ash of a volcano.

He dropped the vehicle down onto the grass beside the small spaceship. Not waiting, he unbuckled me and grabbed Fred.

“Put me down,” I shouted, struggling. “Knave. No!” Tears wet my face, but he held me tight, determination and devastation plastered on his face.

He opened the hatch and leaped outside, rushing to the ship. Once he’d opened it, he dropped me inside. He was right; it was incredibly tiny. My arms brushed the sides, and I could tell if the top was closed, it would almost rub against my belly. I couldn’t stretch out my legs.

“No, Knave,” I sobbed as he wrapped a buckle around me, pinning me in place. “No. I have to stay here with you.”

“This is the only way you’ll be safe, mate. Please. Take this chance to be free.”

“No! We don’t know the coordinates for Earth.”

His intent gaze met mine. “But I know the coordinates for my own planet.” He programmed the small computer on the inside of the craft while I tried to unbuckle. Fred lay beside me, whimpering.

I couldn’t see outside, but I didn’t need to. I could hear the penrots coming, their shrieks lifting in pitch. They knew a meal was right ahead, and they couldn’t wait to devour it.

“I’m sorry,” Knave said, his voice slicing through me. The wound of our separation would bleed forever. “I wish I could go with you.” He tossed the bag with our supplies and a big flask of water inside, keeping nothing for himself.

“I’m not going. Please. Don’t make me go!”

I couldn’t get the damn buckle to loosen.

He leaned inside and kissed me, his lips lingering on mine. Like always, his touch sparked my inner fire.

If he had his say, this would be the last time he’d kiss me. It wasn’t enough. I needed more. Years of more. No!

“Knave,” I said as he backed outside the small craft. “Please.”

“When you land, tell them who I was.”

Was. He didn’t expect to live.

I couldn’t stand this. No. No!

“Tell them I gave you everything I possess,” he said. “A home. Safety. Please, mate, be safe.”

“Get me out of here, Knave. Please. I don’t want to leave you.”

“Be safe, mate. I love you.” He touched his lips as if to hold on to the memory of our last kiss forever.

“I love you,” I said. There was nothing else I could do. The penrots were coming, and I couldn’t undo the damn buckle.

The hatch closed, and the vehicle lifted off the ground.



CHAPTER 40

KNAVE

I wanted to watch as the ship soared into the sky, taking my mate to safety. I wanted to stand here while it left the outer atmosphere and disappeared from view. I wanted to know that this time, this very last time, I'd done something wonderful.

Tears ran down my face, and I left them alone. This would be the last time I'd cry. If I lived, and the odds were not good, I'd smile when I remembered Sage. I'd know she was safe, living happily in my home. Her home. Something we could've shared if only . . .

What else could I expect? I knew I'd die here. There was no escape to something better for a part-cyborg pirate like me.

As the penrots came closer, their shrieks grated across my scarred skin like their claws soon would. I raced to the transport craft and shut myself inside.

I tapped the gauge, hoping it was a mistake, but the needle showed it had almost no power left.

Would it be enough for me to escape? Perhaps I could find a way to leave somewhere else on this forsaken planet. I could travel to Sage and join her on my beloved planet, Trulene.

Then I could tell her again I was sorry. That I didn't want to make her leave, but I loved her, and I wanted her to be safe.

I was able to get the craft running again, and I pushed it to its top speed, soaring above the plain. If I was fortunate, I'd get far enough ahead of the penrots that I could find a secure location. I'd have to start over, locating and locking down safe spots and establishing multiple routes to reach them, but I'd gladly do it knowing that my mate would no longer suffer with me, that the penrots would never kill her.

She must've reached the outer atmosphere by now. I didn't look. I couldn't look. It hurt, damn but it hurt, but there was no other choice. I wouldn't fit inside with her, and she needed to get away. I couldn't bear for her to be captured and harmed.

And little Fred. He'd remain with her. He'd comfort her when I couldn't.

