

A SPICY SCI-FI ROMANCE

THE
STRONGEST
IN THE
GALAXY
(Allegedly)



Mates,
Mayhem
- and the -
IMPERIUM
Book 1

VERONIQUE DESOL

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The Strongest in the Galaxy
(Allegedly)

A Spicy Sci-Fi Romance

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Content Notes

This book contains themes and content that some readers may wish to know about before diving in. No spoilers, just a heads-up.

- Abduction / kidnapping — depicted off-page, in the past; heroine escapes on her own terms
- Violence and self-defense — including a lethal act of survival in the backstory
- Trauma references — present but not the central focus; heroine is resilient and self-aware
- Alien biology and instinct — includes a permanent biological imprinting / mate-bond; depicted with consent and complexity
- Power imbalance dynamics — physical and hierarchical; handled consensually with clear agency on both sides
- Psychological tension — slow-burn emotional stakes, possessive behavior, and intensity from the male lead
- Explicit sexual content — spicy scenes between adult characters; includes alien anatomy
- Dark humor and morally grey moments — this book does not take itself entirely seriously, and neither does the heroine
- Forced proximity / no-escape trope — they're stuck to-

gether in space. It goes about as well as you'd expect

This story ends with a guaranteed happily ever after. Whatever the galaxy throws at them, they land on their feet, together.

Chapter 1

The Whispers of Fate

Khar

“Whatever you do, do not anger a Divani. They are a ruthless, calculating species where unnerving intelligence meets overwhelming physical force. Exceptional soldiers in times of war... yet in times of peace, it is safest not to stand too close.”

The IMPERIUM Guide to Peaceful Coexistence with Registered Spacefaring Species

If anyone ever asked for Khar’s opinion, and thank the *Universe’s Cradle* that almost no one did, it usually came down to one thing: the Universe could choke on its own black core and he would not raise a single claw to stop it.

This galactic day, however, the Universe had other plans. Specifically, it had decided to finally teach a certain Divani male a lesson after far too many years of coasting on the effortless privilege of being born exceptional.

Khar was not accustomed to weakness.

The Divani, his people, ranked among the strongest of all Registered Spacefaring Species. Even among them, he was exceptional. In Divani society, where body size directly correlated

with strength, intelligence, and leadership potential, Khar had been destined for greatness. A destiny he had walked away from without much regret, choosing instead to waste his galactic days at the far edge of the known galaxy on a space station, living a life of comfortable monotony.

Until this moment.

Khar was also not accustomed to waiting.

At Gravity Pulls, a gym designed for soldiers, elite athletes, and creatures from high-gravity worlds, the regulars already knew the rules. When Khar walked in, it was wise to clear whichever section he intended to use. When Khar wanted a machine, everyone else simply vanished from that quadrant.

Right now, however, two offenses struck him at once, sharp as a laser blade driven into the base of his carefully polished horns.

An unfamiliar lifeform sprawled across the very machine he wanted.

Even that he might have tolerated. What he could not ignore was the arm and forelimb press being set to a resistance so high that even he found it difficult to move, let alone lift repeatedly. The alien was tiny, with a narrow torso and two arms and two legs dangling loosely from it. Its body was sheathed in a dark, clinging material that covered everything except the lower half of its round, hornless head.

Against pale skin, a small mouth curved in a surprisingly soft line of red.

For one dangerous moment, Khar's attention caught on those lips.

He crushed the thought immediately.

He did not consider himself xenophobic. When he encountered new species, he despised all of them equally if they were weaker than he was. Yet somehow this little nothing, not even

listed among the Registered Spacefaring Species, managed to mock him simply by existing.

And that was before it spoke.

“Waiting for this too? I have two sets left. We can alternate if you want.”

Even its voice was velvet, a complete betrayal of the insult its presence represented.

Khar stared without blinking into the creature’s plain, unlit eyes, his own inner-lit gaze flaring bright enough to send most species fleeing. Civilized entities tended to evolve from herd-minded herbivores. They instinctively recognized when they were standing too close to a predator.

The creature merely lifted one shoulder in a shrug and resumed its reps when he did not answer.

Khar’s focus snapped away when one of his favorite war anthems thundered through the gym speakers.

This station hosted countless species, and cross-cultural exchange was encouraged. Anyone could upload motivational music from their homeworld. But this track was from an Unregistered Race. Too fast. Too violent for most.

For Khar, it sounded like rebirth.

To distract himself from the indignity the tiny alien had caused, he headed for the reception desk to inquire about whoever had requested the song. Perhaps the uploader had more tracks from that mysterious species.

His heavy steps echoed down the corridor, drawing the usual mix of envious and respectful stares. No surprise. His size alone dwarfed the galactic average, not to mention the bulging muscles beneath taut skin, the curved horns crowning his forehead, and the gleam of his claws. A nightmare for many.

Fear had never concerned him. His own thoughts and plea-

sures always came first.

He refused to let this minor annoyance ruin what had otherwise been a very good morning. He had woken in peak condition, had no duties, and the gym finally smelled different. Instead of the hateful sting of disinfectant that assaulted his predator-sharp nose, the air carried something else.

Something like a luxury perfume.

He almost considered complimenting the receptionist for once.

When he reached the desk, he slammed a clawed hand onto the counter hard enough to make the slim Dak'ri worker drop their holopad. They had met before. They knew better than to test a Divani's patience.

"Khar, how can I help you?" the trembling receptionist asked.

Khar's low, rumbling voice carried easily across the room, even though he made no effort to raise it. Authority clung to him whether he wanted it or not.

"The song that just ended. Who uploaded it?"

The Dak'ri hurriedly retrieved their holopad.

"Oh, that one. It is from an Unregistered Spacefaring Species, but the uploader listed the genre. Let me see... rock from the hum...man? No. The Human race."

Khar's eyes flared brighter, a clear sign of displeasure.

"That is not what I asked. Who has it?"

The receptionist shrank in their seat.

"Khar... I cannot give out personal information once someone leaves the gym. But I thought I saw you talking to them earlier."

Khar's brow furrowed between his horns. Talking? Impossible. There had been no one worth acknowledging.

Unless this fool meant that ridiculous little runt.

Without a word, Khar turned and stalked away. The Dak'ri

collapsed into their chair with a relieved gasp.

He returned to the machine.

It was empty now, scrubbed clean by the automated sanitizing systems. No scent. No sweat. Nothing to track.

He sat, gripped the handles, and prepared to reclaim his domain.

To his shock, he could barely move the bars.

Absurd.

If that scrawny alien had managed it, then he, exemplar of the Divani, certainly could. He stood, circled the machine, checked the settings, found nothing amiss, and finally rebooted it. Only then did the resistance return to normal, and he moved easily through his reps.

Balance restored.

Or so he thought.

Curiosity, however, was the Divani's greatest vice when it came to strength. When no one was looking, Khar opened the machine's training log. His name dominated the leaderboards, as always.

Except now the alien's entry matched his record.

Exactly.

And beside it, a small symbol blinked.

Increased gravity setting: active.

Khar's carefully ordered universe shattered.

Irrevocably.

Chapter 2

No Shelter from the Storms of Life

Lily

“Although the intergalactic government, the IMPERIUM, strictly forbids the abduction of Unregistered Species from their natural environment, unscrupulous smugglers still commit this crude, barbaric act.”

Statement from a Commander of the Intergalactic Legion’s Cosmic Observation and Response Division, a military umbrella organization under the IMPERIUM.

Two universal chrono-years earlier (approximately 2.5 Earth years)

Lily’s world shattered in that instant.

The ship carrying her was moving at unstoppable speed toward an unknown destination. The alien who had torn her from her homeworld, Earth, lay collapsed on the cold metal floor, cooling in its own blood. Lily had managed to break free of the makeshift restraints the smuggler had used on her, but the console’s shrill warnings in an alien language were an impossible puzzle.

She sucked in a long breath. Then another. Anything to fight the nausea rising with the stench of the creature's remains. Panic clamped around her throat in an invisible, merciless grip. She needed a solution, fast, yet her mind refused to cooperate.

Like a grotesque theater reel, the events of the last hours kept looping behind her eyes.

She had been walking home when an amorphous, greenish-gray alien with stalked eyes snatched her.

At first she thought she was lying on some kind of ritual altar. Then she realized she was strapped to a surgical platform.

The nearly ten-foot-tall creature examined her with an array of tools resembling scanners and lights. None were invasive or painful, yet the horror of it pinned her in place. She stared at the ceiling's reflective surface and watched her own terrified green-brown eyes, her bloodless skin, her brown hair splayed beneath her, while the alien's grotesque form moved above her.

When the creature finally left, Lily acted.

She twisted, rubbed, and yanked at the synthetic restraints until one fastening gave way. Guided by instinct, she freed all her limbs, then folded the restraints back into place to make it look as though nothing had happened. Every second felt like torture, but she knew stepping off the platform would give her away.

The next minutes were the longest of her life.

When the door slid open with a soft hiss, Lily went completely still, bracing for the inevitable fight. The alien approached with measured steps and lifted a tool from the tray: a scalpel-like blade that caught the light in a cold, predatory glint.

Even then, Lily did not move.

The creature's thin, mottled arm descended toward her skin, casting a warped shadow under the overhead lights. When the

blade was about to touch her, Lily tore her hand free, burst upright, and grabbed the most lethal-looking instrument within reach.

The device, perhaps a bone cutter, connected with the alien's head with a sickening crunch. Thick black blood exploded outward.

The creature collapsed. It tried to crawl away, panic twisting its crumbling voice into gurgling screams.

Another blow.

The floor around them turned black with blood.

Another blow.

The liquid began draining through the grate surrounding the platform.

Another blow.

The alien fell silent.

Lily did not trust chance. She kept striking the greenish-gray mass until it broke apart beneath her hands. Who knew how fast these things could regenerate? She only stopped when the once-towering creature had been reduced to a sludge-like heap of blackened pulp.

She stumbled back, careful not to let the blood touch her more than it already had. The weapon remained clenched in her fist, fingers white around the handle.

No other alien appeared. No one came to help the smuggler, despite its final, panicked commands to the ship. Maybe she had a chance. Maybe she could get home.

That was when the ship's warning lights began flashing red, and the speakers emitted a rhythmic, mechanical alarm. Lily had no idea what it meant, but nothing about it felt promising. The scanners around the room reactivated, turning blinding white lights toward her until they erased everything from her

vision.

Lily fainted.

When she woke, she was still on the floor, as if nothing had changed.

Yet something had.

The unintelligible noise from before now flowed into clear, melodic speech in her native language.

“Configuration of Herion-6 class cruiser has been completed. Awaiting identification of the only sapient lifeform onboard in order to assign administrative authority.”

The red lights continued pulsing. Lily pushed herself to her elbows, then her knees, expecting dizziness or pain. None came.

“Configuration of Herion-6 class cruiser has been completed. Awaiting identification of the only sapient lifeform onboard in order to assign administrative authority.”

The ship repeated the message again and again, leaving brief pauses between each cycle. Lily squinted through the flashing lights, trying to force meaning from the madness. But between the alarm and the voice, concentration was impossible.

She needed silence.

“Herion Six!”

The repeating message cut off at once, replaced by a new prompt.

“Beginning identification of new administrator. Please state your name for database entry.”

“Lily... Bergman. Wait. Just Lily.”

“Administrator Lily, the previous administrator’s life signs have ceased. According to IMPERIUM protocol, the next sapient lifeform detected is automatically designated as the new administrator. Local language encoding required preliminary scanning. Thank you for your cooperation.”

The red lights shut off, and the door that had been an impenetrable barrier slid open without a sound.

Lily moved toward the exit slowly, the bloodied weapon still in her grip.

“Herion Six, is there anyone else alive onboard?”

“Negative. Standard sanitization procedures have been completed. All sub-sapient lifeforms have been removed.”

Lily still did not believe she was safe. She pressed her back to the wall and peeked through the doorway.

Nothing moved.

She repeated the question and received the same answer.

No one else.

She slipped into the hallway. The next open door revealed only a storage room. She continued forward, realizing as she went that every interior door had opened during the ship’s reconfiguration. Nothing barred her path.

The ship itself was not large, but its towering ceilings and cathedral-like architecture made it feel vast. The walls curved inward above her head, the surfaces resembling marble threaded with metallic veins. Lights in the ceiling mimicked stars so perfectly she felt as though she were walking under a night sky. Side lighting created the illusion of gentle waves, though everything around her was perfectly still.

Every surface, every tool, every piece of furniture radiated harmony, as though crafted not for function but for an aesthetic higher than anything human ships ever aimed for.

It was beautiful. It was haunting. It was deeply unsettling.

After a short exploration, Lily returned to the gruesome room where she had nearly been dissected.

She stayed outside the threshold.

No need to step closer than necessary.

“Herion Six, why do I understand you now?”

“My systems contain an automatic translation algorithm. Administrator Lily’s language was not in the database, so a preliminary scan was required for calibration.”

“What commands can I give you?”

“The full command registry requires ten standard chronocycle days to recite. Please refine your query.”

Lily groaned, frustration rising now that the adrenaline was ebbing.

“Can you tell me where I am? And can you take me back to where I was taken from?”

“Current location is uncharted star system fifty-six eighty-seven twenty-five B. Second request: negative.”

“Why not? What is stopping you?”

“Administrator KHR issued a complete data purge of all navigational coordinates before life signs terminated.”

The bone cutter slipped from Lily’s fingers and clattered across the floor.

“You are telling me his final act was making sure I could never go home?”

The ship fell silent.

Then the voice returned, steady as ever.

“A full memory purge occurred. All navigational data and related systems were erased, except for the previous administrator’s codename. It is probable this was done to protect sensitive personal information. However, my factory-programmed psychological and practical support systems are optimized to assist members of Unregistered Species during forced relocation and galactic acclimatization.”

She had been kidnapped. She had fought for her life. By some miracle she had taken command of a starship.

And the only solution this monumental piece of interstellar engineering had to offer her was therapy.

Yes.

Lily's world shattered.

Irrevocably.

Chapter 3

The Best Revenge Is Finding Joy in Your Reality

Lily

“Hello and welcome to the IMPERIUM, the Intelligent Morpho Planetary Entities’ Systemic-Interaction Union of the Multiverse!”

Lily muted it.

“Yeah, okay. Still kidnapped,” she muttered.

“While the circumstances that brought you here may be tragic, we acknowledge your survival skills and your indomitable will to live.

As representatives of the interstellar government of all spacefaring species, we say: may the Cradle bless you, in honor of the beginning of all life that binds us. Just as the Cradle gave rise to life, the IMPERIUM exists to unite and safeguard all star-citizens beneath its authority.

Do not fret. You will be educated in our ways so that you possess the knowledge necessary not merely to survive, but to thrive.

Your first and most important lesson is the observance of IMPERIUM law. Under our watch, no being goes hungry, no individual may be exploited for their reproductive capacity, and no citizen may be subjected to abuse.

Your vessel's AI is programmed to notify you of any deviations from the laws of the local star cluster. The protection of every star-citizen's well-being is our highest priority, and violations are addressed swiftly.

The IMPERIUM encompasses all species across all known galaxies.

While you were taken from what was once yours, you are now one of us.

You are under our protection.

Welcome to the IMPERIUM."

Standard Welcome Message to Protected Beings upon First Contact

Lily rested her forehead on the control panel.

"Goddammit."

The ship didn't break the silence of space for a long time after that.

Ninety universal chrono-cycles later (approximately 112.5 Earth days)

Lily had never felt this free.

Her health glowed from the inside out. She was in the best shape of her life.

Her days brimmed with study, training, exploration, and play, with no one to tell her what she should or should not do. She commanded a small but technologically superior starcruiser and wandered the endless night of space by her own will alone.

She did not know Earth's coordinates, so at the ship's suggestion she set course for the nearest general station. The ship's AI explained that they were deep in unmapped space. Reaching civilized territory would take more than three Earth months in conventional mode, without deep-void jumps. Those were off-

limits until she completed the IMPERIUM's mandated training. The Universe, it turned out, had opinions about who was allowed to fold spacetime.

Lily protested at first, but after the ship insisted, she began the acclimatization program. It became the best decision she had ever made.

She learned to fly the ship.

The first time she overshot a docking maneuver, the ship quietly reduced her control access for a quarter of a chronocycle.

She never missed again.

She mastered its life support and emergency systems. She devoured cultural archives from countless species, though even a dozen lifetimes would not have been enough for true immersion. She mapped every corridor and chamber. She uploaded her genetic blueprint into the medical bay and let the system design a personalized regimen of nutrition and training.

In time, she renamed the ship Helios, after the Greek sun god. True to the name, Helios saw nearly everything and understood even more.

He taught her that the deep void teemed with life. Species ventured beyond their stars and eventually encountered an IMPERIUM envoy, becoming part of the grand alliance. In truth, it was not optional. Refusal meant facing the combined military force of entire galaxies.

Membership came with real benefits and strict rules governing diplomacy, trade, and conflict.

Because Lily had been taken aboard a vessel that met universal standards, the same rights and obligations applied to her as to any Registered Spacefaring Species. She wasted no time learning them.

At one point, Helios played her a jingle of a youth show about the shared common scientific belief of the IMPERIUM, the Cradle of Life:

“What is this movement?
Is that light?
No, it’s just a tiny cell!

How can this be?
I don’t know,
But now it’s real as well!

What is this movement?
Is that light?
No, it’s a meteor in flight...

And that’s the Cradle of Life,
scattered through the universe,
binding us together forever
in a protein burst!”

“Absolutely not,” Lily said. They never spoke of it again.

Helios also explained that universal standard gravity was lower than Earth’s. If she ever wanted to walk on a station’s surface without falling on her face, she would need practice. Helios recalibrated the ship’s gravity fields, and Lily discovered a new kind of joy. In lower gravity she could leap impossibly high and toss heavy objects as if they were feathers. In higher gravity, even raising her arms became an exertion.

Against Helios’s warnings, she even tried zero gravity. She laughed as she chased floating beads of water, catching them one by one like a child playing a cosmic game.

Then she slammed into the ceiling.

Hard.

“Okay. Not graceful,” she muttered.

Then, she set the gravity to one-sixth of Earth’s, remembering it matched the Moon’s pull, and bounced around the cargo bay in clumsy, exhilarating arcs.

Helios warned her about muscle atrophy, and Lily remembered Earth’s returning astronauts, who sometimes fainted after standing too long. In the end she chose a compromise: gradually increasing the gravity each week, building strength while practicing her balance at universal standard. She made it her mission to climb the cargo bay walls on safety tethers, eventually scaling the ceiling. It became a daily challenge, each time under heavier gravity.

The food dispensers, however, were an uneasy truce. She did not enjoy the bland taste of synthesized meals, but she could not deny the results. Her hair grew long and glossy. Her nails, once brittle and easily chipped, became smooth and strong. Even her skin looked younger and fresher than she remembered.

She adapted to the longer rhythm of a universal chrono-cycle, which flowed differently from an Earth day.

The medical bay alone could have kept her occupied for weeks. Eventually, she gave in to every long-delayed curiosity. Permanent hair removal, everywhere she wanted it. The faint imperfections she disliked were erased, though she chose to keep some scars as mementos.

One chrono-cycle she covered both arms in tattoos from wrist to shoulder. The next chrono-cycle she had them removed.

To Helios, it was trivial.

To Lily, it was intoxicating.

After a lifetime of uneasy collaboration, her body now felt like hers.

While the medical bay was not capable of regrowing hair from nothing, it enhanced her natural growth patterns with almost surgical precision. For the first time in her life, Lily managed something she had never quite succeeded at on Earth.

She found the perfect fringe.

After a few experiments, she settled on an asymmetrical cut that framed her face just right. It felt deliberate. Cinematic. Like the kind of haircut a protagonist acquired halfway through an old science fiction film, when her life finally tilted into motion.

She had feared she would be sick with loneliness, hollowed out by missing her family and friends. But the acclimatization program softened the ache.

And if she was brutally honest, she had not been truly happy on Earth.

Her personality, her circumstances, her environment, none of it pointed toward change. She was young, in her early thirties, but not so young that endless parties or late-night bar-hopping held any charm. Lately her life had been nothing but work followed by collapsing in front of a screen. Her job bored her. Her friends were marrying, having children. She had dated, but nothing lasted, and she had grown weary of men who were selfish, indifferent, or incapable of truly seeing her.

Yes, she had lost Earth. For now.

But she still had her phone. Helios absorbed its entire library of music and books, then supplemented it with the near-infinite archives of the IMPERIUM. Together, they gave her an ocean of entertainment.

For the first time in her life, Lily felt she had finally found herself.

Only one question remained.

If she ever found Earth again...

CHAPTER 3

Would she even want to go back?
It was not as if she had the choice.
Until then, she could only hope for more.

Chapter 4

A Blood-Heating New Rival

Khar

“Honored Vegrun’nur’Aghar,

We are delighted to inform you that your Herion-12 class vessel has been completed and now awaits your first commands in our shipyard dock. Based on the biometric data you supplied, you have already been configured as Super-Administrator. We trust this luxury starcruiser, surpassing even the most modern expectations, will be to your complete satisfaction. Safe travels among the stars, and welcome to the privileged circle of Herion owners!”

Welcome message from Vitromium to Vegrun

Khar stood on the deck of the Vitromium luxury cruiser, checking the control consoles in the command hub. This was the first chrono-cycle his new colleague would report for duty, and he could not wait to demonstrate, once again, that he alone belonged at the top of the hierarchy.

Their employer, a famous oligarch obsessively protective of his privacy, insisted on hiring only the finest species to maintain the cruiser and guard him whenever he felt like traveling. Khar, however, always made sure from the very first meeting that he

was the one in charge, and that his counterpart slipped neatly into the role of obedient second.

He hummed to himself, in an unusually good mood as he imagined how he would intimidate the newcomer. Challenge them to a grapple the moment they stepped aboard? No. Last time Vegrün had warned him to give others a little time before he started throwing them around.

That left one option.