And maybe, just maybe, she'd someday find someone new to love. I hoped she did. It was hard enough to see her leave. If I thought of her mourning for the rest of her life, it would kill me.

My life with her was over, but hers was just beginning.

The craft slowed, and I tapped the dial. It was no good. It had run out of energy, and there was no safety in sight other than a scraggly forest ahead. If I could make it to the trees before the penrots caught up, I might survive long enough to watch the sunset.

I set the vehicle down and grabbed my things. Hers, too. I couldn't bear to leave them behind.

Reaching the ground, I bolted as the penrots closed in. I could almost feel their breath on the back of my neck. I aimed for a tree on the edge of the forest. If I could climb, I could knock off any of the penrots who tried to reach me. I'd outlast them. Maybe.

I dropped my bags and jumped, grabbing a branch half a body length above my head. Not stopping, I swung my legs up and hooked my heels, levering myself up onto the branch. Another leap, and I climbed higher. I kept going until I reached the top and just as I assumed, the penrots gathered around the base.

They climbed, scrambling over each other to reach me. Their deafening shrieks grated down my spine.

When one got close, I kicked it. It tumbled down, knocking others off and buying me a few ticks.

It was a fool's wish to hope I could outlast them. There were hundreds surrounding the tree. Eventually, I'd tire, and they'd overwhelm me.

I'd fall or be ripped from the limb, and it would be over.

I always knew it would end like this, so it was hard to feel much sorrow.

At least I'd known Sage's love before it happened. At least I'd had the chance to love her in return.

More penrots swarmed across the open plain, gathering beneath the tree. I kicked a few more off below me. This was going to get nasty. Some

abandoned chasing me to eat the others, but there were too many of them. I'd never fight them all off.

With my blades, I sliced off arms. Bits of my attackers littered the ground, and a pile started to grow. There were enough of them to stack up until they could pluck me from the tree.

It was a lost cause. I should just let it happen.

But I didn't want to die. Not even one bit. I wanted a long life with Sage by my side.

Sage.

I sighed her name, and my remaining real eye stung. Despite knowing she'd be safe, this was still hard. My lungs hurt, and there was nothing I could do but keep breathing. Keep trying until it was impossible. She'd want me to fight to the bitter end, to never give up.

Penrot shrieks filled the air. More joined those stacking up beneath me. I slashed and kicked at any that came close, and they tumbled away, falling down the pile.

They were getting close to where I crouched on the limb. Despite my resolve, despite my overwhelming need to survive this, it wouldn't be long.

A flash of light drew my eye, and I frowned.

Something rushed toward this location, flying so low, it was a wonder it didn't hit the ground.

A ship?

It slammed into the penrots, sending them scattering, before lifting up and circling around to approach again.

More creatures were killed with the next pass, then more after that, until only a few remained to scramble around the clusters of slumped bodies.

The craft touched down, and the hatch opened.

"Get inside," Sage cried. "Please, Knave, get inside. More are coming. They've all left the city, I think. I saw them rushing this way from above."

How could she possibly be here? "You're supposed to be leaving the outer atmosphere."

"Knave! Get inside. We'll fit. I'll make us fit."

Choices, choices. Remain here for the new packs to find me or try to squish myself into the ship with Sage.

I leaped off the branch, tumbling down the mound of writhing penrots. They tried to grab me, but my heart gave me wings to leave them behind.

Hitting the ground, I raced to the open spaceship. I still couldn't see how I'd fit. It was too small. I was too big.

"Knave. Get in!"

All I could do was try.

I climbed inside, wedging my feet down as far as they'd go. I'd have to lay on top of her but . . .

Looking toward the city, I spied a wave of penrots rushing this way.

Their shrieks filled the air.



CHAPTER 41

“We’re in this together, Knave,” I shouted over the cries of the creatures. “I’m never leaving you. Get into this escape pod, or I’m climbing out.” I showed him the belt I’d severed once I remembered I still held a knife.

“There isn’t room for more than one being in the pod,” he said.

“So squish me. I don’t care. I’m not leaving without you.”

He sighed and finished climbing inside, and damn, there really wasn’t room.

The penrots roared toward us, their claws slashing the air. We had maybe ten ticks before they’d be scooping us out of the small ship like gummies in a bowl of ice cream.

“I can’t get the hatch closed,” he said, struggling to lower it.

The penrots grew closer. We’d be overrun in seconds.

Knave wiggled downward beside me, and it was all I could do to breathe. His knees were bent, but his arms felt fantastic around me.

He yanked on the hatch. Again.

And it clicked.

“You’re in,” I cried, overcome with emotion.

“I am,” he said by my ear, pushing a series of buttons. A hum erupted, and the hatch pressed us down farther, locking it for takeoff. “I am!”

By the time I’d seen the penrots pinning him in a tree, I’d figured out how to control the spaceship. I wasn’t a pilot. Hell, my only experience flying anything like this was in video games. But I’d learned to drive on a stick-shift VW, and this wasn’t much different than that. Well, other than there was no clutch. And a few other things. But, damn, I’d figured it out.

“Let’s get out of here,” I said, engaging the power. The ship lifted off the plain. Penrots leaped, grabbing the craft but a few jerks of the controls sent them dropping to the ground. “Say goodbye to Likair, Knave, because we’re never coming back.”

He snorted. “I like that, mate. Goodbye, Likair. We’re never coming back.”

“Nope. We’ve got a future together on Trulene, and it’s about to get started.”

With a grin, she blasted the ship upward, shooting it into the sky.



CHAPTER 42

EPILOGUE

Sage

Two weeks later, I woke in Knave's bed.

Our bed, that is, inside our gorgeous house on Trulene.

It had taken us a week to travel here, though we'd had one stop at a space station two days or so after we left Likair. Time was hard to gauge in outer space, but based on how my body felt, two days passed before we were seen on whatever they called alien radar and hailed.

The admins of the station were shocked when our tiny ship appeared in this quadrant. They'd tugged our tiny craft into the ship and parked us on a landing bay. A variety of alien species had been waiting with weapons drawn when our hatch opened. They backed away.

We . . . So, it was a tiny craft. And we were completely naked. We'd been squished together and at times sweaty. Somehow, even in a miniscule space, we'd found a way to reaffirm our love once Fred discovered a small compartment above our heads that he took over as his own home.

Within a few ticks, they'd draped blankets around us. They took us to a small room with many guards, as if they thought we'd attack the space station. Ha.

After we explained what happened, we were basically welcomed with open arms. Knave in particular. He'd been reported missing three years ago, and a few of his friends still searched for him and any surviving crew. His family had offered a big reward.

Family.

To think I had a new family!

When we told the space station's commander about how Knave's ship had crashed on Likair and he didn't believe his other two crewmen had survived, the commander offered to send ships to the planet to look for their remains. Their families ached for closure.

There had been two other males on Knave's ship, Theer and Ketz. They were about Knave's age, and he hoped they could be found alive and brought home.

After giving us a chance to eat, bathe, and rest, the commander loaned us a bigger ship. While I'd become fond of the tiny Likair one, I wasn't too sad to tell it goodbye.

We traveled five or so more days, finally arriving on Trulene.

Knave's parents hugged me when Knave introduced us. His younger brother stared, probably shocked to see his first human, but he was friendly once he found his tongue. His older sister held herself back, but Knave kept telling her all the things he loved about me, and she finally hugged me too.

He had cousins and uncles and aunts and even a few grandparents still living. I'd meet them all eventually.

They all lived near enough to each other they could visit, but not so close they got on each other's nerves.

We'd found a way to send a message to my mom. I cried while I wrote it out. My simple message explaining what happened, told her that I was in love with Knave, and let her know I was safe and that I'd remain on Trulene with my mate.

The Trulene government was talking about opening up channels between our planets that would allow her to one day visit. I was keeping my fingers crossed.