He would assign something especially grueling, something Khar could breeze through, and there would be no doubt left about who was superior.

His attention drifted to the scent he had caught in the gym a few chrono-cycles earlier. It had haunted him ever since. He had even considered asking the ship's owner how refined it would be to use that aroma as Vitro's ambient fragrance. Khar certainly would not mind smelling it all the time.

How did one even describe a scent like that? Soft. Luxurious. Never intrusive. Sexy, and yet somehow as if it cleansed the soul.

Far too good for his employer, really.

But Khar would never deprive himself of a good experience.

A polite chime from the console snapped him back. Someone had arrived at the dock and was requesting entry.

Khar rubbed his hands together in satisfaction and headed for the cruiser's main airlock.

He had already chosen the first small but certain psychological blow he would deal the new hire.

"Vitro, raise gravity ten percent above universal standard."

Not enough to stop anyone from working, but more than enough to make simple existence more tiring. Khar had long since conditioned his body to the higher load. His counterpart,

if they did not complain immediately, would start grumbling soon enough.

He could hardly wait.

A huge display beside the main pressure gate showed the visitor waiting outside. Even inside the environmental exosuit, the being looked short and slight. These suits were not designed for long walks in hard vacuum. They were typically worn by lifeforms whose breathing or skeletal systems were not suited to standard environments and needed gravitational or other corrections to function in common spaces.

Perfect.

If standard gravity already strains them, what will they say to the extra weight?

With a flick of his hand, he granted entry. When they finally stood face to face, he noted with deep satisfaction how far he towered over the newcomer.

“I am Khar. I have been Vitromium’s chief maintainer for three universal chrono-years.”

A small light flared beside the suit’s speaker, indicating the being was about to reply, but Khar cut in before any sound could escape.

“I do not care who you are until you prove yourself. Once I am certain you will keep your position, I will learn your name. Now move. We have work to do.”

The being dipped its head in the smallest of nods and followed Khar into the cruiser’s depths.

Vitromium was vast, modern, and above all luxurious. Its generous spaces and minimalist design satisfied the demands of most species. Its manufacturer catered exclusively to the highest echelon, so not only the quality and equipment, but the price as well, was astronomical. Ordinary star citizens rarely set

foot on one, let alone owned a ship like this.

The only product tangentially associated with Herion star-cruisers that could be called remotely affordable was the Void-Brace, a wrist-mounted quantum computer. Those who could not dream of owning a Herion, yet adored the brand, often saved for hundreds of chrono-cycles just to obtain one. To interface properly with Vitro, you needed a VoidBrace, and Khar could see the newcomer already had one mounted on their exosuit.

Either a maniacal Herion fan, or Vegrun had sent it ahead. Knowing Vegrun, Khar would have bet a significant sum on the first option.

Fine by him. It meant he did not have to provide one.

Before they entered the cargo bay, Khar performed a quick scan and registered the being's VoidBrace to Vitro's systems with severely limited user privileges.

Time to test the upstart.

"We are in Cargo Two. A fresh resupply for the next half universal chrono-year just arrived. Load everything into stasis. You have until evening."

Without further instruction, Khar strode off, leaving the newcomer alone with the task.

He was certain they would not be able to complete it. Loading under increased gravity? He almost wanted to clap himself on the shoulder for how cleverly he had arranged this little hazing.

Or training, as he would call it if anyone asked.

If they wanted to work with him, they had to handle this challenge. Starcruisers and ships might share standard elements, but their sorting schemes and command trees were as different as worlds in a galaxy. Just deciphering the organizational logic would take time. That was not even counting the fact that Khar had "accidentally" taken the anti-grav hand-fork that made

moving crates effortless. Oops.

Back in the central control room, Khar cast one more glance at the being through the camera system. As expected, they were staring at the mountain of crates in clear confusion. He set a rule for Vitro to alert him if the newcomer left the designated storage sections, then dove into his own work, which stretched past midday.

Dessert after lunch, he decided with a small, cruel smile, would be a leisurely walk down to the cargo bay to enjoy the recruit's flailing.

Khar liked his job.

Afternoon came too quickly, along with a navigation glitch in Vitro's systems that he could not resolve despite several attempts. It was not serious enough to abort takeoff, but Khar preferred to be ready for anything. A content employer meant a stable, well-paid position that was not overly taxing.

He intended to keep it.

Muttering under his breath, he descended toward the cargo bay. On the way, he composed a neat line of insults to hurl at the useless head that now technically fell under his supervision.

The bay door slid open.

Khar forced a professionally neutral expression onto his face. That proved difficult when the scent hit him again, sharp and clean.

Am I hallucinating it now?

"How is the unload going?" he asked in a tone that was almost innocent, at least by his standards.

His long stride faltered as he stepped into the bay and took in the empty space.

The newcomer sat in one of the rest-chairs, casually scrolling through their wristband.

“Oh, Khar, finally! I was just about to come find you. What’s next?”

In that instant, Khar discovered what true vacuum felt like. Because inside his skull, that was all that remained.

The bay was empty. The job was finished. A job he himself could not have done in this time even with loading gear, and he had been working here for three chrono-years. He could load this ship blindfolded.

No.

Impossible.

He swallowed hard and retreated to the only ground that had never failed him: criticizing others.

“Let us not get ahead of ourselves. I will check how you stowed it.”

The being tilted their head, as if not entirely sure what Khar wanted, then shrugged one shoulder. Something in Khar’s psyche flashed a warning at the familiarity of the gesture, but he brushed it aside. He had bigger problems.

“Do you want me to show you, or would you rather...?” the newcomer began, uncertain.

With a grunt, Khar dismissed them and stepped out of the bay so they would not see his console or overhear his exchange with Vitro.

“Vitro, report on recent storage operations. Give me inventory levels in universal chrono-cycles.”

Data pinged to his VoidBrace, but Vitro, ever helpful, summarized aloud.

“Khar, food stores loaded for four hundred cycles. Medical and hygiene equipment for two hundred fifty cycles. Protective gear, technical and maintenance supplies for one hundred seventy-nine cycles. Other consumables sufficient for two hundred thirty

cycles.”

Khar’s hand trembled, just barely, as he closed the console. In all the time he had served aboard, Vitro had never misreported stock levels.

Still, manual verification was in order.

His broad shoulders barely fit between the racks, but he moved through the inventory at a steady pace.

The crates were there.

Stowed.

Secured.

Scanned.

Khar gave himself a quick shake, as if he could fling off the sticky, unpleasant feeling clinging to him. Nothing was lost yet. He only needed another task. He had not planned for this outcome. He had calculated the new worker would need at least two chrono-cycles to finish.

Fine.

He would adapt.

And he would come out on top.

When he stepped back into the cargo bay, he faltered, thrown by the absence of the black exosuit.

The being had removed the bulky suit and now sat in the same rest-chair as before, their small body relaxed, back turned to Khar in the doorway.

Khar smiled.

They must need a break, finally feeling the inevitable crush of increased gravity that made even breathing an effort.

“I checked the stock. Acceptable.”

The being turned their head toward him.

Dark eyes without the inner glow typical of Divani. Pale, almost white skin, so fragile it looked as though blood might be

visible beneath the surface. A nose like a Divani's, only smaller. A mouth without the blade-edged incisors of his species. By any measure, a face far less frightening than that of a Divani.

Yet deep inside, Khar shivered as if he were facing his worst nightmare.

Which, as it turned out, he was.

The being smiled when they saw him.

“I like the raised gravity. Means I do not have to wear the suit for compensation. Do you think there is a chance we could take it a little higher?”

Khar had found his challenger.

He already knew what to call them.

The Usurper.

Chapter 5

Collision Course: Colleagues

Lily

“Algors are exceptionally agile and intelligent amphibious beings, perfectly adapted to both aquatic and terrestrial life. The more tendrils an individual has, the more attractive they are considered in the single eye of their fellow Algors. Their skin secretes a viscous mucus that allows them to spend extended periods far from their deep-sea spawning grounds, and they are particularly fond of long-range hunts.

Algors belong to the rare category of species whose homeworld once hosted two sapient species at the same time. Strikingly, the other species worshiped them as gods. Although this is history from many IMPERIUM eras ago, Algors still tend to regard themselves as exceptional among star-citizens.”

IMPERIUM Guide to Peaceful Coexistence with Registered Space-faring Species

A lot had happened to Lily in the past two universal chronoyears.

She had been abducted from her homeworld, overpowered her captor, and walked away with a Herion-6 class starcruiser

as her spoils. She had reached a station and finally met aliens who did not try to dissect her alive, although she did not escape being swallowed whole by their bureaucracy.

A pale, spiderlike enforcement officer with smooth skin had registered her and her biometrics, binding Helios's legal ownership to Lily for good once she was granted refugee status. As Lily learned, it was rare for a sapient whose species could not yet manage long-range spaceflight to be integrated into the system, but it happened often enough that the IMPERIUM had protocols ready for exactly this situation.

Lily received a two-chrono-year exemption from taxes. She was given a nano-injection that partially blocked diseases and infections and, of course, an alien translator chip.

The chip surpassed everything she had ever imagined about translation. It did not only render words. It interpreted intent, drastically reducing the risk of cross-species misunderstandings. In Lily's opinion, it was nothing short of miraculous.

After a long discussion with the officer, she chose the version that anchored to the bone above one eyebrow. When she looked in the mirror after the installation procedure, she felt a little like a futuristic cyborg. Not even the placement robot's politely amused comment about her "charmingly old-fashioned choice" was enough to wipe the grin from her face.

The officer, who turned out to be a matriarch of her species, also offered her a control chip that could be implanted into her skull and would allow her to operate most tools and ships by thought alone.

Lily refused.

"Are you certain?" the spiderlike being asked. "You only possess two grasping limbs. It would be highly beneficial if you did not have to gesture with them. You would simply think, and

the task would be carried out.”

She waved her gnathal parts and rippled her long, knobbly legs, perhaps to demonstrate the advantages of having many appendages.

Lily might have appreciated the concern more if the sight had not made her want to sprint straight back to Helios.

The translator chip was mandatory, but it did not interface with Lily’s nervous system. There was no transmitter in it, only an internal datastore and a tiny supplementary AI. It could also be swapped out at any time in Helios’s compact med-bay.

The control chip, however, was another story.

Lily did not trust it.

Instead, she continued using Helios’s baseline wrist computer, Herion’s VoidBrace technology.

“A wrist-mounted, quantum-linked module that allows faster-than-light communication. VoidBrace, from Herion Tech,” chirped the advertisement Helios played when Lily snapped the slim, white-and-silver holographic band around her wrist.

On the station, Lily quickly noticed she was smaller and slimmer than the average alien and just as quickly learned not to draw long-term conclusions from that. Physical strength and intelligence had very little to do with what she would have predicted based on appearance. She met hyper-intelligent, physically weak, elephant-sized swimmers, and tiny, lightning-fast insectoids that could barely form words.

Eventually she reached a conclusion. To most aliens, she was the equivalent of a human hunter-gatherer. Someone who had to fight hard for everything and became resilient because of it. Modern life was easy for humans, but not as decadently effortless as it had been for many alien species for millennia.

Most species had lost much of their heavy dentition because they no longer needed to chew. They were out of practice using brute strength because machines did everything for them. Protocols were so deeply embedded in daily existence that they rarely had to solve problems with their own logic. Life overflowed with amusements, so why struggle?

Measured against that, Lily might seem barbaric, but she had no desire to soften into the same comfortable inertia that marked the average star-citizen.

Well, if nothing else, I am definitely not ordinary here.

On Earth, Lily had been average in build. Brown hair, green-brown eyes, nothing remarkable. She was taller than most women, which she had usually experienced as a disadvantage. In the IMPERIUM, at least she was not diminutive beside representatives of Registered Spacefaring Species.

In truth, she liked herself more than ever. No one bombarded her with endless images of younger, prettier girls every single day, and she had never been in such good shape as now, when movement was no longer a duty but a joy.

Her two chrono-year introductory period, filled with hard lessons, passed surprisingly quickly. Then Lily had to find a source of income if she wanted to keep Helios. The ship was not very large, but maintenance was expensive, and the consequences for failing to pay taxes were severe: forced labor, or even conscription into “voluntary” experiments.

Fortune finally smiled on her when, after wading through an endless stream of dull and downright depressing job listings, she found a posting from Vegrun Fer’s sink, an Algor oligarch.

“Seeking crew member of exceptional physical strength and endurance to maintain a Herion-12 class vessel. Familiarity with the class an advantage. Discretion essential.”

That was all Lily needed. She applied as best she could, and Vegrun immediately seized the opportunity to add another rare and valuable species to his service.

He even granted permission that, if Lily passed probation, she could dock her ship beside Vitromium at his expense, saving her a small fortune. Hard to compete with an offer like that. Lily decided she would do everything in her power to keep him satisfied.

She had never worked under alien supervisors, but she accepted they would be different from humans and resolved not to take offense at things that seemed strange to her. The priority was simple: keep her marvelous starcruiser, the one that had carried her so far already. For that, she needed IMPERIUM credits.

The granite-gray giant who introduced himself as Khar and did not bother to ask her name struck Lily as a perfectly adequate colleague. He did not talk much and did not micromanage.

Yes, at first glance he was terrifying, with his massive frame, bulging muscles, demon-bright eyes, horns, claws, and sharp teeth. But Lily was past judging aliens by appearances. She shuddered as she remembered hearing the deep, almost resonant cadence of his voice, mixed with the strange, raspy quality of Divani speech, which made her very insides quiver. While her translator enabled her to understand the meaning of his words, it did not diminish the full effect of his alien way of communication.

Upon closer inspection, he looked exactly like the demon a particularly talented Earth sculptor might have carved from stone, which Lily found extremely funny and, in a disconcerting way, extremely attractive. Had aliens visited Earth long ago and inspired old human myths? Or did life stabilize along a

few archetypal patterns, so that most aliens fit snugly into familiar human categories? Or was the human mind simply that inventive?

Whatever the answer, she had a feeling she would enjoy working with this space demon.

She knew Helios like the back of her hand, so handling the larger and far more prestigious Vitro came easily. It belonged to the same development line of Herion starcruisers, which meant the organizing logic and command trees were the same or very similar. If she had to use a human metaphor, Helios was a sporty yacht or speedboat, while Vitro was a luxury ocean liner drifting through space instead of water.

Throughout her two chrono-years of wandering, whenever Lily ventured onto a station or a planetary surface, she drew a lot of attention, and after her kidnapping, attention did not sit well with her. She preferred working with only a few aliens who would get used to her presence and stop staring at her like some curious exhibit.

From that perspective, Khar was perfect.

Khar did not praise her, but if Lily had had to rate her first day, she would have said it went well. Of course, she could have restocked faster, but she had needed to audit the existing system. In the afternoon, Khar gave her a simple coding task to correct a navigation subroutine. She fixed it quickly, and he dismissed her, saying he was busy and would deal with her again in the morning.

Maybe working with aliens was not that bad. She would learn a lot, and she might even make friends.

Besides, the uniform was perfection. Black, form-fitting material that somehow did not pinch anywhere, more like velveted silk than synthetic fabric, a second skin. The base layer

was sleeveless and ran in clean, elegant lines from her neck to her ankles, paired with a jacket whose shiny silver inlays resembled a leather biker coat. Lily felt as if she were wearing a designer piece, and given Vegrun's habit of sparing no credits on anything tied to Vitromium, she probably was.

She admired herself in Helios's reflective panels, flexing her now-toned arms. The movement immediately made her think of Khar's impressive biceps, which looked magnificent even without posing.

She flushed at the thought, then admitted to herself that so far, her new colleague certainly did not seem bothered by her presence.

The next morning, Lily felt even more cheerful when she noticed that Khar had followed her suggestion and raised gravity a little higher. It felt good to be considered. After two chronoyears of near-solitude, the small gesture warmed her far more than it otherwise might have.

She beamed at her unreadable colleague. Maybe today she would finally ask his name properly. By now she was almost certain they would get along.

"Vegrun, the owner of Vitromium, wants to speak to us now" Khar said. "He can appear at any time, and we must be ready to launch at a moment's notice. When he is aboard, we provide security and, of course, maintenance. Clear?"

"Yes, thank you, Khar."

He answered with a noncommittal grunt, but it did not dampen her mood. Lily had not spoken with Vegrun yet, only with his secretary during the interview, but she hoped he would be pleased enough with her to let her keep this comfortable job.

Khar set their availability on the console, and the speakers chimed almost immediately.

Vegrun was calling.

With a practiced flick, Khar threw the holo-feed onto the main display, where Vegrun's orange body filled the frame, all tendrils and a single, central eye.

"Khar, my loyal Divani. And our new Human hire. Welcome aboard my ship."

Lily did not miss how Khar's head snapped up at the word human, but that was fine. Once they knew each other better, she would ask him if he had ever met others of her kind.

For now, business. Time to deploy the skill that had always served her well on Earth: targeted flattery. Big egos loved to be polished.

"Vegrun, your ship is magnificent. Elegant, tasteful. A true rarity."

Vegrun flushed a deep purple, and his tendrils twirled around him in delight.

"Ah, you have an eye for starcruisers. No surprise. If memory serves, you own a Herion-6 yourself."

Lily answered modestly that hers was nothing compared to his, and in doing so, failed to notice Khar's jaw hitting the metaphorical floor beside her.

Vegrun and Lily got along almost immediately. Vegrun spoke at length about how important constant availability was to him and how he expected absolute discretion from both of them. No one could know when he came or went, much less with whom.

"Of course, Vegrun. Naturally."

"Splendid, splendid. Now then, Khar, how did our little Human female perform on her first chrono-cycle?"

Khar's hands curled into fists and his body tensed, as if he were already in the middle of a brawl and bracing for the next blow. Even so, he did not ignore his employer, though his voice

sounded forced.

“No problems.”

“Perfect. If she is teachable and diligent, everything will be fine, is that not right, Khar?”

The silence stretched dangerously long, but at last the least enthusiastic reply emerged.

“Exactly, sir.”

“Excellent. Then we are done here.”

One of Vegrun’s tendrils waggled playfully in Khar’s direction.

“And, Khar?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Give it thirty or so chrono-cycles before you challenge her to any scuffle. Lily, just so you know, Khar is Divani. For them, physical strength and combat skill matter more than anything. He has settled every question of seniority with a fight so far. I trust you understand this is culturally important to him. Do not worry, you will not come to any real harm. It is more of a formality. In the meantime, work together and keep my ship ready at all times.”

They both agreed, and the call ended.

Lily turned to Khar with one eyebrow raised.

“So... we are going to fight?”

Those demon-bright eyes regarded her, impossible to read. The pause stretched, and Lily covered the awkwardness with a laugh.

“Khar, I am a woman. You cannot just beat me up. At least, among humans, that is not done. I do not mean to insult your culture. If this is important to you, I will take part. Just go easy on me, please.”

The granite-gray statue finally gave a low, approving grunt, and Lily smiled at him in relief.

Thirty chrono-cycles were a long time. By then, they might know each other well enough that he would give up on the whole ridiculous idea entirely.

Chapter 6

A War Decided Before the First Clash

Khar

“Arthropodal Dak’ri are tall among IMPERIUM species but average only half the usual body mass. They reproduce rapidly and are widespread in every corner of known space; because of their short lifespans, they typically fill roles requiring little experience or specialization.”

IMPERIUM Guide to Peaceful Coexistence with Registered Space-faring Species

Khar had finally learned what it meant to be a lesser Divani.

Living in fear of challenges.

Dreading those stronger than you.

Keeping to the shadows.

Listening for footsteps.

Holding your tongue.

Preparing for a fight you would almost certainly lose.

Losing was shameful.

Running was impossible.

That was not the Divani way.

And maybe Khar was no longer the strongest being in his

world,

but he was still Divani.

Even if it killed him.

So he prepared.

He trained.

Even his sleep belonged to the fight.

As soon as his work on Vitro ended, he went straight to the sparring floor. At first he used the station gym too, but after running into Lily there a second time he decided that was too dangerous.

Lily was everywhere. On Vitro. In the gym. In his dreams.

His sleeping mind conjured them fighting in the dust. She hooked his ankle, launched herself at his throat, and with those tiny, laughable claws that would have made a Divani child snort, she ripped open his neck and laughed with that thin voice that froze his blood.

Khar knew Lily's claws could hurt. He had seen her, when no laser cutter was available, strip insulation from wiring with those "stubby" human hands so she could repair damage some pest had chewed into the system. Efficient, precise, relentless.

Another night they were on the ship's upper deck in the dream. He had her pinned, fingers tightening around that small, fragile-looking neck, when she grabbed a nearby fluid canister and doused them both. The cleanser burned his skin at once. On her pale, immaculate skin it simply beaded and ran in clear streams while she laughed.

At least he knew where that nightmare had come from. Earlier that chrono-cycle Lily had used the biocide without protective gloves. It always stung Khar's hide like liquid fire. He had kept quiet on purpose, wanting to see the Usurper suffer.

Her skin flushed a little, then returned to its usual shade in

minutes.

To make matters worse, he woke from both dreams stiff and throbbing, as if the humiliation pleased him.

Khar knew himself and his appetites. Among Divani, this kind of degeneracy did not fit anything he believed about who he was.

As if that were not enough, this cunning, enticing, lethally dangerous creature kept baiting him with her scent. Like the deadliest predator pretending to be easy prey, drawing the unsuspecting closer.

The thought of being snared by the human female sent Khar's twin hearts racing.

He had to avoid that fate at all costs.

Something was wrong. He lacked information. There had to be some detail his focus had slipped past.

So he watched.

He waited in silence for any sign of weakness.

Chrono-cycles passed.

Nothing.

What cursed hell could have forged a species like human?

When an unexpected message arrived from Vegrun, it felt like a perfect chance to reclaim solid ground. Vegrun had forwarded an invitation to the grand opening of a new racetrack on the station, transferable for two guests. It granted unlimited track access within a certain time window.

Khar could barely hide his grin as a plan took shape.

Maybe the Usurper had surpassed him in almost everything.