On Trulene, I was a bit of a novelty, but interstellar travel was a thing in this part of the heavens, and it was common to see other species walking the streets. Or flying transport crafts. They had those here too.

I rolled over to find Knave awake, watching me with hooded eyes.

"Mate," he said with heady satisfaction in his voice. He kissed me, and I felt his morning woody pressed against my thigh. Guys were all the same no matter what the species, and frankly, I was pretty happy about that.

His four hands roamed my body, and I had to admit, four arms came in handy during sex. He could brace himself above me, hold my hips, or even

lift me off the ground, while his other hands could eagerly stroke my body. What could be better than that?

Oh, one thing.

I had a little surprise to share with Knave soon. If my calculations were right, we'd have our first child in about eight months, assuming I'd gestate the same length of time while carrying a baby that was a mix of our two species.

His mating bite had changed me enough for his seed to find fertile ground.

He groaned and rose over me, centering his cock at my entrance. I couldn't wait to feel him knotted deep inside me.

We'd do it again later on today. Tonight. Tomorrow, too, if I knew my mate and my own needs. He was eager, and that was fantastic, because I was too.

Our future was going to be amazing.

I just knew it.

I hope you enjoyed Ravaged World!
If you'd like a peek at Ravaged Realm,
Book 2 in the Alien Warrior Abandoned Series,
just turn the page...

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Ava Ross is a *USA Today* Bestselling author of numerous titles. She fell for men with unusual features when she first watched Star Wars, where alien creatures have gone mainstream. She lives in New England with her husband (who is sadly not an alien, though he is still cute in his own way), her kids, and a few assorted pets.

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RAVAGED REALM

Blurb



CHAPTER 1

Code 99, Room 311. Code 99, Room 311.

I froze in the hallway as the voice rang out on the hospital's PA system overhead. My pulse jumped, and I pivoted, hurrying to Room 311. This wasn't my patient, but I'd been assigned a role on the code team for my nursing shift, and I needed to get there quickly to manage the paperwork. It was sad to think the last bit of this person's life might be reduced to notes about which drugs were given and their response.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. Since my sister and mom were driving across the country right now, I yanked the phone from my pocket and opened the screen. They must've sent a message.

Vital Update flashed across the screen. *Please update now.*

I growled and shoved the phone back into my pocket. My phone had been after me to upgrade forever, but I didn't have time for something like that. I was a nurse, and I worked twelve-hour shifts.

Basically, I had no life outside of work, and I had bills to pay. Co-workers to help. And no one special waiting for me at home.

I hit the door of Room 311, pushing it inward, and hurried inside. The rest of the team had already arrived. The nurse standing by the code card handed me the clipboard with the forms I'd need to fill out. At the bedside, someone did CPR on the patient, and the Respiratory Therapist had intubated and was bagging the elderly lady from where she stood at the head of the bed. Another nurse stood nearby, pushing medication into the patient's IV.

"Catch me up," I whispered as the doctor asked the nurse to stop CPR so she could study the monitor. No spontaneous cardiac rhythm. This didn't look good.

The nurse glanced down at the open drawers of the red cart and told me what had been done before I arrived. I quickly jotted the information on the sheet. As long as I had the important bits noted, I could fill in the rest when the code was over.

My phone buzzed again in my pocket.

Dr. Kazem frowned my way.

I pressed for a rueful smile. "Sorry." Juggling the clipboard beneath my arm, I pulled out my phone. After making sure it wasn't a message from Mom, I'd shut it off. They hadn't checked in this morning, and I worried when I didn't hear about their progress.

You must update your phone now, scrolled across the screen.

Really, during a code? I huffed, but when I started to turn my phone off, the device crackled, and electricity shot from my phone and up my fingers.

I gulped, and my eyes widened. This... This...

I tried to drop my phone, but it clung to my fingers, connected to me by an invisible force I couldn't define. Things like this didn't happen. This was impossible!