But not here.

Khar had survived the hardest pilot trainings. He was an excellent driver. He would show her. With luck, that would bury the damned challenge once and for all.

Everything would be fine.

He forced his features into a neutral, even friendly mask as he presented Lily with the invite, pretending his nerves were not stretched to breaking while he waited for her answer.

“Lily, look. Want to try a racetrack after shift? It is rare. Usually it is very expensive and booked out chrono-cycles in advance.”

The roots of his horns throbbed from stress. Too much depended on her answer. She hesitated, then, as if remembering something, nodded.

“Okay. I just don’t know what kind of vehicles we’ll be driving. I don’t have experience with... well, those.”

“Do not worry. You said you drove vehicles on Earth. However primitive they were, there will be plenty to choose from. You will find something you like.”

Khar was right.

The new track combined cutting-edge tech with the renaissance of mechanical vehicles sweeping the IMPERIUM. In a civilization optimized for assisted operation, only artificial difficulty could satisfy adrenaline-hungry daredevils. Khar loved how the ring coiled around the station, each sector simulating different weather and terrain to test the drivers’ skills.

Their guide, a tall, slim Dak’ri female in the track’s blue and white colors, tapped along ahead of them on the tips of her jointed arms. She led them from the stands to the skydeck, then into the garage, where imported classics from every quadrant waited, tailored to local species’ tastes.

“As you can see, we offer a wide selection so species of all sizes can find their perfect racer. Gravitational fields protect the track’s edge to minimize collision risks. The vehicles are mechanically driven, but we can customize every characteristic, including controls and output, so that only reflexes and piloting

skill decide the winner. May the best pilot prevail, yes?”

She smiled with her yellow teeth, an expression not typical of her species, but a good host tried to match Divani preferences even if she knew nothing about Lily.

Khar ran his hand along the iridescent skin of a red machine with serpentine externals, admiring the rainbow sheen.

Lily drifted uncertainly, studying the skids, air-cushion models, and designs with soft pads and sucker arrays.

Then she spotted a four-wheeled car with a single steering device.

Her eyes lit up and she ran to it.

Of course Khar noticed. He always watched her from the corner of his eye. He could not take the greatest challenge of his life lightly.

“How does this one work, Karora?” Lily asked the Dak’ri guide.

The name surprised Khar. He did not remember anyone mentioning it.

“Ah, an interesting choice. Simple but brilliant, as they say. An internal motor drives four wheels. You can set it to four-wheel or two-wheel drive. Steering wheel for direction, throttle and brake pedals to command the motor. Would you like to try a simulation before your actual lap?”

Lily nodded and pulled the sim-cowl over her head, tuning the controls to herself.

Khar decided he would drive the same model. A race only meant something if the variables matched and he still won, as he should have from the beginning.

While Lily inspected every virtual bolt, Khar reviewed the map with Karora and loaded it into his system.

Unlike Lily, he recognized the vehicle on sight. He had not

driven this exact model before, but he was certain it would be fine. He left the auto-settings as they were. Engineers had optimized them after tens of thousands of test laps.

Lily peeled off the sim-hood grinning, and for a moment Khar swayed at the impact of that smile.

Damn Usurper.

Not for long. Now everything between them would finally be decided.

“Khar, you’re taking the same one? Great, I’ll watch how you do it and try to copy.”

He grunted, then turned to Karora.

“Top speed?”

This time her smile seemed genuine, as if speed tempted her too.

“Our track has special permission from the IMPERIUM to exceed local surface speed limits by twenty-five percent.”

Lily took her place on the skydeck. Khar settled into his element and rolled to the line.

Divani were famous across the IMPERIUM for fast reflexes, very useful for a species at home in combat, though their arrogance did not earn them many friends. When spectators and staff saw a Divani up next, almost everyone paused. Whether they cheered or glared did not concern him.

He cracked his neck and clipped into the safety webbing. It pinched across his broad chest, but he ignored it. The helmet fit perfectly. He was used to the pressure from Legion service, and the rigid shell left room for his horns.

At the signal, Khar slammed the throttle.

Gravel sprayed from the bright white stones lining the start. The sunny slopes of Lurok gave way to the rains of the Geror Crags, then to the pangaros swamps of Vegrun’s homeworld,

and finally to a snow-squall finish.

He carved corners like a sculptor working stone, accelerated flawlessly on the straights, and when he blasted for the line he was himself again.

The undefeated emperor of life.

He cut through the finishing laser and the track erupted in cheers. The announcer's voice tore through the roar.

"Honored guests, a new record on our brand-new track. Will anyone be able to match a lap like that? Astonishing. Absolutely astonishing."

Khar parked in the garage and climbed to the skydeck with measured, confident steps, hoping Lily had witnessed every heartbeat of his triumph. Every holo either showed him unfolding from the seat or replayed the most dazzling moments of his run.

He could hardly wait to see her expression. Admiring, or sulking. He was not sure which he wanted more.

At the top, the Dak'ri female almost flung herself at him, but one look froze her mid-pounce. He might accept rapture from Lily. From no one else.

"Khar, that was genuinely cool," Lily said, smiling when she saw him.

He tasted the word, then inclined his head. Yes. Appropriate.

She had not driven yet, but he had no doubt. He might have lost some battles, yet the war had ended in his victory.

Their host led Lily down to the start. Khar sank into one of the plush seats on the platform, a chair so oversized it felt like a throne. A servitor offered a tray of refreshments. From afar, visitors watched him with shining eyes.

After the torment of recent weeks, he decided he deserved a little reward.

The highlight would be watching Lily's inevitable struggle.

Track staff strapped her in and finished the safety checks. She was ready almost at once.

Khar did not notice he had leaned forward, elbows on his knees, eyes fixed on her.

Lily's launch was decisive. Perhaps not as explosive as his, but her rhythm on the opening straight was good.

Then came the first corner.

Instead of braking, the vehicle accelerated.

She tried to correct.

The car hit the barrier and spun.

The gravity fields scrubbed the speed at once, but even so the forces slamming into her body must have been immense.

Ice terror seized Khar.

For a heartbeat his entire frame locked as his senses went into overdrive, capturing every flicker of the impact and hyper-focusing on the shape rattling in the driver's seat. He was more shaken than he had ever been in any Legion brawl or battle beyond.

Had it simply been too long since real conflict? Or was his body rebelling because he had taken part in such an unequal contest?

He did not know.

He vaulted the railing in a single motion, landed in a bloom of dust, and sprinted across the sand toward the now-silent vehicle, every muscle fiber singing.

He reached the door first, far ahead of the techs, only for Lily to push it open from the inside, almost knocking him over.

"Oh, Khar, sorry. I didn't see you there."

People did not simply overlook Khar. Not with his size and the gravity he cast over any space.

But Lily was the exception to every rule.

His gaze swept her body, searching for blood, bruises, any sign of injury. Finding nothing, he let out the breath he had not realized he was holding.

“What happened? You drove straight into the wall.”

Before he could continue, Karora and the technicians reached them and swarmed around Lily like a worried insect-hive around its queen.

Lily looked more embarrassed than flattered. She ignored Khar’s question and spoke directly to their guide.

“Karora, I didn’t damage anything, did I?”

Surprise flashed across the Dak’ri’s face. Of course Lily was fine. That was what the gravity fields were for, though even with all precautions the forces were harsh on most bodies.

“No, Lily, do not worry. No damage. And if there had been, our insurance would have covered it.”

Relief softened Lily’s features, then she gave Karora a hopeful look from beneath lowered lashes.

“In that case... could I try again?”

“But of course. As long as you are sure you are alright.”

After assuring Karora that she was being overprotective, which Khar absolutely did not agree with, Lily returned to the tuning booth while they prepared a new vehicle for her. With the sim-cowl over her head, she gestured decisively.

“Can we swap the pedals? Throttle on the left, brake on the right? It is hard to drive opposite from what I am used to. When I slid, I stepped on the throttle instead of the brake.”

They honored every request.

Until she asked them to set all assistance to minimum and switch from automatic to manual.

Then Karora frowned.

“Are you sure about that? Most drivers prefer these assists. If you turn them off, the experience will be completely different. You will have to track far more at once and, in light of the earlier crash, in short, it is practically a different sport.”

“I’m sure. The assists overcorrect. It feels like driving a toy. Trust me, Karora, this will be fine. It will be closest to the Earth cars I know.”

For the first time Khar saw Lily stand her ground that firmly. It surprised him, even as he silently agreed with Karora’s misgivings.

He resisted the urge to rub the base of his horns, a classic Divani tell for stress. He had trained himself not to show weakness. Instead he waited by the line with the techs, VoidBrace linked into the track network, eyes locked on Lily.

When the lap began again, his hidden worry evaporated.

He watched, spellbound.

The jet-black car ran far wilder than his. Tires spinning, controlled drifts across the shifting terrain.

But the mastery was absolute.

Steep climbs, vicious weather, unstable ground, hairpin turns, none of it slowed her.

She was simply perfect.

Past the finish laser she braked with a long squeal, sprang out of the seat, and ran straight to him.

“That was divine. Thank you for talking me into this, Khar.”

“Yes. Not bad. You will have to go faster to catch me.”

His brevity did nothing to dim her mood. Arm in arm with Karora, she floated back up to the skydeck, chattering about race types, vehicles, and the other drivers.

Khar did not follow, though the adoration due a record-holder waited for him above.

Deep down he knew he did not deserve it.

Yes, his lap had been faster. But every ground-vehicle pilot knew true skill showed when systems failed and the driver had only themselves. Maybe the gawking masses did not know Lily had shut the assists off.

Khar did.

He had thought his torment was over.

It had only just begun.

Chrono-cycles blurred together. No night, no day. Only the human female's face, always before him. Not even trying, yet always better. Always above him. Always humiliating him.

The worst part was that she did not even know.

He imagined the moment Lily realized how thoroughly she outstripped him. In his mind she laughed at his inadequacy, disgusted.

No.

That could not be allowed to happen.

It didn't help that he kept finding common ground with her, as if the path to becoming enemies kept splitting into something else—something far more dangerous.

One cycle, Lily had been following Khar's smooth movements across Vitro's main console when she suddenly burst out in her melodic, and therefore intolerably smooth, voice.

"I think it's very strange that this spaceship is the absolute luxury cruiser and her technology is mind-bogglingly advanced by human standards, and yet it has buttons and a few screens and voice control instead of something more... I don't know... sciency and efficient."

Khar looked at her appraisingly. He seemed inclined to answer with his usual hum, but in the end the topic appeared to interest him.

“The IMPERIUM moves in technological cycles. It is not always the quickest innovation that becomes widespread. Some beings prefer physical touch over the fluidity of plasma screens. Herion perfected the balance, creating an inviting system while still enabling full thought control, if one possesses the device for that... which I see you do not. Why is that?”

Lily blushed, which reminded him of the red of a delightful but deadly spice that Divani youth sometimes enjoy for pranks.

“I’m fine with the translator ... but the thought controller chip felt excessive. What about you, Khar? I don’t see any markings.”

With one sharp claw, Khar tapped the root of one of his horns, producing a faint metallic clink. Lily squinted, then did that strange human nodding of hers when she recognized the thread.

“I also only have the translator,” Khar confirmed.

After a brief silence, during which Khar contemplated ending the conversation, a sudden surge of words found their way out of his blasted mouth.

“You were right not to acquire that. They were advertised as safe. They are not.”

The way her clear, lightless, yet sparkling eyes locked onto his face was like a scorching mark he could not bear any further.

In a final act of desperation, he considered poison.

Despicable, craven, cowardly, but he could not bear the thought of being outdone by a small female.

She did not have to die. That would trigger an investigation and end badly for him.

But if she were incapacitated, he could claim honor forbade him to fight such a weak opponent and the whole business could be quietly forgotten.

Just a tiny dose.

A pinch of red harmun in her lunch.

Non-lethal, but for most species it caused vomiting and chrono-cycles of bed rest. Trivial.

As expected, Lily accepted the meal without suspicion.

Almost too easy.

“You brought me lunch? Thank you, Khar, that is so kind of you. You know, on Earth...”

She launched into a long explanation of Human food customs and traditions.

Khar did not hear a word.

He stared, unblinking, waiting for the first bite.

He would not let her eat much. He did not want real harm, only enough to make her unfit to fight.

One bite.

Two.

Three.

“Khar, this...”

She lifted a hand to her mouth and made a small sound. Like a cough, but tiny.

“It is pretty spicy. Do Divani like this? It is not bad, do not get me wrong. We have much hotter dishes on Earth, but I prefer only mildly spicy food. Hm. It is getting better. The first bite just surprised me.”

Khar did not understand.

The dish was so hot he had wept black tears after a single bite, his inner glow dimming with the pain. Shameful, pitiful, but he had tasted it first to be safe. He could not be too obvious. If there was an inquiry, he needed plausible deniability.

It had to be edible for him. Barely, and crying, but edible.

By the time he collected his thoughts, Lily had finished the entire plate.

Oh no.

What have I done?

He was already calculating how fast he could drag her to a med station for immediate treatment after so much harmun.

Then Lily made a sound he had never heard from her before.

Khar shut his eyes, accepting that his life was over.

He had murdered a colleague whose only crime was making him feel threatened. There would be an investigation. The station would buzz about the cowardly Divani. The thought flooded him and closed like a fist around his throat.

“Khar, sorry, I started hiccuping. I will drink some water. It will pass.”

He stared.

She had to be delirious.

She had eaten a full serving and nothing?

A horrible suspicion dawned.

“Human female, how does your digestive system work?”

“Um, I don’t know exactly. Sometimes spicy food makes me hiccup. I think it has to do with stomach acid, but I am not sure.”

“Stomach... acid?”

“Yes, that. You know, hydrochloric acid and the like. It’s so corrosive it can make metal smoke if you drip it on, but a layer of mucus protects the stomach so it doesn’t digest itself. I’m no expert, but it’s one stage of human digestion.”

Khar sat there and tried to process the new brick that had just been mortared into the impenetrable wall in front of him.

A being that looked like something a Divani child might invent to ward off night terrors, yet stronger and faster than the most famous Divani warrior. With pyny claws. With skin that behaved like armor.

And hydrochloric acid sloshing around inside.

In that moment Khar accepted he had been defeated. He

needed no further proof from Lily to know his claim to superiority was gone, irrevocably.

He scooped up a spoonful of his own now-cold meal.

Black tears ran down his cheeks as he forced himself to eat every last bite.

Chapter 7

Shared Quarters Protocol

Lily

“The outbreak of the KRIO-223 virus was one of the most defining events of the last thirty chrono-decades in the IMPERIUM. We believed that with the state of modern medicine there was nothing left to fear. We were wrong.”

Documentary series on the KRIO-223 virus (After watching, Lily rated it a solid ten out of the usual twelve on the Galactic Entertainment Scale)

Lily worried about Khar more than she cared to admit. Her colleague had been unable to work for three chrono-cycles after their shared lunch. She had no idea what had made him sick, but she held the line, taking responsibility for everything until he returned.

She went through Vitro’s full error report and fixed every issue that didn’t require expensive replacement components. Then she tackled the problems that officially did require them, as her experience told her the existing tools were enough if she recalibrated a few parameters. Two chrono-years aboard her own starcruiser had carved ingenuity into her bones.

For the first time since her abduction, Lily felt genuinely lonely. She had grown fond of Khar over the past month. They barely spoke, yet the gray giant's quiet, towering presence had become a steady point in her chaotic new life. His fierce face had frightened her at first, but now she associated it with safety, warmth, even comfort.

Also, Khar had even offered her his food, a gesture so unexpected it still glowed in her mind. She didn't know exactly when he would return, but she was determined to repay his kindness with a meal of her own making. She would make it spicier than usual this time; now she knew Khar preferred that flavor.

A soft chime signaled an incoming call. Lily copied the casual gesture she'd seen Khar use dozens of times and flicked the signal to the main display.

"Vegrun, how can I help you?"

"Lily! Always a pleasure to see your little Human... what do you call it?"

"My face?"

"Yes, your face! How is my new mechanic doing?"

"Everything is wonderful. Vitro is in perfect condition, waiting for her owner."

Vegrun rippled happily across the screen, tentacles twisting in excitement.

"I can hardly wait for our next journey, but regrettably I am very busy. In about ten chrono-cycles we should be ready to launch. Be prepared by then. Usually you will not receive such generous notice, but what can I say? Vitro is my weakness. I want her in flawless form."

He chuckled at his own joke. Lily smiled politely and breathed out in relief when the call finally ended. The thought of facing Vegrun without Khar at her side was depressing. The nearly

silent, imposing Divani was a stabilizing wall against Vegrun's noisy theatrics.

She was still sinking deeper into her gloom when Vitro announced a crew-level entry authorization.

Khar was back.

Lily shot to her feet, instinctively ready to run to him before she stopped herself. Khar would probably hate it if she fussed. Better to wait, calm and collected, at the central console.

The hatch slid open and Lily felt tension melt from her shoulders at the sight of him: a massive gray figure, horns nearly scraping the frame, eyes glowing like embers in his skull.

"Khar, how are you? Are you all right? Wait, never mind, I know work comes first. I'll send you the report I put together."

She tapped in a flurry. Khar's VoidBrace blinked as the file arrived. He sank into the seat beside her with a weight that shook the console. He looked thinner now, muscles sharply carved, the way bodybuilders back home looked when they dehydrated themselves before competitions.

He didn't even check the data. He just stared ahead, silent and unmoving.

Lily tried again.

"Vegrun called. He said he's incredibly busy, but expects to leave in ten chrono-cycles. Of course we should be ready before then, but that's the plan."

Khar rubbed his forehead and the base of one horn, as though even this simple update caused him pain.

"Did he say how long we will be gone?"

Lily shook her head, forgetting for a moment that Divani rarely used such gestures.

"No. Sorry, I forgot to ask."

At last he looked at her. His glowing eyes were like the

lanterns of death—terrifying, except Lily had grown strangely comfortable with them.

“You were right not to ask. If he wants to tell us, fine. If not, we don’t pressure him.”

Lily’s chest lifted. Praise from Khar felt absurdly good.

Silence followed, but it felt peaceful. Khar had approved of her judgment. Vegrun wouldn’t arrive for ten chrono-cycles. Her probation was ending. Her own ship was safe. The universe felt manageable for once.

She didn’t realize she had begun to hum her favorite song. She loved it so much she had shared it across every public database, uploaded it for any curious non-human to find. She played it in the gym and in common rooms whenever allowed. No one had ever said they liked it. Usually she heard things like “too loud,” “abrasive,” or “is this a battle anthem,” but Lily didn’t care.

She loved it.

And she didn’t notice that while she hummed softly, Khar’s massive boot tapped slowly, rhythmically, in perfect time with her tune.

Several chrono-cycles later, they were polishing the ship’s exterior in their suits.

Khar glided along Vitro’s hull in a sleek black Divani spacesuit. The design followed the lines of his body like a second skin, its angular plating emphasizing the sharp sweep of his horns. Lily suspected this was a deliberate Divani fashion choice. Against the abyss-dark surface of the suit, the horns themselves were traced with faint blue bioluminescent lights, turning his silhouette into something both elegant and predatory in the void.

Using subtle bursts of vibrational propulsion, Khar moved with the effortless grace of an Earth feline stalking its prey.

Lily, meanwhile, hated her own suit.

At first glance it was beautiful, like everything else aboard Vitro. Long, gauzy beige fabric wrapped around her in layered folds, forming a protective cocoon against the bite of space. The material shimmered softly in the starlight, more like haute couture than survival gear.

Unfortunately, it was also unbearably warm.

Her spacewear unfolded into delicate, wing-like protrusions along her back, thin membranes that helped capture energy from nearby solar radiation. When she moved, the fabric billowed around her, and she drifted through the void like some oversized jellyfish, slow and graceful whether she liked it or not.

The suit itself was brilliant engineering. It could keep her alive in open space for chrono-cycles with minimal input, harvesting faint solar flares for power and recycling every possible resource.

But brilliance did not stop sweat from running down her spine.

Inside the elegant cocoon, Lily was slowly roasting.

Her silent suffering was interrupted when an emergency alert flashed on their communicators.

“We have a problem.”

Before Lily could react, Khar unclipped both of them from the tether lines, hauled open the airlock hatch beneath them, and pushed her inside without hesitation.

“Khar! What happened?”

He lifted a hand to silence her while he read the incoming data. His expression hardened. Then, in a rare flare of irritation, he barked at Vitro as though the ship’s AI cared even remotely about his temper.

“Vitro, full lockdown on guest suite B. KRIO-223 contamination alert. Full exposure report and sterilization estimate, now.”

Lily froze. Vitro sealed the suite immediately, switching the entire area to a closed-cycle atmosphere.

“Guest suite B sealed. Exposure analysis underway. Estimated sterilization period for KRIO-223: three chrono-cycles.”

Lily reached for her helmet clasps, but Khar caught her wrist.

“Wait until Vitro confirms this area safe.”

“Because of KRIO-223 exposure? What is that?”

Khar stared at her through his darkened visor as if he couldn't believe the question.

“You've never heard of it? Where have you been the last thirty chrono-years?”

Lily punched his upper arm playfully. It came out harder than she meant, but surely someone like Khar didn't even feel it. His species worshipped strength. A little tap meant nothing.

“Oh, come on. You know I was on Earth until two chrono-years ago.”

The giant in the black suit stared at her.

“You have only been in space for two chrono-years.”

A flush crept up her neck.

“Yes. This is my first job. Well, not ever—I worked plenty on Earth. But out here, yes.”

The silence stretched, so she added in a small voice:

“I promise I'll try not to be a burden.”

Khar didn't respond to that. He returned to the emergency at hand.

“KRIO-223 is an extremely resilient nanovirus. It attacks the nervous system and is fatal to most intelligent species,” Khar said. “The station has confirmed an active case. All docking bays and communal areas are sealed until sterilization is complete. This is the strictest level of lockdown.”

Lily shrugged. It was not her first sterilization cycle. Space

loved its protocols, especially the dramatic ones.

“All right,” she said. “How long are we stuck here?”

“Vitro is still calculating air contamination levels. Until clearance is given, the suits stay on.”

Almost on cue, Vitro’s voice filled the suite.

“Guest suite B atmosphere analyzed. Probability of viral presence: zero point two percent. KRIO-223 protocol initiated for all remaining ship sections. Please remain within guest suite B until sterilization is complete. Estimated remaining time: three chrono-cycles.”

Lily’s stomach dropped.

Three chrono-cycles. Nearly three galactic days, sealed inside a luxurious but very small suite with Khar. She liked him. She even trusted him. But being confined with a coworker for that long was a different matter entirely.

Before she could dwell on it, Khar was already halfway out of his suit. Sweat slicked his gray skin, his powerful muscles shifting beneath a thin black undershirt.

Yes. This is going to be a very long three chrono-cycles.

She hurried out of her own suit. Even with a top-tier model, she was soaked through. Heat rose to her cheeks as she hoped Khar would not notice. He spared her only a brief glance before striding into the tiny bathroom and shutting the door behind him.

While she waited, Lily pulled up the IMPERIUM database and began skimming entries on KRIO-223. She had barely made it through the first paragraph when a heavy crash echoed from behind the bathroom door.

“Khar?” she called, alarmed. “Are you all right?”

“I am fine,” came his muffled reply. “I will be out shortly.”

Relief loosened her chest, but only slightly. When he emerged,

he was freshly cleaned, water still clinging to his skin. A massive bruise bloomed across the bridge of his nose, sealed with a layer of medic-gel.

“Oh my god, Khar,” she said. “What happened?”

He shrugged, as if the injury were trivial.

“I tripped. There is a first aid kit inside. I treated it. Do not concern yourself.”

She could not help it.

“That looks awful. That must have hurt. Are you sure you do not need help?”

He met her gaze with that unreadable, glowing stare she was slowly learning to interpret.

“It will heal. The gel seals the injury. I also cannot smell anything right now, which is preferable. Under these conditions, that could be dangerous.”

She tilted her head, unconvinced.

“Well, if you say so. I read that KRIO-223 spreads through the air, but I doubt a broken nose improves your immune system. Still, maybe the gel helps.”

Without another word, Khar lowered himself onto the couch beside her. The furniture groaned under his weight. Lily had never sat this close to him before. Up close, his sheer size and the solid strength of his arms were impossible to ignore.

She bolted for the bathroom.

Better safe than saying something she could never take back.

Chapter 8

A Big Dog's Big Fall

Lily

“Among the Divani there are many ways of competition, and not all are tied to physical strength. Sometimes strategy is tested... through physical violence.”

The IMPERIUM Guide to Peaceful Coexistence with Registered Spacefaring Species

Lily was bored.

Dangerously bored.

And when she was bored, her thoughts had an annoying tendency to drift toward sex.

In the two chrono-years she had spent in space, she had been completely celibate. She was not nearly brave enough to initiate anything with a member of another species, even though the more she encountered them, the more accustomed she became to the endless variety of shapes and bodies.

There were, of course, forums dedicated to facilitating interspecies unions. Unfortunately, as a human, Lily was not considered a Registered Spacefaring Species. That meant endless bureaucratic steps before she could even appear in the

database. She was not ready to parade her biological processes and intimate anatomy in front of some space administrator who would decide which species she was compatible with.

So she was left with longing glances.

And guest suite B offered no shortage of worthy targets.

The Vitromium starcruiser's luxury design philosophy extended to the guest suites as well. They were not spacious, that was the purpose of the common areas and main suites, but their tasteful opulence and meticulous attention to detail made them easy places to relax. Originally, the suite had some long, elaborate name in Vegrun's native language that probably meant something important. To Lily and Khar, it was simply suite B.

Now they were sharing a sliver of a bedroom, a breath of a living room with a single comfortable couch, and a bathroom so small Khar could barely fold himself inside.

There was very little actual work to do. Khar flatly refused Lily's repeated suggestions to try any of the popular games from this sector of the galaxy. So Lily occupied herself with reading, music, and other discreet pastimes that would not disturb him.

Khar, meanwhile, seemed to have exactly two priorities.

Training.

And grumbling.

Grumbling.

And training.

Lily could have lived with the training. Watching the play of muscles eventually made her squirm and blush, but that was manageable. She could even call it some kind of anthropomorphic study, as the similarity to human physical traits was stunning, yet there were some noticeable differences. (At least she felt a tiny bit better thinking of it that way instead of

objectifying her clearly very dedicated bodybuilder colleague.)

The grumbling, however, was driving her insane. Khar did not even suspend it during meals, and by now Lily was thoroughly sick of listening to it.

Their only saving grace was that suite B had a built-in mini stasis pantry stocked with enough food and drinks to last several chrono-cycles. No banquets, but enough to get them through the lockdown.

By the second chrono-cycle, Lily's patience snapped.

She had to do something to knock Khar out of this endless loop. Maybe he would feel better if he got to fight a little.

"Khar, listen."

Khar acted as if Lily's words had never reached him, grinding through what looked like his hundredth push-up beside the couch she was stretched out on.

"Lily calling Khar. Khar, report in."

The Divani finally stopped, reluctantly lifting his glowing eyes to her.

"I was thinking," Lily said, "it has been well over the thirty chrono-cycles you said you would wait before challenging me."

Khar said nothing, but Lily noticed the movement of his throat as he swallowed.

"Anyway, obviously we cannot do anything that would damage the suite," she went on. "But on Earth, men often test their strength by trying to force each other's arm down onto a table."

Suspicion rolled off Khar in waves. Lily could practically bottle it. She did not back down.

She tugged him into a sitting position and dragged him over to the small dining table.

"It is called arm wrestling. I have not done it that many times, but it is very simple. Even kids sometimes do it against adults.

Look, like this.”

She showed him how to sit, how to place his elbow, then clasped his hand and gently pressed it toward the tabletop.

“That is it. Your elbow stays on the table. Like that.”

When Khar signaled that he understood, Lily deployed her final argument.

“It is an easy way to demonstrate arm strength. I thought maybe it bothered you that our duel never happened, but this way we settle it, and I do not get hurt. What do you say?”

She flashed her most convincing smile, the one experience had taught her was the hardest to resist.

“So. Are you in?”

Khar growled softly.

Lily nearly cheered.

Finally, resolution. No blood. Khar would get his fun. And if letting the big guy beat her at arm wrestling meant less grumbling for the rest of the lockdown, it was a very small price to pay.

“All right then,” she said brightly. “Let’s go.”

She felt his muscles tense and answered with her full strength. No reason to make it too easy for him. She worried briefly that Khar might slam her hand down too hard, but there was a small medical kit in the bathroom. Nothing serious could happen.

But contrary to her expectations, Khar’s hand slowly began to move downward.

When it neared the tabletop, he stopped.

Lily thought of all those movies where two men arm wrestled, one nearly lost, and then turned the fight around at the last second. Khar was clearly doing the same thing, just playing with her.

She smiled. So he did have a sense of humor.

Encouraged, she pushed harder, her hand trembling.

The dramatic reversal never came.

Khar's hand touched the table.

Lily flared in indignation.

"Khar, seriously. You should not have let me win. It is sweet, I appreciate it, but that was not the point."

Khar did not answer.

He only stared at his hand long after Lily released it.

For the next chrono-cycle and a half, they spoke very little.

Khar stopped working out altogether and sat next to the windows, quiet and unmoving as a statue. At first this annoyed Lily (even more than his prank at letting her win, which she frankly felt as if he was looking down on her), but after a little while she found that this was a serious upgrade to the perpetual grumbling.

Well done, me. Well done, indeed.

Chapter 9

Live and Let Live

Khar

“Among Divani sports champions, perhaps the most remarkable is a young titan who rose from humble beginnings to colossal heights: Khar. Remember the name. We expect great things from him yet.”

Excerpt from the first official interplanetary broadcast about Khar

Seven chrono-cycles later (approximately 8.75 Earth days)

Tired of always setting the example.

Tired of always being strong.

Tired of never being allowed to look up to anyone, because he was required to be the best.

Khar had been defeated.

It took time to accept that the faces he had always believed were his own had been masks. When they finally fell away, everything grew lighter. The hardest part had been waiting for the blow. Then the moment arrived, the thing he had feared all his life, and he discovered that it was not so terrible after all.

Perfection was over. The pressure was gone.

Now he would train not because he was being chased, but

because he enjoyed it. He would grow stronger to reach someone he respected, not because a thousand eyes watched him, ready to judge every sign of weakness.

The human female.

The Usurper.

No.

Lily, the Liberator.

Lily sulked for a few chrono-cycles over her imagined grievance, believing that Khar did not respect her enough to consider her a worthy opponent. She forgot all resentment the moment he addressed her by name for the first time.

Had she known that in Divani culture only the victor was granted a name, while the defeated were addressed only by general functions such as Divani male, navigator, or mechanic, she might have reacted very differently.

Now that Khar had moved past his resistance toward her, he found himself deeply amused by the vast gulf between Lily's self-image and her actual abilities.

Even her appearance did not align with what she was capable of.

Among the Divani, size, strength, and social standing were directly linked, yet Lily barely reached the center of Khar's chest. Her small head rested there when she stood close, and still she could leap nearly as high as a gerilfi predator pursuing its prey. Her pinkish-yellow skin, so pale that veins often showed through it, was as resilient as an IMPERIUM-standard protective glove.

And Khar knew exactly what those slender arms could do when Lily focused on overpowering him in arm wrestling.

As for her scent, Khar would rather break his own nose than act on impulses he would regret while trapped alone with her.

His nose healed the moment he stepped into Vitro's medical bay, but the wound to his pride would have lasted forever.

"Cursed human females and their irresistible scent. That should be illegal," he muttered.

Khar had no doubt that if humanity were ever classified as a Registered Species by the IMPERIUM, they would be placed in a category marked particularly dangerous.

Even sealed away from Lily's scent, he was still far more aroused than was appropriate for sharing a ship with a coworker.

The discomfort left him irritable, and only training helped.

A little.

Then Lily, as always, turned his life upside down once again.

Since the arm-wrestling incident, Khar avoided interacting with her whenever possible. He had learned that he could never predict what to expect from the tiny catastrophe.

Lily was like the radiation of Divani homeworld's sun. You may try to protect yourself against it, but eventually the radiation will wear you down.

Perhaps it was better to accept that.

More than once, Khar amused himself with the thought of inviting the human girl to the Divani core worlds, just to witness the reaction of the elders when Lily effortlessly pinned one of them to the floor.

He also knew it would never happen.

The events of the past weeks made him understand why he had drifted so far from the Divani nesting galaxy. What happened with Lily severed the last and strongest tie to his past.

He was no longer Khar the Unbeatable.

He was simply Khar, free to shape his future however he wished.

He went to work humming.

Lily was already waiting on the bridge.

“I’m glad you’re here, Khar. Vegrun will arrive soon. I’ve prepared everything, but I’m nervous about meeting him.”

Khar dropped into the seat beside her and performed a cursory check of Vitro’s status.

Why bother nitpicking? Lily had done flawless work ever since he met her.

Not that he would ever tell her that.

“Why? He barely notices us. He enjoys the novelty of rare species working for him, but usually he brings a few business partners for short trips, or takes one of his lovers on a shopping excursion. We’ll greet him, and then we likely won’t see him again until the farewell.”

Khar knew he had become more talkative lately, but he did not mind. Lily, for her part, visibly brightened during their conversations.

What a sweet little creature.

Horos’s voice filled the speakers.

And this one is a disgusting little creature.

The fact that Horos was nearly his size did nothing to alter his opinion.

“Vegrun’s vessel has docked at bay two. After expedited customs clearance, we will proceed to the Vitromium. Remain on standby.”

Khar responded with a low grunt that could have meant anything.

Lily rolled her eyes at his reaction and replied politely.

“Yes, sir. We will be ready for your arrival.”

Whatever Lily had feared about Vegrun never came to pass. Just as Khar had predicted, their employer cheerfully introduced them to his lover as if they were old friends, then promptly

forgot about them for chrono-cycles at a time.

Horos, who Lily later learned had been the one to interview her for the job, never even set foot aboard the ship.

Khar and Lily barely had any orders to execute.

Vitro was largely self-governing by design, and between the two of them they had refined her algorithms to near perfection.

Once, they drained and refilled the star-deck pool that mimicked the chemical composition of the oceans of Gentarno, after Vegrun and his lover finished amusing themselves in it.

Once in a chrono-cycle, they remotely navigated their employer to the luxury space promenade nearby, far enough from the Szaler Nebula that Vegrun could enjoy the view during dinner.

Khar was convinced this was the easiest, least stressful assignment he had ever had.

“Khar, something is wrong with the data.”

Lily stood at the console, frowning at the cascading lines on the main display, while Khar lounged beside her with his feet propped up.

For a moment, he considered pretending not to hear her and letting her solve it alone.

She was faster and sharper than he was, after all.

But his sense of honor would not allow it.

Hierarchically, she outranked him, even if she did not know it.

“Show me.”

As Lily explained, Khar’s glowing eyes narrowed with sudden clarity.

Someone had breached Vitro’s defenses and was currently inside cargo bay two.

The intrusion was executed with such precision that without

Lily's sharp eye, they would not have noticed until the intruder reached a primary panel, where real damage could be done.

Khar sprang to his feet and seized Lily, pulling her along the corridor toward the dock while already calling Vegrun on his private channel.

"I hope this is important, Khar."

"Multiple intruders in cargo bay two. Professional level. Vitromium's security did not trigger. You may be the target, or your guest, or they may be attempting to seize the ship with minimal damage. Lily and I are en route."

Khar appreciated the calm in Vegrun's response, though in truth he had never seen the tentacled being panic.

"They are fortunate that Silomarila is currently bathing and did not hear this. She has been quite anxious lately, and the last thing we need is her learning she is still not safe. I would be left standing here with dry tentacles."

So that was her name.

Vegrun had introduced her, but Khar had not paid much attention.

Privately, he referred to her by the name Lily had jokingly given her.

Madame Turtle, perhaps.

Vegrun would not have appreciated the comparison.

By the time Vegrun finished grumbling about his lover's fragile mental state, Khar and Lily reached the external panel of the cargo bay.

With a single motion, Khar seized manual control through his handheld console and accessed the data the intruders had failed to overwrite.

"I see it now, sir. Ten individuals breached the bay. Their vessel is still docked to the cargo aperture. That is how they

entered. Small-bodied. Based on thermal signatures, I would classify them as vukri.”

Lily’s eyes went wide in her pale face, but to her credit she made no sound.

Khar needed her boldness intact for what came next.

“Khar and Lily, listen carefully. Resolve this quietly and quickly so that Silomarila remains unaware. Naturally, I expect you to protect the ship as well. You will receive double the usual hazard compensation.”

As Vegrun spoke, Khar had already torn open the locker containing weapons and protective gear.

He fastened a defensive vest onto Lily with the brisk efficiency one might use on a child, then secured his own.

“Sir, ten against two alters the odds. I am owed triple hazard pay, and Lily should be allowed to order a solar collector for her vessel if we resolve this minor inconvenience.”

Lily froze mid-motion and looked up at him with sudden hope. A solar collector.

Only premium owners like Vegrun could order one.

It would reduce her fuel consumption to a tenth of its current level.

Her resistance collapsed instantly.

Khar suppressed the half-smile tugging at his mouth.

Only one being remained to be convinced.

Vegrun seemed more distressed by the negotiation than by the attack.

Had he possessed teeth, he would have ground them.

Then the bathroom door opened behind him, and he had no choice but to agree.

“Fine. But deal with it quickly. Darling, there you are. I ordered you a new surprise. What? No, not that. I learned from

last time.”

Khar cut the connection with a grin, sparing himself the rest of Vegrin’s pitiful scrambling, and pressed a stun weapon into Lily’s hands.

Before she could object, he spoke over her.

“Stay behind me. I will handle this. Nothing will happen to you. If they are not vukri and they are armed, your vest will absorb any ranged strikes. You will feel only the shockwave. I am nearly certain they will prefer close combat. When we enter, we move straight into the storage aisles. They will think they have the advantage. They will be wrong.”

Lily nodded once and tightened her grip on the weapon.

“I understand, but why not simply deploy Vitro’s drones?”

“Impossible. IMPERIUM law forbids autonomous systems from attacking sentient beings. Every unit has an automatic lockout in situations like this. Now move.”

Before the human female could change her mind, Khar slammed his palm onto the door control and broke into a sprint toward the rows of storage lockers.

Lily ran after him, careful to stay in the giant’s shadow, but contrary to her expectations, no projectiles came flying their way.

When they reached the narrow corridors between the lockers, Khar was grinning broadly.

“This is it. Now the hunt begins.”

The first intruder burst into view. The lean, brown-skinned creature was nearly as tall as Khar, but lacked the mass and definition of a Divani frame. It rushed toward them at frightening speed, shrieking to summon its companions. One clawed, membrane-like limb swung up to strike. Khar caught it effortlessly at the joint and bent it back the wrong way.

The creature's scream was piercing, but mercifully brief. Khar slammed it to the floor and crushed its skull under his boot.

Two more vukri appeared almost at once. One rounded the corner where the first had fallen. The other launched itself from the top of the locker row. Khar kicked the runner hard enough to snap its spine, but the second landed on his neck, its serrated teeth snapping toward his throat. Khar threw himself backward into a metal support pillar, pulverizing the creature against it.

He turned toward Lily with a triumphant look.

That was when a harpoon-like metal spike tore through his right shoulder and burst from his chest.

Khar dropped to one knee. Even as he fell, he dragged his attacker close. The vukri barely understood what had happened before Khar smashed its skull against the pillar.

"Unauthorized... illegal machinery," Khar muttered, then shouted, "Lily, I cannot remove the projectile without bleeding out. I cannot fight like this. Go to the escape pods. Get inside one."

He severed the tether line, then swayed as the harpoon shifted in his shoulder, pain exploding through him.

He knew Lily was stronger than him. That much was undeniable. But she was also painfully innocent. This had to be her first real fight. She had no chance. And as the defeated one in the hierarchy, it was his duty to protect her.

The luxury promenade maintained its own security detachment. He would send a distress signal. All he had to do was survive until they arrived. Lily's best chance was to flee. He was not worried about Vegrun or Madame Turtle. Breaching the private suite would take more than a gravitational strike.

Lily bit down on her lip.

Khar braced himself to drag her bodily toward the escape pods,

convinced she could not move on her own.

Then she spoke.

“These... ASSHOLES!”

Khar was suddenly certain the harpoon had been poisoned and he was hallucinating.

“Khar, stay here. I’ll deal with these bastards. How dare they attack us? Vitro, reduce gravity to one quarter.”

Reduce gravity?

His thoughts were dimming by the heartbeat.

Raising it would make more sense. Lily could handle the strain.

He did not have time to say any of it.

She was gone.

His head felt heavier by the second as blood loss set in, dulling his reactions. A strange rhythmic thudding filled his ears. That was not a good sign.

With shaking hands, he tore a medipatch from his vest and slapped it over the exit wound. With some effort, he managed to secure another over his shoulder. He forced down a circulation stabilizer, and the world steadied slightly. He was not combat-ready, but he could move. And if a vukri found him, he could still run.

His only fear now was Lily.

He dragged himself upright and peered through the gap between the locker rows.

Nothing could have prepared him for what he saw.

Of the remaining six vukri, three lay broken and unmoving on the cargo bay floor. The others clung desperately to the outer wall, trying to evade Lily’s attacks as she pelted them with a heavy, elastic sphere normally used to provide traction for vehicle stabilization. She hurled it at them like a youth playing

a ball game.

The lethal kind.

“You’re not so tough now, are you?” Lily shouted. “Ten of you against two of us? You fucking pirates. If I lose my only friend because of you, you’ll wish you never set foot in here.”

Something warm bloomed between Khar’s twin hearts, like the way his mother had held him when he was small.

At the same time, an icy shiver raced down his spine. The same feeling he had known when a ghesz warrior had driven a kick into his gut during his Legion chrono-cycles.

For a moment, he had believed he was dying.

He had not known both sensations could exist at once. Clearly, anything involving Lily required him to rethink everything he thought he knew about the universe.

The pounding sound finally made sense as Lily bounced the ball beside her, occasionally slamming it into the wall near the vukri, keeping them pinned in place.

Khar almost felt sorry for them.

Almost.

“Lily, I’m here.”

She snapped her head toward him. One of the vukri seized the moment and bolted for the logistics hatch through which they had entered the Vitromium.

“Khar, I was so worried about you!”

Without breaking her rhythm, Lily hurled the ball. It struck the fleeing vukri in the leg, dropping it in a heap with a strangled cry.

Khar felt time slow to a standstill as the vukri and the two of them locked eyes.

Humans, it seemed, could see at an angle as well as straight ahead, something neither he nor the intruders had anticipated

based on the forward placement of her eyes. Though they stood on opposite sides, fear mixed with respect bound them together in a single, breathless pause.

Lily stepped closer to Khar and wrapped one arm around him from the side, keeping the vukri in her line of sight.

“I’m so glad you’re all right. I think we can call the promenade guard now. They cannot escape.”

Khar looked down at the small head pressed against his chest, at the dark, silky hair, then at his own skin as it continued to deepen in tone, shading toward near black. Lily noticed it too and lifted her face toward him.

“What is happening to you? This is not blood loss, is it?”

Khar shook his head. The gesture was still new to him. He had only ever seen Lily use it, but it felt appropriate now. Necessary, even.

He knew this was not blood loss.

He had never imagined this could happen to him, but somewhere amid the chaos of the fight—or perhaps the moment Lily pressed against him—the irreversible process of Divani imprinting had begun.

It was not supposed to happen. Not to the strongest. Not to the undefeated of his kind.

But he was not undefeated anymore, was he?

Still, his body was already changing. Reshaping. Attuning itself to a single chosen mate, preparing to become her biologically perfect counterpart.