The screen flashed light so bright I couldn't see anything else. I was vaguely aware of the clipboard dropping from beneath my arm, clattering when it hit the floor.

Dr. Kazem called out my name.

The cardiac monitor alarms and the room disappeared.

I was sucked through something that felt like a gelatinous membrane and spit out the other side.

My feet hit the ground hard, and I steadied myself, staring around. My lungs were on fire and my heart leaped up into my throat.

My brains felt like someone had taken a blender to them. The world spun, and I staggered, falling to my knees in...deep grass.

This wasn't possible. I was at the hospital. I was helping with the code.

My phone fell from my limp fingers and hit the ground in front of me. I stared at the blank screen, unable to comprehend what had just happened.

Lifting my head, I peered at the endless plain surrounding me.

"Hello," I croaked, then louder. "Hello? Is anyone here?"

A glance up made my bones quake. I rubbed my eyes, because I did not see two freakin' suns in the sky.

My skin prickled, and a cold sweat zipped down my spine.

I picked up my phone. Hoping it would tell me what the hell was going on here, I pressed my thumb against the round button. Nothing happened. No flash of a home screen. No irritating message insisting I enter my code because the stupid device didn't recognize my thumbprint.

No notice that I needed to upgrade my phone.

A shriek echoed in the distance, and my head jerked up. I frowned as I took in something moving across the plain toward me. It was too far away to make out what it could be, and...it was joined by other blobs, just like it. They rocked and jolted, coming this way.

Was help coming or...?

My mouth went dry and my heart thudded as panic took hold.

I instinctively hunched forward, dropping onto my belly to bury myself in the deep scruff. Tall strands of grass crackled in the breeze, their dry seedpods split and empty. They rattled like bones. The grass grew sparsely here, as if this part of the world hadn't seen much rain.

This was Earth. This was Earth. This was Earth!

Repeating the statement wasn't making a difference. I knew within my soul that something horrible had happened when my phone sent lightning through me.

Rhythmic thuds grew in volume as I scrunched myself into a ball, hoping to avoid notice.

I'd called out. This could be help rushing my way. Why did I want to crawl into a hole and hide?

I swallowed against the lump of fear clogging my throat. Something was terribly wrong, and it wasn't just finding myself in a strange and terrifying world. The wild part of my mind that gobbled up every sci-fi and fantasy book available suggested I'd been stolen from Earth and placed here, but that couldn't be true. This was reality, and I was no heroine in a novel.

Cries and shrieks rang out. Many beings were coming closer. Maybe they were friendly?

The crawling sensation on my skin told me they were not.

I lifted my head. Better to see what was coming than wait for it to pounce.

I frowned, unable to believe what I was seeing.

Chariots?

Four skeletal creatures had been harnessed to the front of each of the numerous vehicles. Flesh hung from their bones.

As a nurse, I had a healthy knowledge of biology. What I was seeing wasn't possible. If their bones were exposed, they should be lying on the ground and rotting with bugs swarming their carcasses. Instead, they ran upright, their bare, clawed feet slamming on the ground. They forged their way through the grass, pulling the chariots toward me.

One being rode inside each chariot, equally skeletal with globs of flesh dangling. They held leather reins from their elongated arms, ending in single-claws. Tusks jutted upward from their lower jawlines. Guttural shrieks erupted from their throats, and those pulling the chariots ran faster, their feet drumming the dusty soil. Clouds of dust spun up behind them, snatched by the wind and carried across the plain.

"Juvva," one cried, pointing right at me. "Juvva!" It swung its arm upward, and a rope coiled in the air above its head. The rope snapped forward, landing with a bang directly in front of me. The driver yanked it back and quickly started spinning it above its head again.

The glowing orange eyes of the drivers fixed on me. They'd heard me. They'd seen me. And now, they would capture me.

I knew in my bones that my death hovered near.

Rising to my feet, I spun and bolted in the opposite direction.

They howled and gave chase.

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