There was no escape from Divani imprinting.

Khar had always known that.

He drew a deep breath and lowered his massive, clawed hand onto Lily’s shoulder. She leaned into him a little more, never taking her eyes off the vukri.

“Lily. I am opening the rear stasis locker. Can you herd them?”

“I think so. They are very afraid of the ball.”

Khar might have shaken his head at her calling a guest-ship collision dampener a ball, but now was not the time. He issued the command to Vitro, and with Lily’s enthusiastic assistance, the vukri were quickly secured. Even the motionless ones were revived and deposited beside the others.

When it was over, dizziness washed over Khar, but Lily did not let go of him.

He could not afford to collapse yet. To receive their reward, everything had to be handled discreetly, including the cleanup. Lily protested briefly, but Khar insisted that despite the absence of visible injuries, she submit to a scan by the wall-mounted medical unit in the cargo bay. When it confirmed she was unharmed, Khar filed the incident report with promenade security.

Lily returned to the control room to guide Vegrun and Silomarila on yet another unnecessary shopping excursion, buying them enough time to transfer the vukri to authorities without notice.

As expected of a security force assigned to the playground of the wealthy, the response was flawless. The intruders were taken into custody and Khar’s statement recorded before Vegrun and his companion had even begun their return. By then, Khar was already in Vitro’s medical bay, sealing the puncture wound in his chest.

By the time Vegrun and his lover returned, and Lily finally escaped them, there was no trace of the injury. Khar had replenished his circulation with several chrono-cycles’ worth of premium nutrients from the medical station’s exorbitantly priced reserves. He would need them for the imprinting process,

and Vegrun could hardly complain about supplies used in the line of duty.

The upper portion of Khar's uniform was beyond saving, so he donned a white medical robe reserved for patients. He lacked the patience to fuss with the tiny fasteners at the front and left his chest bare.

The medical station announced Lily's presence at the door. Khar released the lock and pretended to be occupied with reorganizing instruments as she hurried inside.

"Khar, how are you? Are you really all right?" Lily asked, worry threading her voice.

He turned toward her and did not miss the way her voice faltered as her gaze caught on the muscles visible through the robe. Khar smiled to himself. He had suspected before that his appearance affected her, but he had been too preoccupied with sulking and a wounded ego to explore it further.

It was time to correct that oversight.

"I am fine. Do not worry about me. How were Vegrun and his companion?"

Relief softened Lily's features, but at Vegrun's name, annoyance returned.

"Everything went according to plan. Silomarila noticed nothing, though I think even she is tired of all the shopping. Vegrun also asked me to order a gift for her, something that would be waiting in the suite when they returned. You know, when you warned him about the vukri, he pretended that was why he was calling us."

Khar barely remembered that detail, but as she spoke, it resurfaced.

"What did you buy?"

Lily smiled mischievously.

“A game. It is called Predestination. There are characters printed on cards who face random disasters in random locations, and depending on your choices, they survive or they do not. A strategy game. You can play alone or with others. Both Silomarila’s and Vegrun’s species are included as playable characters, so Madame Turtle can see exactly how many ways Vegrun might bleed out.”

Khar liked the concept, though he doubted Vegrun would appreciate it. The extent of their shared taste ended with Vitro. Vitro, in Khar’s estimation, was perfect.

“It sounds good. I would accept it.”

Lily’s smile widened at his approval.

Khar remembered the first time he had seen her, how despite his irritation, his gaze had lingered on the delicate curve of her mouth. Now, with joy radiating from her, he had to restrain himself from touching her. Instead, he finished tidying the medical bay and walked toward her in slow, measured steps.

When he reached her, he braced one arm against the door-frame above her head and looked down into her dark-pupiled eyes.

“How do human females celebrate when they have done very well?”

Khar prided himself on maintaining composure, but he had to fight to keep a neutral expression as Lily flushed crimson, dropped her gaze, and let it trail from his exposed chest down along the lines of muscle disappearing beneath the robe before she snapped it away again.

She stammered. Khar laughed softly, unable to stop himself.

“Come, Lily. Let us secure Vitro and I will walk you home.”

CHAPTER 9

Chapter 10

Free to Dream

Lily

“Under Section 34/B of the IMPERIUM Personnel Protocol, any interaction of a sexual nature, including interspecies coitus or equivalent forms of intimate bonding, is strictly prohibited within all service zones. Violations are subject to sanction.”

Official Protocol on IMPERIUM Protocol Violations

Khar sat naked upon the massive, heavy chair like a king upon his throne.

In the dim, flickering light, his skin looked velvety black, his body sculpted with the lethal elegance of a jaguar. He was enormous, far larger than any human could ever be, yet perfectly proportioned. The devilish glow of his eyes and the curve of his horns made the sight decadent, almost obscene. Like a demonic being beyond humanity, come to claim her body and soul if she did not flee at once.

Lily felt she had never seen anything more unsettling or intoxicating in her life.

“Undress.”

She did not know how she had ended up here. She only knew

she could not resist even this simple command.

She slipped out of her fitted uniform and stood before him in nothing but her underwear.

Until now, Khar's sex had rested heavily against the cushioned seat, dense and dormant. The moment she moved, it stirred, rising with slow certainty. As Lily shed the last of her clothing, Khar wrapped his hand around himself and began to stroke, unhurried and deliberate, until he stood hard and unyielding.

Lily was not usually aroused by anatomy alone, yet she could not look away. He was long and thick, so thick she was not certain her body could take him comfortably. The head was sharper than a human man's, an alien detail that only made the sight more compelling.

She swallowed hard as she imagined tracing the dark skin with her tongue, following the subtle swell of veins down to the heavy weight beneath.

"Come here. Sit on me."

Khar's voice pulled her forward as if she were under a spell. Shame did not even occur to her. Want drowned out everything else.

She climbed onto his lap, but once she was that close, his sheer size frightened her. She looked up at him, uneasy, into eyes that burned brighter against his darkening skin.

"Khar, I cannot. You are too big."

She shook her head helplessly, but he would not let her retreat. He caught her at the nape of the neck and drew her close, his voice low and rough against her ear.

"I know you can take me."

Lily nodded and slowly lowered herself onto him.

Her breath caught. He filled her completely, stretching her, yet there was no pain. It felt as though her body had been made

for this exact shape.

Khar did not look away as she began to move, tentative at first, then faster, finding a rhythm. His heated gaze, his flawless body, and the overwhelming fullness combined into something irresistible, driving her toward release. Yet no matter how quickly she rode him, the final edge stayed just out of reach.

The sound she made surprised even herself.

“Please, Khar. This is not enough.”

He laughed softly, dark and knowing, as his hand closed over her hip. Even the touch of his obsidian claws against her pale skin was indecently arousing.

“You are greedy, little female.”

Before she could protest, he thrust upward and took control. From that moment on, he dictated everything. He moved with relentless precision, claiming her so thoroughly that tears welled in her eyes. The world narrowed to sensation, to heat, to the burning intensity of his gaze, until pleasure finally detonated inside her in a blinding white rush.

When Lily opened her eyes, reality crashed down on her like a physical weight.

The details of the dream were already fading, but the aftermath of her release lingered in her body, slow and insistent.

What the hell, Lily?

She stared at the ceiling for a long time, trying to understand the corners of her mind that had led her here.

Having sexual dreams about a coworker was embarrassing enough. Having one this vivid and this unrealistic was worse. It was far more likely that Khar did not possess a perfectly compatible body, and even if he did, there was no guarantee he found her attractive.

Besides, Lily had never climaxed from penetration alone, and

something that size without any foreplay would probably hurt more than please.

She wrote all of that off as dream logic. Dreams ignored reality and left only feeling behind.

And the feeling was that nothing in her life had ever been this erotic.

I really need to have sex. Obviously not with Khar. The poor Divani would probably flee the galaxy if he knew what I did to him in my dreams.

She showered for a long time, determined to scrub the last fragments of the fantasy from her mind, and focused on acting completely normal the next time she saw him.

It had only been the previous chrono-cycle that they handed the vukri over to promenade security and said goodbye to the oblivious Silomarila and the ever-performative Vegrun.

It seemed they would part without incident, until Silomarila turned back at the last moment and stepped directly in front of Lily.

Over her lover's massive, armored shoulder, Vegrun fixed them with a sharp, warning look, making it clear that their safety depended on his companion remaining unaware.

"Lily, is it?" Silomarila asked. The words were ordinary enough, but her voice conjured images of bubbling marshes in Lily's mind.

"Yes. Is there something else I can help with?"

Lily straightened, projecting innocence.

"What a short, charming name. Among the Mokra, the shorter the name, the lower the rank, or the simpler the mind."

Lily swallowed her reaction and replied evenly.

"I see. Did you need anything else?"

Silomarila opened her wide, lipless mouth and produced a

wet, coughing sound. Lily's translator informed her it signaled amusement, though her spine prickled at the sight. She felt Khar tense beside her, silent but imposing.

"Vegrun told me you chose my gift. Such a clever little game. On real paper, no less. Very antique. Of course, we cannot judge other species by our own values, can we?" She gestured toward Vegrun. "As the saying goes, even broth boils in cold water. In any case, I only wanted to thank you. It was the best part of my trip."

Without waiting for a reply, Silomarila turned and left, Vegrun hurrying after her.

Lily and Khar exchanged a baffled look, then returned to their duties.

Docking protocols kept them busy enough to push everything else aside. Vitro's robots handled the cleanup, sparing them the task of scrubbing blood from metal plating. The surviving vukri and the bodies were already gone.

Nothing remained of the incident except Lily's memories and the unsettling way Khar's skin continued to darken from granite gray toward something deeper wherever it showed beneath his uniform.

"Khar, are you sure you are all right?"

He answered with a low grunt, his usual response when he did not want to talk.

Lily shrugged and returned to the control center, running diagnostics and reviewing results. Once she was satisfied the ship was stable and all necessary replacements ordered, she allowed herself to browse information on solar collectors.

Maybe Vegrun would allow her to order something better than the cheapest model. She gazed dreamily at the device, imagining crossing the galaxy at a fraction of the cost.

“Greedy female.”

Lily flushed to the tips of her ears when she heard Khar laugh and instantly cleared the data from the main display, as if she had been caught watching something obscene.

Even though Khar had not used the same words as in her dream, and his intonation had been entirely different, she could not stop her mind from connecting the two. Her traitorous body reacted immediately in response, and she made sure not to look at him directly.

Stupid dream.

Khar settled into his comfortable armchair, and Lily silently thanked every known force in the universe that it was not the same chair she had seen in her dream. That would have been far too much.

Still, the longer she looked at her colleague, the more her concern for his condition outweighed her embarrassment.

“If you say everything is fine, I believe you,” she said carefully, “but what is happening to you looks ominous. With humans, a drastic change in skin tone is never a good sign. I know I cannot measure you by human standards, but I cannot help thinking about it.”

The Divani avoided her gaze with deliberate care, focusing on the main display as if it demanded his full attention.

“This is natural among Divani,” he replied. “It does not happen often, but it does not signify anything harmful.”

Lily let out a breath she had not realized she was holding.

She hesitated, unsure how to answer, and a foolish saying escaped her before she could think better of it.

“On Earth, there’s a saying that once you go black, you never go back.”

She giggled at her own joke and failed to notice how Khar went

utterly still beside her.

“What does that mean?” he asked.

“Oh, nothing important,” Lily said quickly. “Just something darker skinned men sometimes say to women. Mostly a joke. It is not meant seriously.”

Even with a flawless translator, Lily had the distinct feeling that some things simply refused to cross cultural boundaries.

She was rescued from the awkwardness by someone she had not expected. Horos’s voice came through the console.

“Crew of the Vitromium, I request permission to come aboard.”

Khar grumbled as if he had stepped in something foul with his favorite boot, but this time Lily was grateful for the secretary’s arrival.

They granted access through the main gate, and it did not take long before the tall, ash gray being entered the control room.

“Vegrün sends his thanks for your swift and efficient handling of the recent inconvenience,” Horos said smoothly.

He raised his VoidBrace, performed a brief sequence of gestures, and Khar’s own console lit up.

“The agreed amount has been transferred to your account, Khar. Lily, if you permit, I would like a word with you.”

Lily raised an eyebrow.

“With me? Is something wrong?”

Horos lifted both hands in a calming gesture and laughed politely.

“Quite the opposite. I would like to discuss the details of the solar collector order. I have time before my next meeting, and I have not yet eaten. I would be pleased if you joined me.”

Lily shrugged and slipped on the looser jacket of her fitted uniform.

“Sure, if you like. Khar, I will be right back.”

Khar looked as though he wanted to say something, but he remained silent until the door closed behind Lily and Horos.

Lily had explored parts of the station where Vitro was docked, but the more expensive restaurants and entertainment venues were far beyond her budget. She happily accepted Horos’s offer to treat her, even if it felt a little excessive. Vegrun was likely grateful, and Horos’s generosity probably reflected that.

She hummed softly while browsing the menu. It automatically analyzed her biological profile and digestive tolerances, offering only dishes she could safely eat and genuinely enjoy. Lily felt slightly self-conscious in the upscale environment, surrounded by well-off alien socialites, so she made sure not to commit a faux pas. As they waited, Horos coughed once, and every being around them looked over disapprovingly, raising her guard a little more.

Once they had both ordered, Horos steered the conversation away from neutral topics and into more personal waters.

“So, Lily,” he said, “how does a being as unusual as you come to work at one of the known galaxy’s bastion stations?”

The question caught her off guard. She was not sure what the correct answer was. She was not ashamed of the truth, but she had no idea what was considered acceptable in universal circles. The acclimatization program had focused more on keeping her from falling into depression than on social nuance.

She wished she had asked Khar. He might grumble endlessly, but he did not strike her as hypocritical. “As I wrote in my application,” she said, “I own a Herion-6 class ship. That is how I arrived here.”

Horos smiled at her reply. The simple expression transformed his otherwise alien features, and Lily was surprised by how

approachable he suddenly seemed.

“Yes, but you are not a Registered Spacefaring Species,” Horos said. “I reviewed Vitromium’s report on the confrontation. What you did was remarkable. Why did you lower the gravity?”

Relieved that the focus had shifted away from her past, Lily eagerly explained her reasoning.

“When I traveled through space, I trained a lot in higher gravity. In lower gravity, I played ball games to pass the time. The ball behaves differently, you see. Most beings are used to standard or zero gravity, but the state between the two feels strange to them. I thought it would give me an advantage over the *vukri*.”

Horos tapped long black fingers against the table as he listened.

“Very inventive.”

Lily was not sure how to respond, so she blurted out the first interesting thought that came to mind.

“On Earth, there were countless religions and myths over the millennia. One of them is long dead now, but they built incredible monuments to honor their gods and rulers. They are still so significant that we call them wonders of the world.”

Horos hummed in agreement.

“Yes. Most sentient species preserve relics of their past. Age makes them sacred.”

“I only mentioned it because one of those gods was named Horus. Or at least that is how we think it was pronounced. You even resemble how he was depicted, a little.”

The secretary leaned back in his chair and laughed openly.

“The universe is full of strange coincidences.”

Lily nodded. The fact that she was here at all felt improbable enough.

Now that she had spent more time among the stars, she was beginning to see patterns across species. She found similarities between alien races and the creatures of Earth's myths.

She could not tell whether her mind was drawing connections where none existed, or whether aliens had once reached her homeworld and left an imprint on humanity's collective memory.

The rest of the meal passed pleasantly. Horos proved to be engaging company, and Lily was delighted when she finalized the order for the solar collector model she truly wanted.

Horos escorted her back to Vitro but did not board with her.

All in all, Lily felt she was making real progress toward the life she wanted. She was closer to financial independence and free travel aboard her own ship. She had gained her first alien friend in Khar, even if the friendship was still tentative.

Horos still made the hairs on her neck rise slightly, but nothing she could not brush off. He was only her superior in the loosest sense, someone she rarely saw.

Smiling to herself, Lily stepped back onto Vitro's deck, eager to share the good news with Khar.

Chapter 11

Urgent Matters

Khar

“I would not recommend hiring this male. He seems... unpredictable.”

“Oh, nonsense. There is nothing wrong with him. I like that he has some nerve. If anything, you could learn from him.”

“...Yes, sir.”

“You see? That is exactly what I mean.”

Conversation between Vegrun and Horos after Khar’s interview

Khar was pissed off.

And sulking.

He could not sit still after Lily left with that predatory bastard, so he went down to the cargo bay and started moving crates around. His body seemed to need an outlet lately, ever since Lily had hugged him after the fight.

Not that he had accepted his current situation.

And just because he had not given in to the next step, something every fiber of him demanded with growing urgency, did not mean some leering carrion bird like Horos could swoop in and take advantage of her.

Khar knew exactly what the secretary's intentions were. He was not about to let that smooth-talking parasite exploit an innocent, inexperienced girl. The fact that he himself might have benefited from Lily's presence was irrelevant.

For now.

His senses were sharp, honed by countless raids and ambushes, so the soft voice behind him still caught him off guard.

Had he known Lily was back, he would have pulled on his uniform jacket instead of standing there half-naked, a faint sheen of sweat catching the low light across his chest.

"Wow, Khar. You actually finished the reorganization," Lily said. "This morning you said you could not be bothered."

Khar glanced over his shoulder and maybe flexed just a little. Hardly noticeable.

It did not mean anything.

Certainly not that he did it because Lily seemed to enjoy the view.

"Had time," he muttered.

She hummed softly as she inspected the new cargo layout, while Khar wrestled with the urge to ask about her meeting with Horos.

In the end, pride won.

Barely.

He still had a scrap of dignity left, and he intended to keep it.

"You did a great job," Lily said at last. "It is much more organized now. Vitro will coordinate the helper bots better this way."

She smiled up at him, and something dark and possessive stirred in Khar's chest. He would have done anything to see that smile again.

Instead, he abruptly yanked his head back and slammed it

into the wall, hard enough to produce a dull thud while carefully angling his horns so they would not take the impact.

Lily rushed to him.

“Oh my God. Are you okay?”

“Yes,” he said flatly. “Do not worry about it.”

Get yourself together. You cannot become this pathetic this quickly.

She hovered anxiously around him, then patted his shoulder.

The simple touch nearly undid him.

“Lily,” he said, forcing his voice steady. “I have been thinking about the attack.”

She tensed, shoulders lifting as if to shield herself.

“Yeah. It has crossed my mind a few times too.”

Khar considered how to approach it, then decided that with Lily, directness usually worked best. It reduced the risk of another catastrophic cultural misunderstanding, something they had already managed more than once in the past month.

“How are you feeling?” he asked. “Incidents like that are rare. Most intelligent beings do not have to fight for their lives.”

Lily stared down at her boots.

“Maybe here that is true,” she said. “In space, I mean.”

“You are saying Earth is violent?”

She thought for a moment. “Not peaceful. It depends where you live. Some places still have wars. I am from a safer region. I never had to fight like that, but the threat is always there. You can get attacked. Robbed. Or raped.”

Khar carefully placed that information into a very small mental box and locked it tight, marked for later destruction.

Right now, her well-being mattered more.

“I see,” he said evenly. “Still, you went through something serious. Even if you were not physically hurt, it leaves a mark.”

Lily lifted her chin, eyes flashing.

“I do not need therapy from you, space bull. I did what I had to do. It was them or me. And how was I supposed to know they were that fragile? When I hit the first one with the weight and it just crumpled, I thought I was hallucinating. Who is that fragile and chooses piracy?”

Entirely possible. You simply come from a terrifying species that fights like trained soldiers without training.

Her anger cooled, settling into something sharper.

“I appreciate your concern,” she continued. “Really. But this is not the first time I have had to defend myself out here. Where do you think I got my ship from?”

Khar listened carefully. Every detail about her was cataloged with tactical precision, like intelligence gathered for a long campaign.

“I suspected as much,” he said. “I am sorry you had to go through it again. I assume someone helped you afterward.”

Her smile softened at the mention of her beloved ship.

“It is called an acclimatization program,” she said. “It helped me process it back then, and it will help now too.”

Khar smiled at her.

She blinked, then returned it with a wide, radiant grin.

“They also reminded me of a pest species from Earth,” she added. “Disgusting little things. I really did not want them touching me. Wait. Is that allowed to say? Is that... specist?”

Khar leaned against a pillar, relieved that if nothing else, Lily had support.

“Well,” he said dryly, “if you have to ask...”

Her face drained of color.

The old Khar would have let her squirm, maybe even enjoyed it. The new Khar felt a sharp pang instead. He tilted her chin gently so she would meet his eyes.

“Most people grow up knowing there are other species,” he said. “Even then, some cultures turn xenophobic. You lived your entire life in one environment. It is natural to compare new things to what you knew.”

She shook her head. “That does not make it right. They were living beings. Maybe they had families. Dreams.”

“Yes,” Khar said gravely. “The vukri are well known for their rich cultural life.”

She went even paler, her lower lip trembling.

Khar was torn between comforting her immediately or wondering if she would make this expression if he bent her over his knee and spanked her thoroughly.

Later. Definitely later.

“Lily,” he said gently, “I am joking. The vukri are parasites. They do not qualify as sentient. Someone planted them aboard Vitro using a remote probe with limited life support. They can be equipped with simple tools but cannot pilot ships. They slipped in because their bodies do not register standard life signs. It is a rare but known pirate tactic.”

Her distress vanished, replaced by outrage.

“You jerk!”

She slapped his hand away and glared up at him. Khar noticed, almost absently, that the claws he had touched her with were a shade darker now.

She did not see it.

“Lily.”

“What?”

“Can you handle operations alone for a few chrono-cycles? There is something I need to take care of.”

Despite her irritation, she shifted instantly into professional mode.

“You will clear it with Vegrun?”

“I will handle it.”

“Fine. I could use a break from you anyway.”

“You will still see plenty of me.”

Khar watched her stomp away, small boots striking the deck in furious rhythm.

Better finish the transformation soon.

A Liberator does not deserve to be kept waiting.

Chapter 12

Back to Business as Usual

Lily

“Lily, you always go for the bad boys. That useless guitarist in high school. The biker guy at university. That ripped guy from the office. I swear, even in kindergarten you liked the boy who pulled your hair... I swear, it’s the abs.”

Lily’s sister, three chrono-years ago

Khar had only been away from work for a few chrono-cycles, yet Lily was already bored.

And lonely.

She had crammed all the work waiting for her into the first two cycles, and now she had nothing left to do. No tasks. No conversation. Not even Vegrun had checked in, and he usually liked to ping them about his beloved space cruiser, just to make sure everything was running smoothly.

She cursed herself for how quickly things had changed. Nearly two chrono-years alone aboard Helios, with only brief excursions to space stations, had never weighed on her like this short stretch of solitude did now.

At least the sexy dreams had stopped.

That really would have been too much.

She did not know where Khar lived on the station, and she could have messaged him through Vitro, but she had no real reason to do so. Instead, she searched the public IMPERIUM database for information on the Divani.

She learned a great deal about their social hierarchy, which was essentially a meritocracy based on strength and combat capability. Their biology. Their history. The material was informative but dry, although she quite liked some of the older Divani sayings, like “The horns that arch highest bear the greatest burden,” implying that the strongest were responsible for acting in the interest of Divani society.

Only one unusual line stood out in the free database, and she could not quite make sense of it.

“The Divani are not only highly sought after in military and law enforcement roles, but are also valued for their potent reproductive capacity. See Divani imprinting.”

There was no further information available.

Lily assumed it referred to the fact that many advanced species struggled with declining birth rates, something the Divani apparently did not. She briefly considered subscribing to the expanded database, but in the end she could not bring herself to hit purchase.

When Khar finally returned after a week away, Lily was not sure whether it was just her starved-for-company brain talking, but he seemed more attractive than ever.

She could not pinpoint what had changed. She just knew she could not stop watching his face whenever he was not aware of her gaze.

The only obvious difference was his skin.

It had darkened completely, now a deep, absolute black from

the tips of his horns to every inch of skin visible beneath his uniform, right down to the ends of his claws. His ominously glowing eyes stood out even more starkly against the ebony tone.

She loved it.

And did everything she could to avoid making him uncomfortable under her attention.

It was not as if Khar had become gentler. If anything, he seemed exhausted and irritable, like he was not quite at ease in his own body. Combined with his usual severity and mood-dependent silence, this should not have been attractive.

Yet Lily found herself quietly relieved just to have him back.

He also ate constantly.

Not proper meals, since that would have been impractical during work, but he kept tossing calorie spheres into his mouth. Lily used them too. They were individually calibrated to contain all necessary nutrients and were practically free on most stations. No one went hungry in space because of them, though real food was far more expensive.

“Lily. Let’s go eat lunch in the central plaza.”

She snapped her head up at the unexpected suggestion. Not because Khar wanting food was surprising. Lately, that seemed to be all he thought about. But because it had not occurred to her that they could leave the ship during work hours.

“I would love to,” she said. “But is that allowed?”

“Of course. Come on. I cannot eat another calorie sphere.”

She nearly bounced as she walked beside him, so pleased by the idea. Their work rations included Vitro’s generated standard menu, but it had grown monotonous. For Khar, who had been on the ship much longer, it must have been unbearable by now.

The central plaza was one of Lily’s favorite places on the

station. Artificial weather patterns were generated there, and she loved feeling them on her skin. Vendors lined the space, and in the center stood tables and seating adapted for different species, making it easy for them to eat together.

They quickly agreed on a vendor that sold non-spicy food and joined the long but fast-moving line.

As they made their way through the plaza, Lily noticed far more attention than usual. She was used to drawing stares, but this felt different. It did not take long to realize why.

They were not looking at her.

They were looking at Khar.

Her face burned when she overheard two feathered aliens, likely female, whispering nearby.

“Do you see that Divani stallion?”

“Incredible. That black coloration.”

“I wish he’d mount me.”

“You? Dream on.”

Lily almost spun around to give them a piece of her mind, but Khar seemed so utterly indifferent that she decided against escalating things. When they finally got their food, Khar carrying triple her portion, she could not hold it in anymore.

“Those beings are so rude.”

Khar looked at her with those glowing eyes that increasingly felt like they could see straight through her, his expression blank.

“What beings?”

“The two feathery ones who were talking about you like you were a sex object.”

His brow furrowed between his horns as he replayed the last few minutes.

“Oh. That.”

He chewed thoughtfully before responding.

“For Divani, that kind of attention is not insulting. We consider it appreciation. Acknowledgment of potential.”

Her anger evaporated, replaced by confusion.

“You enjoy being sexualized?”

“Yes. It is like having your strength recognized. If something is exceptional, it should be valued. It is not offensive.”

They ate in silence for a while, enjoying the artificial sunlight and breeze. Even manufactured, it felt wonderful on her skin.

What Lily said next could not be explained by the pleasant weather or the few lonely chrono-cycles she had endured. Perhaps she just wanted to cheer up her friend, whom she had missed more than she wanted to admit. Or spending so much time without proper social norms dictated by humans and being alone in space completely dissolved her self-control.

“I had a sexy dream about you.”

The table jumped violently as Khar slammed his knee into it.

For a moment he looked as though he might speak, but no sound came. The silence stretched long enough that Lily almost believed they could pretend none of it had happened.

Then he cleared his throat, and when he spoke, his voice was rough.

“What did you say?”

Lily buried her face in her hands so she would not have to see his expression and rushed through her answer. By the end, her courage had evaporated and she was barely whispering.

“It just happened. It was not important. I do not mean it was bad. Or deviant. It was a totally normal sexy dream. Like with a human man. I mean obviously you were bigger and better.”

She peeked through her fingers, already preparing to bolt if Khar looked disgusted or disturbed. She would never have said

something like this to a human coworker, and now she regretted every word. Two chrono-years without real social interaction had apparently destroyed every internal brake she used to have on her thoughts and on what escaped her mouth.

But Khar only looked at her with a perfectly neutral expression, his tone calm and conversational, as if they were discussing the weather.

“How did it work?”

Lily blinked.

“What do you mean, how did it work?”

“What is the usual mating configuration among humans? Is it always two participants, or more? One male and one female, or are there other sexes?”

Relief washed through her. Whatever this was, it was not horror or rejection. Khar sounded like he was asking about spiders or some unfamiliar species.

“Usually two,” she said. “Usually one man and one woman. But there are variations depending on individual preferences.”

Khar nodded, then immediately followed up.

“Are the females larger and stronger among humans?”

She stared at him, confused.

“Why would you think that? No. I mean, some women are strong, obviously. But on average men are a bit taller and physically stronger. Women tend to have more endurance.”

She took a sip of her drink, grateful for the shift into statistics and dry facts, far away from the territory of erotic dreams.

“It is because you said bigger and better in your dream,” Khar said. “Do human females enjoy sex? Do they go into heat?”

Lily choked on her drink.

So that was where they were now. Her dignity was gone, her modesty nonexistent, and they were back to her personal

preferences. This was entirely her fault.

“I meant that you are obviously bigger than me,” she said hastily. “And you know what? I do not want to talk about this anymore.”

Khar continued eating as if nothing had happened, while Lily endured the seventh circle of embarrassment.

“That is fine,” he said. “I believe humans carry some shame around sexual matters. Then tell me more generally how humans choose their mates.”

At that point Lily would have preferred to discuss the way the paint was wearing off the table, but she accepted this compromise.

She was about to launch into an explanation when a thought struck her.

“Wait. Why are you even interested? You never pay attention when I talk about Earth.”

Khar stopped eating and straightened, clearly offended by the suggestion.

“That is not true. I remember everything you tell me.”

That, unexpectedly, moved her.

Not knowing what else to do with that feeling, Lily began outlining the general framework of human dating and family formation. Khar listened attentively, interrupting only occasionally with precise questions. He had more food anyway, so they finished around the same time, even though Lily had done most of the talking.

“So monogamy is a personal choice.” he said.

“Yes. It is preferred, but not everyone wants it. Some people choose celibacy.”

“And you, Lily?” he asked. “You chose celibacy?”

She laughed.

“Since being taken from Earth, it has not exactly been a choice.”

Khar took her empty plate and tossed it into the designated container along with his own.

“I see. Let us go back.”

She was relieved to escape the awkward topic, but at the same time she regretted the end of their time away from the ship. Even with all her embarrassment, she felt better after this short outing than she had during her elegant lunch with Horos.

“It was nice talking to you, Khar.”

He acknowledged it with a rare smile.

“Likewise. Until you ruined everything with your strange human sex topic.”

She punched his shoulder. Khar dodged with a grin, but the impact still surprised her. It hurt more than last time.

She almost snapped back with an insult, something like calling him a space stallion the way those alien women had. Instead, she just growled.

“What is wrong with you anyway? Why are you eating so much?”

Khar only shrugged.

“Call it a growth phase.”

Chapter 13

Irreversible Revelation

Khar

“Most Registered Species show loyalty and devotion to their mates, but the Divani, as in so many things, push this tendency to its extremes. They either avoid commitment entirely and pursue pleasure alone, or they become obsessively devoted to love. From a species that brings such passion, unwavering focus, and reverence to combat, we would expect no less toward a partner. This, however, was written before the rare phenomenon of imprinting was widely understood.” — Ner’fol Vas Gorg, Universal Dating Guru: Loving Across Species

“Divani imprinting has two primary phases:

Sampling and preparation, usually accompanied by visible indicators such as darkening skin, sudden changes in body mass, or the lengthening or curving of horns.

Metamorphosis, a near-hibernative state during which involuntary transformation renders the body biologically compatible with the chosen mate.”

From Khar’s training material, Divani Biology

Every part of Khar hurt.

His entire body had reshaped itself to adapt biologically to his chosen one. The Divani were admired across the Registered Spacefaring Species not only for their prowess in battle, but also for their reproductive potential. Like all drastic transformations, this one demanded time and an enormous amount of energy.

Khar slept for nearly seven chrono-cycles straight, waking only long enough to shovel down a dozen calorie spheres washed down with a pitcher of water.

When he finally came to, the process was not fully complete, but the worst of it was behind him.

And he was stronger.

Much stronger.

The Divani had not become apex specimens on their homeworld by chance. The ability to overwrite their own biological blueprint, adapt themselves to a partner of another species, and then produce viable, fertile offspring was nothing short of a biological miracle. Not a unique one, perhaps, but a miracle all the same.

As with most evolutionary advantages, this one came with costs.

Once a Divani chose a mate, devotion followed with near-fanatical intensity. He would protect his chosen partner even at his own expense. And after imprinting, he would be incapable of reproduction with anyone else.

Such loyalty was common among sentient species.

Among the Divani, however, mate selection was constrained by another rule: neither the weakest nor the undefeated strongest could reproduce.

The first limitation was obvious. The second baffled scholars across the galaxy. The explanation that made the most sense to Khar was genetic diversification. Preventing the strongest from

flooding the gene pool ensured survival.

In any case, producing offspring had never been part of Khar's plans. That did not mean he had denied himself pleasure. It simply meant that the chase and the act had always felt hollow.

Until Lily.

His wonderful little Lily.

Now that he had time to confront himself, he understood that his fixation had not been accidental. From the very first moment, she had unsettled him. He had explained it away as something else. The more interesting and attractive she became, the more his instincts reframed her as an opponent.

Old habits died hard.

But once imprinting began, there was no more running.

And when he was finally honest with himself, the truth was brighter than any star. He had fallen for her completely, irrevocably, obsessively. For this creature who appeared fragile and proved anything but.

Khar appreciated the irony. Lily had turned him from undefeated to defeated. And through that loss, he had become stronger than he had ever dared imagine.

His muscles, skin, bones, even his horns felt denser and harder, as though he now wore armor from the inside out.

He was certain he could handle at least three versions of his former self. He was also certain that he could now overpower Lily with ease.

The amusing part was that strength no longer mattered.

It was simply a tool to make Lily happy.

It certainly did not hurt that her sitting on his face while he worshiped her with his tongue would probably not crush his skull. There were worse and less honorable ways for a warrior to die.

Still, he was not planning for a single night.

He was relieved to discover that, by all indications, he and Lily were already sexually compatible. He had worried that he might wake from metamorphosis missing a critical anatomical feature, or discover that humans preferred to take their partners in ways unfamiliar to him. Truthfully, even that would not have been a deal-breaker. Some species had males who carried offspring.

Old Khar would have ejected himself into space at the thought.

New Khar only wondered how best to please Lily.

With his own, largely unchanged anatomy.

One problem remained.

He knew almost nothing about humans.

Lily had shared fragments, but nothing comprehensive. And as an Unregistered Species, humanity had no entry in the IMPERIUM database. Khar knew this because he had checked. Including the databases most citizens could never access.

Now it was time to return to his little human.

Before he did, he took the edge off. It would not do to pounce on her the moment he saw her again. At least this way, he could confirm that everything still functioned as intended.

He also ensured that Lily's solitude remained uninterrupted. Especially by tall, grasping, shameless carrion birds who had somehow secured secretarial positions beside star-billionaires.

Lily had asked him to speak to Vegrun, and he had done so. He reported an erachni infestation aboard the Vitromium, a particularly dangerous parasite that nested in power cabling. Vegrun feared erachni. At his age, at least half of his tentacles were more machine than flesh, and erachni were lethal to both.

Khar was not lying by much.

The previous chrono-year, while working alone, there had been a minor incident he never reported. He had followed

protocol, shut down the grid, sterilized the ship sector by sector, then replaced the logs with data from a standard chrono-cycle. If Vegrun heard the word erachni, he would not allow even his most trusted aide near Vitro.

That meant seven uninterrupted chrono-cycles of freedom.

At the end, Khar would restore the old logs. No one would know.

A perfect excuse.

He had saved it for something special. What could be more special than letting Lily rest before seeing him again?

She could not know what he had done. Still, he felt repaid when she unknowingly handed him the vital information he needed.

Khar was not naive. He knew Lily found him at least somewhat attractive. But when she admitted that he had appeared in one of her sexual dreams, it took every shred of discipline not to sweep the table aside, pull her into his lap, and take her in front of the entire concourse.

Perfect. Innocent. Greedy little thing.

He would reward her.

Soon.

When she was ready.

That part mattered.

Khar's life had always been war or preparation for it. That was precisely why he was not a mindless brute. Survival required strategy. He was a cold-blooded tactician, tempered by a thousand engagements, now embarking on the most carefully planned conquest of his life.

Objective: seduce Lily without frightening her with the strangeness of the situation or the intensity of his desire.

Until she wanted it badly enough to reach for him first.

Khar wanted Lily happy. If she chose celibacy, he would obey. He would probably have to castrate himself to survive it, but he would do so without hesitation. Fortunately, that would not be necessary.

Reconnaissance complete, he moved into phase two.

As they walked back to Vitro after their shared lunch, Lily stretched.

“That sunlight felt amazing,” she said. “I did not realize how much I missed it.”

“You could use the light deck aboard Vitro,” Khar replied. “It is usually set to the Lizon-8 nebula pattern, but the feature exists.”

Her eyes lit up. “You think Vegrun would not mind?”

Khar shrugged. “Why would he? The deck requires a daily maintenance cycle when idle anyway. If your work is done, there is no reason not to.”

“Tomorrow,” Lily said with sudden determination. “Khar, let us go over task assignments.”

He swallowed a smile.

Greedy, enchanting little human.

* * *

The next chrono-cycle Lily set a merciless pace.

She tore through their shared morning tasks, then all but evicted Khar from the control room, ordering him to make the rounds and install Vegrun’s newly requested features ahead of their next departure while she handled the coding. Khar grumbled, loud enough for her to hear.

In truth, he enjoyed every second of being ordered about by her.

He stayed busy for most of the cycle and barely caught a glimpse of Lily.

That was why both of his hearts nearly vaulted out of his chest when he finally spotted her on the light deck.

She lay stretched out on her stomach on a recliner.

Utterly relaxed.

Naked.

Except for a narrow strip of fabric that somehow managed not to diminish the sight at all. If anything, it framed her curves with deliberate cruelty.

Khar approached with practiced calm.

He lowered himself onto one knee beside her, not too close. He would not crowd her.

Lily cracked one eye open at the sound of his steps and glanced at him sideways.

“I finished my part, Khar. You are not dragging me away from here.”

He chuckled under his breath. He had no intention of spoiling this for her. Mostly, he was considering whether, if he did not bury his face between those soft curves immediately, he might simply expire on the spot.

He restrained himself.

Not here.

Not now.

He also wanted their first time to happen aboard Lily’s own ship, where she felt safe. Because that was what he wanted for her.

Safety.

Absolute safety.

In the most neutral tone he could manage, he asked, “As a cultural question, do human females who blush at the mention of sex usually sunbathe wearing only a ceremonial stripe?”

Lily closed her eye again and continued basking.

“This particular human female missed the sun on her skin,” she murmured. “As for the stripe, some habits are hard to give up.”

She paused.

“And I like my tan lines.”

“Your skin darkens under the light,” Khar said. “But not beneath the stripe?”

Her only response was a soft, content hum.

A short while later, sensing that he was still there, she asked, “What are you thinking about, Khar?”

“You will see.”

He left briefly and returned just as quietly.

Lily had nearly drifted off when the clink of ice pulled her back. She opened her eyes to find Khar settled into the lounge beside hers. Two chilled drinks waited on the small table between them.

He had shed his uniform.

A white towel lay across his hips, arranged with deliberate care. It concealed what it needed to conceal while the stark contrast between white fabric and near-black skin emphasized everything else.

He had managed to suppress the most obvious signs of his interest. Imagining Lily rejecting him outright had helped.

“Khar,” she said, squinting at him. “Are you done already?”

“No,” he replied calmly. “Your activity seemed more worthwhile.”

“Vegrun will not be pleased if his upgrades are not finished before our next flight.”

“Vegrun enjoys parading two rare species in front of his guests and knowing we do not speak to the press about his indulgences. As long as we perform adequately, which Vitro practically guarantees, he will be satisfied. Accept it, Lily. We are display pieces. Now drink your cocktail and enjoy the light.”

She stretched lazily and settled back down.

“It really is a comfortable job.”

Khar made a sound of agreement and closed his eyes.

Two chrono-cycles later, they departed.

This time Vegrun arrived accompanied by a three-headed goror female whom Lily privately dubbed Lady Crocodile. Their destination was a heavily regulated world where no sapient species had evolved, but whose ecosystem was astonishingly diverse. It held protected status and was accessible only to researchers.

And to the obscenely wealthy who paid the researchers.

Khar and Lily were flawless. Polite. Charming. Professional.

Vegrun introduced his companion in his usual meandering fashion before ushering her toward his private suite.

“Come, Iroxella. Let me show you my ship more closely.”

Once they were out of earshot, Lily leaned toward Khar.

“Did he not say exactly that to the last one?”

Khar considered, then nodded with solemn certainty.

“Yes. That is confirmed. It is coded language for imminent sex.”

Lily matched his tone.

“No tentacle left dry.”

They found the phrase so amusing that they spent the rest of the journey trying to slip variations of it into conversation without being obvious. Extra points if they managed most of the sentence.

Vegrun even sought them out personally during the trip, a rare occurrence. After rattling off new demands meant to cater to his latest fascination, Khar politely asked about a former companion.

“Of course, sir, we will take care of everything. If I may ask, what became of Silomarila? We had grown rather fond of her. It was a pleasure showing her the ship.”

Lily went pale.

Khar behaved as though nothing were amiss.

Vegrun flushed orange, but his anger was not directed at Khar.

“That treacherous creature. Listen to me carefully. Never involve yourself with a Mokra female. They steal your gherr and crush it. I have realized that these beautiful but devious species are not for me. I desire a gentle partner now, like Iroxella.”

Khar nodded with grave wisdom.

“Sound advice, sir. I will remember it.”

Vegrun patted Khar’s shoulder with a damp tentacle.

“You are a good male, Khar. Not just strength, but intellect. I am sure you never struggle with females. Now I must go. And do not forget to refresh the pool.”

The moment he left, Khar and Lily looked at each other.

“No tentacle left dry?”

“No tentacle left dry.”

The excursion was a gift. Cycles in which Khar could draw closer to Lily. Never too much. A hand placed just so. A laugh earned. Nothing that might erode her trust.

Sometimes it was agony not to give himself away.

Still, he judged that he was close.

Even the minor disaster, a ruptured water line that soaked them both, only reinforced the truth. Khar wedged himself into a service crawlspace while used pool water dripped steadily onto

him. Lily handed him tools and replacement parts from outside.

They both needed thorough showers afterward.

Khar emerged convinced that they made a perfect team.

Perhaps it was time to take the next step.

That illusion shattered the moment they docked and Horos appeared.

His target was obvious.

After escorting his employer and companion into a waiting luxury ground vehicle, Horos turned directly toward Lily, who stood beside Vitro.

“Lily. How wonderful to see you again. Are you busy?”

She glanced around, uneasy.

“Very.”

“It will not take long,” Horos said smoothly. “You are still new here. I thought this would be a good time for a formal performance evaluation. After that, you may return to your duties.”

Lily nodded, though reluctance was written all over her.

Khar moved immediately.

“Lily, your console is reporting a leak in your sector.”

They did not have assigned sectors. It was an obvious pretext.

Lily understood.

She shook her head anyway.

“My sector? Could you look into it for me, just this once?”

Khar respected her too much to argue.

That did not stop him from considering how best to feed Horos into the engine cones and bring them to full power without consequence.

“Of course,” he said evenly. “No trouble.”

Lily smiled at him before walking away.

Leaving Khar alone with his dark, blood-soaked thoughts.

CHAPTER 13

Chapter 14

Tall, Dark, and Brooding — Just My Type

Lily

***“My first heart beats for a Mokra, fierce and blue;
He takes me dancing, but I’m already through.
My second heart beats for a Dak’ri knight;
We finally meet—and I’m bored by the sight.
My third heart beats for a Divani flame;
And I know I’m lost by name.”***

Post-Fusion Ballad, runner-up at the IMPERIUM Interspecific Song Festival, theme for the holo-reality Galactic Love

Lily had never considered herself reckless.

She weighed decisions carefully. She ran simulations in her head before acting. She built quiet contingency plans for everything, because the universe had already proven it could yank the floor out from under her without warning.

Falling for Khar should have triggered alarms.

Instead, it felt inevitable.

She knew it made no sense. He was alien in every way that mattered, a Divani male shaped by war, hierarchy, and instincts she could barely begin to understand. Yet none of that muted

the pull. If anything, it sharpened it.

She wanted him – unadorned, in daylight or in artificial dusk, uniform or nothing at all. She wanted him to touch her like he did everything else, with focus and intent and that unnerving calm that made her feel both seen and claimed. She had no idea whether their bodies would even cooperate, but she was willing to stumble through the awkwardness if Khar was.

When he had settled beside her on the light deck with only that thick, luxurious towel between them, Lily had needed every scrap of discipline she possessed not to climb into his lap and find out firsthand why Divani males were called stallions.

What stopped her was not fear.

It was trust.

Since being torn from Earth, peace had been a rare thing. Silence did not equal safety. Calm did not mean rest. But with Khar, something inside her loosened. Her breathing slowed. The constant edge dulled.

She could not risk shattering that just because she lacked restraint.

So she thought. She evaluated. She replayed moments until they blurred together.

And eventually, she reached a conclusion.

Unless she had completely lost her grip on reality, Khar noticed her too.

Maybe as an exotic curiosity. Maybe as something unfamiliar and intriguing. But not as nothing.

The memory that sealed it came from their last journey.

During the two chrono-years she had spent mostly alone with Helios, Lily had dressed and styled herself for function.

When Khar returned from his brief absence, something shifted. She found herself wanting to look better.

Not for anyone in particular. The lie barely held.

One morning, she braided her hair into a long, neat plait.

When she entered the control room, Khar looked at her longer than usual.

“Lily,” he asked in that precise, formal Divani cadence, “may I touch your hair?”

Her heart had slammed against her ribs.

Khar almost never touched her unless there was a reason. Every deliberate movement from him felt weighted. Intentional.

“If you want,” she said. “It’s just a braid.”

She stepped closer, tilting her head up toward him. Instead of touching her from the front, he turned her gently by the shoulder so her back was to him.

His hand moved down the braid, barely there at first, as if testing whether the contact was permitted. Then he slid his fingers upward, slow and controlled, until they reached the nape of her neck. Where hair met skin, he traced a single line.

Lily shuddered.

Then he closed his hand around the braid and gave it a sharp tug. Not painful. Decisive.

A sound escaped her before she could stop it.

“What are you doing?” she snapped, heat flooding her face.

Khar stood behind her, unrepentant. If anything, he looked entertained.

“It’s a good style,” he said calmly. “Practical. Controlled. In combat, it gives an opponent something to grab, but it’s safer than wearing your hair loose if you leave only one braid.”

“Then why don’t you wear yours like this?”

“Divani braid their hair only after bonding with a mate.”

She had no answer for that.

Khar had chuckled softly and walked away, leaving Lily furious

and uncomfortably aware of every nerve he had ignited with a single, casual gesture.

She thought about it far more often than she should have.

And the more she analyzed their interactions, the clearer it became. One moment stood out in particular. When she commented on his physique, his answer could even be considered flirty, if she squinted.

“Khar, tell me your secret,” Lily said, her voice quiet but determined.

“What secret?” Khar sputtered with uncharacteristic hesitation.

“Your secret workout routine. You look the best you ever have since I’ve known you, so speak up.”

“Oh, blasted Cradle... I suppose one or two things have changed lately... but it is a rather big secret.”

“Come on. Out with it.”

Khar paused, considering. He absently tossed the restart rod into the air, spinning it once before catching it and sliding it into his uniform pocket against his thick thigh.

“Maybe later...” his voice dropped, rough with amusement. “Some secrets are better shown than told.”

Yes, she confirmed. Khar saw her. Not just as a coworker. Not just as a responsibility.

As a woman.

He was not cruel. If he did not want her, he would not play with ambiguity. And if she had misread him, she trusted him enough to believe he would not mock her for it.

Still, the idea of rejection hurt.

But she owed herself honesty.

That resolve burned steadily all the way back to the Vitro-mium, only to be derailed when Horos intercepted her. Lily

barely registered the words he said. Her thoughts were already elsewhere, racing ahead to what she would say to Khar once she escaped. Only Horos's rusty cough caught her attention briefly, making her consider asking if he had the flu or something, but she thought he would notify her if it was a matter of concern.

At least she left with something tangible. The solar collector for Helios was finally in her hands.

When she returned to Vitro, she found Khar sprawled in the command chair, boots resting against the console. He leaned his head back as she entered, dark hair spilling down the chair like liquid night.

"Hi, Khar."

"Hi, Lily. Good to see you intact."

She laughed quietly and took her seat. "It wasn't that bad. He said they're satisfied with my work. And that I'm a good influence on you."

Khar narrowed his eyes. "That diseased feather-thing did not say that."

She grinned. "True. I lied so you wouldn't sulk. You're a lost cause."

He released the grav-lock and pushed himself closer, tapping the package in her lap.

"What's that?"

"My solar collector. For Helios."

"Your ship's named Helios?"

"Yes. After an ancient Earth sun god. Dead religion. Nice sound."

"Fits," he said. "For a sun-loving girl."

She lifted the package. "Want to help me install it?"

"Absolutely. To Helios."

They sealed the Vitromium and crossed to Lily's much smaller

ship. Khar paused at the entrance, surveying the interior with a stillness that made her pulse spike.

“Welcome aboard Helios,” she said. “May I... show you my ship more closely?”

She braced herself for confusion. For laughter. For polite rejection.

Instead, the atmosphere shifted.

Khar did not move at first. He studied her, luminous eyes searching her face, her posture, her resolve. Then, without breaking eye contact, he sealed the hatch behind him.

The click echoed too loudly.

Lily’s skin prickled as if she had stepped into a predator’s territory. The air felt heavy, charged, thick with something unspoken. Like the moment before a storm breaks.

He waited.

Testing her.

She forced herself to lift her chin and meet his gaze.

Slowly, Khar smiled. He dimmed the lights, letting shadows pool around them, then advanced with unhurried certainty.

When he stopped in front of her, Lily had to tilt her head back to meet his eyes. One claw traced a path from her thigh upward, over her stomach, between her breasts, to her throat, until her chin rested in his palm.

The touch was agonizingly slow.

Even through fabric, it unraveled her.

Her body responded instantly, heat blooming low and sharp, more intense than anything she remembered with human lovers. She inhaled sharply.

Only then did Khar speak.

“Such courage,” he murmured. “From such a small human. Very well. Tell me what you want.”

She wanted him now, closer, without restraint, but the words tangled in her chest. She had never been seductive by nature, and Khar was overwhelming in a way no one else had ever been.

So she chose honesty.

“What do you want, Khar?”

He leaned closer, his hand sliding to her waist, holding her in place.

“I want to see what happens when someone as controlled as you loses it,” he said softly. “I want to know if you taste the way you smell. I want to hear my name on your lips while I am inside you.”

The world narrowed to breath and heat and that dangerous, perfect voice.

Lily felt like she was standing at the edge of a cliff. One step forward meant there was no going back.

She stepped anyway.

“Then it’s time you found out, Khar.”

Chapter 15

Leap Into the Deep, Faith as my Wings

Lily

“And remember, young star-citizens: thanks to nano-injections, two consenting adults can enjoy each other freely without ever worrying about STDs.”

Excerpt from Ner’fol Vas Gorg, Universal Dating Guru: Love with Another Species

Khar lifted Lily with one hand braced at her nape and the other under her hips, careful not to hurt her, yet making the message unmistakable.

She was prey. Chosen. Held entirely at his discretion.

The thought alone sent heat flooding her so fast her breath caught.

Lily had always known she liked surrender during sex. She liked being overmatched in a way that made her feel safe inside it. But Khar’s dominance was something else. There was no performance, no uncertainty. He simply claimed her with his hands as if it were the most natural thing in the universe.

Even through her uniform, his touch made her shiver. When his mouth found the curve where her neck met her shoulder and

his teeth grazed the thin skin, a helpless sound slipped from her lips. That spot had always been sensitive, but now it felt like lightning, a direct strike that ran from his bite straight down into the aching center of her body.

“Your scent,” Khar murmured, voice low and rough. “You are driving me mad.”

It sounded like a warning and a confession at the same time. Lily felt helpless before it the way one was helpless before a storm. Too much. Too elemental. All she could do was let him want what he wanted.

Their faces aligned, and she realized she had never seen his eyes this close. From far away they were only eerie light. Up close they looked alive, as if lightning chased itself through them endlessly.

Her storm god. Fierce. Magnificent. Dangerous.

And he wanted her.

“Where is your bed?”

Lily pointed toward the sleeping alcove. He carried her there as if she weighed nothing. Beside the berth, he began undoing the clever knots of her jacket. His movements were smooth, practiced. It was obvious he had spent years in uniform, but in his hands the ordinary act of undressing turned decadent.

Her nipples tightened. Even through the fabric, their peaks were visible. She drew in a breath and her chest rose, and she saw his attention catch on it.

Then, to her shock, he tore away what remained of her uniform and slipped out of his own with a fluid twist, revealing a wide chest and hard-cut abdomen. When only his trousers remained and Lily was down to her underwear, he lowered them onto the silken bedding, careful not to crush her with his weight.

His hot breath at her throat felt like a brand. She could

track him only by sensation as his mouth roamed: along her collarbones, down the hollow between her breasts, teasing first one nipple, then the other with lips and teeth, then lower over her belly until he reached her thighs.

She was already soaked. Want kept building and building. He tasted the skin of her lower belly, caught the waistband of her underwear with his teeth, lifted it, then let it fall back into place. So close. Close enough to make her shake with need and yet still not enough.

She wanted him inside her. She wanted that space between her legs filled until she could not think.

When he gripped her hips and drew her to the edge of the bed, kneeling between her legs, shyness surged back unexpectedly. Lily tried to close her thighs, but his horns made that impossible. His hands pressed her open with calm, relentless certainty.

“You are temptation given form, Lily,” he said. “No wonder humans never made it anywhere in space if this is what they had to resist on their homeworld. I would have discovered fire only so I could watch you even at night.”

The words and the shameless position made her squeeze her eyes shut. She gasped when a single claw neatly sliced her underwear and cool air kissed skin that was already too hot.

“Beautiful,” Khar murmured. “Like the finest bloom in the universe.”

Lily realized what he was admiring and tried to retreat. He caught her hips and held her in place as if she were weightless to him.

“Food does not flee.”

Whatever resistance she had left cracked apart when his tongue touched her.

At first he was gentle. Then he became intent. He explored her

with patient precision, the texture of his tongue unlike anything she had known, rough and perfect at the same time. He listened to every sound she made, every twitch and breath.

When he found her most sensitive point and Lily jolted, he smiled as if he had been waiting for that exact reaction. Then he feasted like a starving thing.

After two years of loneliness, the orgasm took her almost too quickly. It rolled through her in a brutal wave that stole shame and thought and replaced them with nothing but sensation. When the aftershocks faded, they only sharpened her hunger for him.

When she could speak, she pushed up on one elbow, pleading. "Khar. I want to see you."

He did not grant it.

Lily cried out when the first thick finger slid inside her. His mouth returned to that aching point, and when one finger was not enough, a second followed. He mapped her carefully, tormenting her with tongue and touch together.

She grabbed his horns as the second orgasm tore through her, white and merciless, until he finally released her.

She did not understand how it was possible. He was alien. Other. And yet her body responded as if he had studied her for a lifetime.

As she lay trembling, Khar rose from between her legs and removed his trousers. The next thing Lily felt was him pressing against her entrance, nudging her, stretching her without fully entering.

"Lily," he said softly. "I know it seems large. But it will be all right. I will never hurt you. Do you trust me?"

She nodded.

Once. Twice. Three times he dragged himself along her,

gliding over her opening and brushing her most sensitive places, building the ache until she felt hollow with need. She did not know exactly what he carried, and in that moment she did not care. She only wanted him to fill the growing emptiness between her legs.

Not seeing him made it stranger, and somehow more intense. Like surrendering blindfolded, with nothing but trust and sensation.

Taking her yes, Khar eased forward, slow and unstoppable. Lily had never felt so full.

It stretched her, yes, but the sensation stayed balanced on the edge between pain and pleasure without tipping too far. He waited, let her adjust, then began to move, slow and rhythmic.

“You take me so well,” he murmured. “I knew you could.”

The praise sent another surge through her. Against all her earlier fears, they fit. Perfectly. As if they were never meant to be separate species at all. Inside her, he felt crafted for her body, finding places no one had ever reached.

Tears slipped from Lily’s eyes as he drove into her without mercy. Words and sounds spilled from her mouth as she neared the edge again, but she could not quite fall.

Khar noticed the strain.

“Tell me what you need.”

“My clit,” she managed.

His hand found it at once. “Here?”

Lily nodded, eyes clenched shut. Khar knelt, lifted her hips with one hand, and changed his rhythm to match his fingers.

The pleasure detonated. Lily’s cry tore free as the third orgasm slammed through her, leaving her boneless and shaking. Khar withdrew, watched her slacken into the sheets, then finished himself with a few hard strokes, spilling onto the bed.

Afterward, he gathered her close, stripped away the damp linen, and settled her onto a soft blanket, holding her to his chest. His breath warmed her neck. One arm cradled her head while the other traced slow, soothing paths over her skin.

Lily's mind, usually a constant hum of thought, finally quieted. Warmth, touch, and exhaustion pulled her under.

She fell asleep in his arms.

* * *

Hours later, Lily's bladder woke her.

She and Khar were still tangled together, so she slid off the bed with feline care and padded toward the washroom under the ship's soft safety lights. She took care of things quickly, then crept back to the bed. Khar had not shifted at all. His impressive body covered nearly the entire mattress, and with his eyes closed his face looked calmer, almost ethereal.

The same could not be said of his sex. Even soft, it remained faintly intimidating.

In the half-light, Lily could see both the similarities and the differences compared to human men. Thicker. The head more tapered, broader. She did not linger. Instead, she burrowed back against him, hoping not to wake him while unwilling to give up the closeness.

Who knew what tomorrow would bring. Maybe for Khar this had been nothing more than release. Maybe his species attached no meaning to it at all.

The thought darkened her mood until a heavy arm slid around her waist and pulled her close.

“Do not wander off, Lily.”

He did not truly wake. The words came out rough and drowsy, half a murmur. Lily relaxed instantly and fell asleep pressed against him, feeling as though something fundamental in the universe had finally clicked into place.

Morning came with Helios’s familiar chime, but Khar did not stir. Lily watched him, fascinated, quietly pleased to learn something new about him. Namely, that he could sleep through just about anything.

She showered, pulled on a clean uniform, then carefully climbed back onto the bed and settled astride him. His eyes stayed closed. He only tightened his arms around her, holding her possessively.

It occurred to Lily that despite everything he had done with his mouth the night before, he had never once kissed her properly. That felt strange by human standards, but maybe it was normal for Divani.

She had no intention of missing out.

Sitting on his hips, one hand braced against his chest, she leaned down and pressed a small kiss to his mouth.

A low sound rose from deep in his throat.

“I like that,” he rumbled. “Do it again.”

Lily laughed softly at the effect she was having. Before obliging, she voiced her latest observation.

“I did not realize you were such a deep sleeper.”

She kissed him again, then, heart pounding, caught his lower lip gently between her teeth. Khar growled, his hand sliding up to her nape and holding her there.

“I am not,” he said. “I am in a developmental phase.”

As if sensing the swarm of questions forming in her mind, he added quickly, “It is natural. It will end soon. It will not happen

again. Now do THAT again.”

This time Lily used her tongue.

Heat flared low in her belly as she felt him hardening between them, pressing insistently even through her uniform. The contrast between the roughness of his tongue, the flexibility of his mouth, and the sharp frame of his canines sent a dizzying rush through her.

She was still a little sensitive from the night before, but she found she did not mind at all.

“Khar,” she murmured, breathless. “Do you not want to...?”

A warning rumble cut her off. His clawed hands tightened on her hips. He lifted her slightly and let her settle back down so that his erection pressed more firmly against her through the fabric.

“Later. Your soft little cunt needs time to recover.”

Her face burned. Khar opened his eyes, and his entire body seemed to wake at once.

He tipped her back, caught her knees together in one hand, tugged her trousers and underwear down just enough, and bent to her. One hand held her legs steady. The other spread her gently as his tongue worked her with long, powerful strokes, paying deliberate attention to her clit every time.

She was only moments from breaking when he stopped.

With infuriating care, he pulled her underwear back into place, smoothed it, pressed a kiss to her mound, and tugged her trousers back up.

Lily stared at him, overheated and stunned.

“Khar, what the hell?”

He was already pulling on his uniform.

“I have to go,” he said calmly. “I want this on your mind until next time.”

Fury flared, sharp and reckless. She felt the need to reclaim some control.

“How do you know there will be a next time?” she shot back. “Maybe I will finish on my own and will not need you at all.”

His trousers were on, his tunic still open, broad chest on display. Her words landed. He crossed the distance in an instant, looming over her.

For a heartbeat, the otherworldly light in his eyes dimmed into something darker. Lily saw, truly saw, how dangerous he could be.

Before fear could take hold, his hand cupped her cheek, gentle enough to banish it entirely. What he said next stirred a very different hunger.

“I should punish that insolent little mouth for saying such things. Perhaps I should see if it is still that brave when it is filled with my cock.” His smile was slow. “Finish if you wish. You will be thinking of me anyway. It will be better for it.”

He traced her lips once with his thumb, stepped back, and finished dressing.

“We will meet on Vitro, Lily. Do not worry. You will be safe from me there.” A pause. “No. That is not correct. You are safe with me everywhere. I will be patient.”

He returned for one last kiss, long and searing, lifting her by the waist against him, then simply left.

Lily sat there, stunned.

The audacity. To learn to kiss like that overnight. To know her body after one night. To leave her wound so tight that she was the one tempted to break every rule and climb him during her shift.

She made a decision.

Khar was not getting away with this.

One way or another, the balance would tip.
And she already looked forward to the moment he begged.

Chapter 16

The Chrono-Cycle After Victory

Khar

One slow morning, Lily was making low, growling sounds in the command hub when Khar entered.

Khar stopped in the doorway.

He had never witnessed such behavior from Lily before. It was... concerning.

“What ails you?”

Lily’s face immediately flushed into that warm human hue Khar had come to recognize very well.

“Nothing,” she said quickly, refusing to meet his eyes. “I was just practicing my Divani.”

Khar’s twin hearts suddenly felt too large for his chest.

“No one learns languages anymore. It is redundant—”

Lily cut him off before he could finish.

“I know, I know. The translator does everything. But on Earth we do learn foreign languages. It’s a chore, sure, but it’s also kind of romantic.”

Khar considered this.

Then he nodded once.

“All right. Practice on me.”

“I haven’t practiced much,” Lily warned. “But here I go.”
She produced a rapid sequence of guttural growls and clicks, then looked at him expectantly.

“So... how did I do?”

“Well,” Khar said carefully, “you sounded Divani. A bit provincial. Perhaps from one of the outer bases. But definitely Divani.”

Lily brightened.

“And what did I say?”

Khar hesitated.

“You told me to mate with a ferish bear-beast. Vigorously.”

Lily froze.

“WHAT? No! Nononono. I just wanted to ask where the space station was.”

“Do not worry,” Khar said calmly. “It was creative swearing.”

Conversation between Khar and Lily a few chrono-cycles earlier

Khar returned to his quarters on the station for a change of clothes, a quick shower, and every calorie sphere he owned. On the way, he placed an order to replace Lily’s torn uniform. In fact, he ordered several. They would be needed.

If the exhaustion caused by imprinting had not crushed him so completely, he doubted he could have stopped after a single round with Lily.

She had seemed satisfied, but the worry still gnawed at him. Under normal circumstances, he could have spent the entire night pleasing her without effort. The developmental phase, however, had overruled everything else.

Khar shook his head sharply. He could not allow doubt to bury him. He would show Lily that he was capable of far more.

Under ordinary conditions, the presence of a third phase

would have troubled him. There was not supposed to be one. Now, he clearly was in it. Even so, he had no capacity left to dwell on the anomaly.

Every thought revolved around Lily. His own condition was secondary.

The Divani had abandoned the last institutional forms of religion centuries ago, choosing the supremacy of science instead. Still, Khar had studied the belief systems of other species. It was necessary when facing opponents whose lives were governed by imagined gods and rigid decrees. Their psychology produced choices entirely unlike his own. He pitied those who would rather end their lives than disappoint a so-called higher master.

And yet Khar had been illuminated.

He bathed in a new kind of devotion, one whose object was, unmistakably, Lily.

Everything had shifted. What once mattered had shrunk into something mundane and negligible. Even the smallest act done in Lily's interest filled him with quiet satisfaction.

Khar was no uneducated brute. From birth, he had been exceptional, and the Divani colonies had given him the finest education available. Physical dominance alone was useless. Only a trained, calculating strategist could command others and survive.

And Khar had been observing Lily for a long time. If he was honest, since the very first moment he had seen her. Over time, it had become increasingly clear what she wanted. Not what she allowed herself to admit, but what she desired on a visceral level.

Khar had decided that he would become whatever she needed. He wanted Lily. And becoming what she desired was not a

sacrifice.

Above all, Lily wanted safety. Whether that need stemmed from being torn from her homeworld or had always been part of her, Khar ensured that he never abused her trust.

She was also exceptionally intelligent, the kind of mind that demanded stimulation or quickly grew bored. That meant he needed to challenge her. He could not collapse at her feet too easily, or the tension between them would dissolve before any real foundation formed.

Her relationship with sex was conflicted. Desire influenced many of her decisions, yet she hesitated to fully claim it. Khar would gladly take on part of that control, setting the rhythm of their intimacy so Lily could surrender to pleasure without having to steer it herself. She would resist those limits, of course. That resistance was simply another source of excitement.

The most beautiful part of it all was this: if Khar's understanding of Lily was correct, then not only was he perfect for her, but it was almost as if she had been shaped for him. His temperament, his motivations, his entire life path formed an alloy with this astonishing creature that he would never have dared imagine.

Until last night, all of it had been speculation.

When Lily gave her consent, there was no turning back. Khar had to commit fully to his chosen strategy. A thousand battles had trained him to make swift, decisive choices, yet he had never felt the stakes so sharply defined. A fight without risk was nothing but slaughter. He chose courage.

And he was rewarded when he saw the unfiltered desire in Lily's eyes as he took control.

He had been right. By the Cradle of the Universe, he had been right.

Khar grinned the entire way back to his quarters. Victory had

never tasted so sweet.

For a moment, he had almost faltered when Lily threw his own words back at him and suggested there might not be a next time. He had nearly dropped to his knees and begged her forgiveness. Instead, he forced his fear aside and returned to what he knew worked.

Lily had reacted exactly as she had the first time he confronted her with his dominance: with unmistakable anticipation.

Once inside, he stripped and stepped under the shower, cleansing himself and finally examining his body in full light for the first time since the night before. He had grown used to the glossy black of his skin, but the night had brought further changes. Along the length of his shaft, small ridges had formed. At the base, precisely where Lily's pleasure center would meet him, two horn-shaped protrusions had appeared. They were positioned to massage her gently with every thrust. Their shape even echoed the horns on his brow.

Khar could barely wait to show her.

He allowed his thoughts to drift back to the night, even as his body responded instantly. Lily had been extraordinary. That silk-soft skin. Those curves, slightly alien to a Divani eye and therefore even more intoxicating. He could have spent a lifetime in the shallow hollow where her neck met her shoulder, or tracing the elegant line of her abdomen. Her scent alone had already undone him, and it had only been a faint promise of the euphoria waiting between her thighs.

He had not been joking when he told her she was food.

From now on, only her tight, sweet heat would ever satisfy his hunger.

Unfortunately, he could not spend the entire cycle lost in fantasy. Reality was better, even if work awaited. Khar had

already planned how the chrono-cycle would unfold. He would tease Lily, provoke her, and keep her on edge until the end of their shift. By then, she would be too irritated to care about anyone else's opinion and too aroused to think of anything but him.

Seeing her initiate would be intoxicating.

Khar smiled.

The universe, in reply, decided to trip him.

By the time he reached Vitro, Lily was waiting outside the ship. She looked dangerously angry.

Perhaps I pushed too far this morning.

Khar was already revising his strategy on the fly.

As he drew closer, Lily lifted the hand braced on her hip and jabbed a finger toward the massive cargo stack unloaded on the dock.

"Vegrun gave Silomarila another chance."

Khar did not immediately see the disaster in that. Yes, Madame Turtle made his skin crawl, but at least he was not the one expected to entertain her.

"All right," he said. "And what's this? Gifts? Should we load them?"

Lily shook her head, defeated.

"Exterior hull paint for Vitro. Augum-3 moon shade. Silomarila's favorite color."

Ah.

Now he understood.

Painting an interstellar cruiser from the outside was brutally exhausting work, but in seven cycles it was manageable. Even with overtime, they would still have evenings to themselves. Lily, however, looked as if she were standing in the center of a natural disaster, still struggling to believe it had chosen her.

“Khar, you don’t get it. He wants it done in three chronocycles. They arrive in four. He wants that color to be the first thing she sees. Triple overtime pay, and a full seven cycles of paid leave after the flight.”

“All right,” Khar said calmly. “I don’t care about the extra credits. What do you want? We’ll do that.”

“I don’t think we have a choice,” Lily replied. “And I need the triple pay. I can barely save anything as it is.”

She rubbed her forehead as if fighting off a headache, then shot him a suspicious look.

“Wait. Since when do you not care about money? You haggled with Vegrun even when our lives were at risk.”

“That was different,” Khar said. “Everyone needs a hobby. Mine happens to be fleecing Vegrun. As for the leave, I would enjoy that. More uninterrupted time with you.”

Lily looked him over slowly.

Only then did Khar realize something was wrong. He had been too focused on her, on pursuit and anticipation, and now felt like an untested recruit for missing this sooner.

“Lily,” he asked carefully, “how much do you earn?”

She immediately shut down.

“Khar, you can’t ask that.”

He blinked. “Of course I can. Ah. I see. Credits are sensitive. Like sex.”

She groaned.

“All right,” he continued smoothly. “Don’t tell me. I’ll give you ranges and you decide where you fall. First, you know how much they deduct for Helios docking and storage, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Add that back to your thirty cycles pay. If it comes out under two thousand credits, that’s unacceptable. Between two and

four thousand is not outrageous, but still low. Four to six is reasonable. Anything above that means you negotiated well.”

He saw the answer on her face before she muttered it, eyes downcast.

“Looks like I’m terrible at negotiating.”

Now it was Khar’s turn to brace his temple beside a horn.

“You should not be earning thirty percent less than colleagues in the same role. That violates Equal Access law. It applies even more strictly to abductee status. Wasn’t that covered in your integration program?”

“It was,” Lily said quietly. “I just assumed they were acting legally. I’m bad at this. I’m scared they’ll fire me if I push.”

Khar frowned.

“Even without the statute, you should be earning at least four to five thousand. You lack formal certification, but you operate at Herion engineering level. You unload half a cargo bay without antigrav support, and your endurance is exceptional.”

“Well,” Lily said hesitantly, “maybe I’ll talk to Vegrun after we land. He’ll be in a better mood then.”

Khar stared at her.

“No,” he said flatly. “We strike now.”

She blinked. “Strike? They could fire you because of me.”

He crossed his arms stubbornly.

“I will not work another cycle under these conditions.”

She looked at him as if he had lost his mind.

Time to change tactics.

Khar crouched in front of her, lowering his voice.

“Lily, if you want to handle this your way, I trust you. But if you trust me, let me speak to Vegrun. I’ll call him now.”

She shook her head. “I won’t let you get fired because of me. This is my problem.”

Khar laughed softly.

“No one is getting fired. I promise. Colleagues stand up for each other. If they don’t, this keeps happening.”

She chewed her lip, thinking hard, then gave a barely perceptible nod.

“All right. Worst case, we look for a new job together.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Khar said. “Now let me do my second favorite thing in life, which is extracting obscene amounts of money from a billionaire. One question. Who set your pay? Horos or Vegrun?”

“Horos.”

Khar smiled. Now he knew exactly how to frame it.

As he turned toward the control room to place the call, Lily stopped him.

“What’s your first favorite thing?”

He glanced back over his shoulder.

“You are.”

The memory of her Harmun-red blush lingered long after he walked away.

The negotiation went well.

At one point, Vegrun muttered something about organized rebellion, and Khar realized that orchestrating one might also rank among his favorite activities.

Despite the magnate’s bluster, Khar never broke character. He presented himself as a concerned worker simply drawing attention to Horos’s serious oversight. Clearly, the responsibility lay with Horos alone. Vegrun, after all, was just as much a victim as Lily.

Whether Vegrun truly had not known or simply reacted to Khar’s polite threats hardly mattered. He agreed quickly to amend the contract.

Khar did not stop there.

He assured Vegrun that he himself had been reluctant to finish the paint job on time. Lily, he explained, had insisted.

Then he deployed heavy artillery.

They would, he suggested, conduct a full deep sanitation of the pool area. As Vegrun surely knew, the Mokra, Silomarila's species, were mortal enemies of the Goror, to whom Lady Iroxella belonged. Mokra olfactory sensitivity was legendary across the galaxy. It would be tragic if all their work were ruined by such a minor oversight.

Vegrun's tone changed immediately.

"Khar," he said warmly, "you are like a son to me from another sea. I knew I could always rely on you. Handle this matter. And please convey my sincerest apologies to Lily. I will personally ensure her compensation is corrected."

Khar judged Vegrun's apology to be about as sincere as his own concern over pool sanitation, but the mission was complete.

So was the sanitation, the moment Iroxella left the ship.

Khar could not tolerate Goror stench, and he needed something to occupy himself while Horos temporarily separated him from Lily.

She was exactly where he had left her, sitting atop a paint crate, visibly trapped in dark thoughts.

Khar sat beside her.

"It's settled. Vegrun regrets what happened and will correct it shortly."

As if on command, Lily's VoidBrace chimed. She read the message, then looked up at him in disbelief, joy breaking through.

"They've already updated it. Six thousand five hundred credits. They deduct one thousand for Helios docking, but still.

Starting now.”

Khar nodded with satisfaction.

“Correct. You deserve no less.”

She smiled at him, eyes shining. “Thank you for doing this.”

He waved it off. “It should have been handled long ago, but something has taken all of my attention lately. I tried for retroactive adjustment, but Vegrun resisted.”

This time, she did not bite at the obvious flirt.

“Still,” she said, “on Earth people usually don’t discuss salaries. It’s rare for someone to stand up so others get paid fairly.”

Khar stood and began scanning the crates for instructions while Lily went to activate Vitro’s service drones.

“Fascinating place, your Earth,” he muttered. “Perhaps... that tentacled Cradle-dodging bastard!”

“What happened?”

Apparently, Khar had not squeezed Vegrun hard enough.

“Lily,” he said grimly, “the paint cannot be applied in dock. It’s vacuum-set.”

Walking the entire hull centimeter by centimeter without suits was bad enough. An EVA in full gear would make it exponentially worse.

They stared at each other.

Finally, Lily spoke. “Fuck Vegrun.”

“I thought you liked him.”

“There are some things you don’t come back from.”

Khar nodded solemnly.

Busy chrono-cycles lay ahead.

THE STRONGEST IN THE GALAXY (ALLEGEDLY)

Chapter 17

Fuck Vegrun

Khar

“Vegrun Fer’sink is absurdly rich, with his long tentacles dipping into every imaginable industry, yet he guards his private life with astonishing care. Practically nothing is known about him, not even where he acquired his first million IMPERIUM credits.”

The 9,999 Wealthiest Businessbeings of the IMPERIUM

“Silomarila Whitecloud Deepmoon, of the Amphibious Regis-tered Species, is the most celebrated actress, model, and influencer of her era. Everything she touches turns to success, as if destiny itself shaped her path.

Despite her experience, she still projects a youthful, innocent image. A media mogul whose hand has been sought by a Vixori prince, promised lifelong devotion by the acclaimed director Marfos, and named muse by the infamous Designer, Pallas.

And yet, Silomarila has never made any relationship public.

Who, then, will steal the heart of the most coveted flower of the Augum-3 swamps?”

Secrets, Gossip, Lies column, IMPERIUM Daily News Portal

Over the next three chrono-cycles, Khar and Lily slept only in

fragments, taking turns whenever they could until the work was finally done.

The service drones handled the actual spraying, but the precision work fell to them. Each unit had to be programmed individually with laser guidance so the paint coverage was flawless, while avoiding damage to the dense network of sensors and Vitro's latest hybrid camouflage system.

An ordinary ship could have been hauled into a maintenance bay and coated automatically. Vitro, as always, demanded skilled hands. In return, it offered reliability and an unmatched experience in flight.

They stopped only for short breaks to eat, drink, and dose stimulants, staying sharp enough to manage targeting despite the exhaustion. There was barely time to speak beyond clipped phrases, and that silence weighed on Khar even more than the relentless pace.

By the evening of the third cycle, they finished and returned to the dock. Just enough time remained for a brief sleep before Vegrun and Silomarila's arrival.

They stripped off their suit layers in silence, both soaked through with sweat. Lily stumbled slightly while hanging her suit in the locker, and Khar silently thanked his reflexes as he caught her.

"Are you all right?"

Lily leaned back against his chest, managing only a weak groan.

"I'm so damn tired. Fuck Vegrun."

It had become their favorite connective phrase lately, used just as freely when checking in on each other through the helper drones. Khar rested his chin on the crown of her head.

"Same. Fuck Vegrun."

He bent and lifted her. Lily started to protest out of habit, then gave up entirely and slumped against him.

Khar carried her to the crew quarters she used when traveling under Vegrun's command. She could have slept aboard Helios, but even the short walk between ships meant time stolen from rest.

Lily touched her VoidBrace to the door sensor. The door slid open, and Khar carefully set her down on the threshold.

"Thank you, Khar."

"Sleep well, Lily."

He was about to leave when her fingers closed around his wrist. She looked up at him, hesitant.

"Don't you want to sleep together?"

For a heartbeat, Khar felt like he could fight through any exhaustion the galaxy had to offer. Instead, he shook his head gently and brushed her cheek.

"I do. Just not tonight. These beds are too small for us to rest properly, and I want you to actually sleep."

She did not seem offended, though it was hard to tell if she was even fully aware of what she had asked. Khar guided her to the bed and pulled the blanket over her.

"Sleep well," he repeated.

She was already drifting.

Khar felt a quiet satisfaction settle in his chest. Taking care of her felt right.

His good mood lasted into the next chrono-cycle, when they waited in front of Vitro for Vegrun and the object of his devotion.

Vegrun hovered anxiously around Silomarila, who kept him on a surprisingly short leash. At least she appreciated the new paint job, for which Vegrun rewarded them with a grateful glance.

Khar and Lily watched with shared satisfaction as the billion-

aire made a spectacle of himself.

When Vegrun finally coaxed the Mokra star into his private suite, Khar cast Lily a knowing look.

“I like Madame Turtle.”

Lily nodded.

“I hope we see a lot more of her.”

Vegrun spared no expense to impress his lover, keeping Vitro in near-constant motion. Dinner beside the Khgorg asteroid cloud, which, if one squinted, could be interpreted as the shape of two Algors mating, so Khar deeply disapproved of that decision. Breakfast already on Rach, and an evening concert orbiting Silomarila’s favorite world, Augum-3.

Khar and Lily alternated shifts because a schedule like this demanded continuous oversight. During the most dangerous intervals, such as when they had to shoot down incoming asteroids to protect Vitro’s hull, they worked together. Outside those moments, they had precious little time for each other.

At last, on the evening of the second chrono-cycle, Lily went ahead to rest. Khar set Vitro into a stable autopilot loop around a nearby star, and for the first time in chrono-cycles, an opening appeared.

He had just returned to his own crew cabin when Lily stepped into the corridor beside him.

“What’s going on?” she asked, hope edging her voice.

“They locked themselves into the private suite.”

Lily let out a deep, heartfelt sigh.

“Finally. I was starting to think it would never happen. Not that I didn’t enjoy watching Vegrun suffer, but this has been our most exhausting run yet.”

Khar had not been thinking about Vegrun for quite some time.

“Come here.”

He pulled her into the cabin and kissed her. Lily laughed at the sudden intensity, then answered him with equal heat. They backed toward the bed, stripping layers from each other with clumsy efficiency, careful not to break the kiss for longer than absolutely necessary.

Soon Lily stood in her underwear, while Khar wore only his briefs. She felt his hardness immediately as she climbed into his lap.

Khar did not rush her. His rough tongue traced her throat, his sharp canines grazing her skin as a warning rather than a bite, enough to raise goosebumps without breaking flesh. One hand slid beneath her bra, teasing her breast until her nipple hardened fully. Then he tore the garment away and took her into his mouth, tormenting her slowly until her panties were soaked.

“Khar...”

“Say it. Tell me what you want.”

He watched desire finally overpower her shyness.

“I want you. Please.”

“Good female,” he murmured. “I will reward you very well.”

Khar felt a swell of pride. And now, he would show her what he had been waiting to reveal.

He covered her eyes with one broad hand. With the other, he freed himself and nudged her underwear aside, positioning himself at her entrance without entering yet.

“Khar, what are you...”

He did not let her finish.

He thrust in deep and decisive. Lily’s moan was raw and ancient, so erotically unguarded that Khar nearly lost control from the sound alone.

Her body had been well prepared by their earlier hunger. There

was no pain, only shock and pleasure, though the journey had only just begun. He started to move, careful not to let her feel the small horned ridges at the base of his shaft just yet. Even without them, the new textures along his length were already working their magic, drawing helpless whimpers from her.

“Why does this feel so good?” she gasped.

He could not see her expression beneath his hand, but her voice was praise enough.

Khar waited until she hovered close to the edge before driving fully in. As he anticipated, the small horns nestled perfectly around her clit, stimulating it with every deep thrust.

Lily shattered.

She cried out as she came apart, and Khar watched in reverent focus. The spasms of her body were like divine command. He could not resist. He followed her over the edge, pulling out at the final moment.

Lily curled against him and looked up into his eyes.

“Khar, I loved that. What was that thing you used?”

“Not a toy,” he replied calmly. “But if you want, you can play with it anytime.”

He gestured to himself. Lily squeaked in surprise.

“That wasn’t there before!”

Khar shrugged, as if it were nothing at all.

“Divani adapt to their partner. Exactly one partner. I adapted to you.”

Lily flushed.

“Humans don’t do that,” she said, then added more softly, “but I really liked it.”

Khar smiled broadly. *Fortunate, how little she dramatized the miracle.*

“Want another round?”

Lily yawned widely.

His chest softened instantly. As much as he wanted her, he would not push.

“No,” she said apologetically. “I’m still really tired. Fuck... Vegrun.”

“Why would I be angry?” Khar asked.

She answered with a sleepy murmur and drifted off against him. Khar sent a message to Vitro, swapping Lily’s morning shift with his own so she could sleep longer. He adjusted his VoidBrace to wake him with vibration only, not sound.

The bunk was narrow and uncomfortable for two, but Khar could not remember ever sleeping as well as he did with Lily beside him.

The journey ended soon after, though not quietly.

Silomarila threatened Vegrun with emergency landings more than once, threats only defused by promises of obscenely expensive gifts. Khar found himself developing genuine fondness for the Mokra female, despite having barely exchanged a word with her. It seemed they shared a common hobby: tormenting an old tentacled lecher.

That goodwill lasted right up until Khar was ordered to land on a nearby planet to hunt a fresh gurjt for her, a delicacy renowned this season.

He was still muttering about it when he returned to Vitro, then brightened instantly at the sight of Lily.

“Hello, beautiful,” he said. “Did you miss me?”

She rolled her eyes, but he saw the pleasure beneath it.

“Vegrun’s nervous,” Lily said.

“Let him be.”

Khar’s suit had been damaged during the hunt, not enough to compromise its integrity, but enough to require tape to keep it

from flapping loose. Lily watched with interest as he extended one claw to twice its resting length and sliced cleanly through the adhesive.

“I’ve never seen you do that before.”

“Make it bigger?” he asked mildly. “Or cut through tape?”

“Now that you mention it,” she said, frowning, “neither.”

Khar extended all his claws, turning his hand into something unmistakably lethal.

“Divani trait,” he explained. “Though lately, they have become harder.”

Lily leaned closer, examining them, then froze.

“Wait,” she said quietly. “But you... how were your fingers inside me?”

Khar retracted the claws in one smooth motion, then extended them again.

“I do not enjoy keeping them retracted,” he said. “Some Divani do.”

Lily tapped one experimentally, as if testing a blade.

“Hmm. Useful.”

Khar reached for her, but she slipped away, grabbing the sack containing the gurjt.

“No,” she said lightly. “Vegrun’s waiting.”

Khar muttered their now-familiar refrain under his breath. Fuck Vegrun. Lately shortened to “FV,” since Vitro’s command systems had a habit of listening.

He could hardly wait for the star-crossed lovers to disappear from view, so he could finally have a full week with Lily.

If she allowed it.

He hoped she would.

CHAPTER 17

Chapter 18

The Calm Before the Rupture

Lily

“Every swaying step of Silomarila is tracked by watchful eyes, yet lately the Muse of the Mokra Matriarchy has been vanishing with suspicious frequency for short stretches of time, and no one seems to know where she goes. Is she preparing for a new role? Has she turned to philanthropy? Has her heart been stolen, or has she fallen victim to blackmail? One thing is certain: you will hear about it here first the moment the truth comes to light.

And now: three recipes for achieving the perfect Augum-3 hue on tentacles, tentacle-chewers, and other flavorful appendages—at home, of course!”

Secrets, Gossip, Lies column, IMPERIUM Daily News Portal

Lily lost her bet that Silomarila would throw Vegrun out by the end of the trip.

She had spoken with the Mokra woman a few times about this and that, and by the time they reached their destination she had genuinely grown fond of her. Among her own species, Silomarila was considered breathtakingly beautiful, and she was universally famous for her modeling career. Beyond that, Lily

thought she had a sharp sense of humor and discovered they shared more interests than expected. What a shame that the bland, flavorless Vegrun had managed to snare her.

Khar stood beside Lily at Vitro's dock, radiating smug satisfaction as they waved goodbye to the departing ground luxury transport. The moment it vanished from sight, he pulled out his console, switched Vitro to remote sentry mode, grabbed Lily by the waist, and tossed her over his shoulder.

"Come on, loser."

She punched his back. "Put me down!"

"Never. You live on my shoulder now."

"The wager was one favor!"

"Yes. And I'm doing you a favor by letting you live on my shoulder. See? You already owe me two."

Lily sighed and went limp, arms dangling behind him as she bounced with the rhythm of his stride. She briefly considered biting his ass, but it was too far away. Damn giant space demon-bull alien.

Khar turned her toward seven chrono-cycles entry sensor and she triggered the door. Contrary to his earlier promise, he set her down on the threshold and looked at her hopefully.

"Can I come in?"

She gestured inside, and Khar promptly scooped her up again and jogged in.

"Want to shower together?"

"What? No!"

"That's fine. Next time then. But we do need a shower. Both of us. Vegrun and his tentacles on our shoulders is not an experience I want to repeat."

Lily shuddered. "They were so wet. But hey — at least he was happy."

Khar was already peeling off the jacket of his black uniform, where the slick residue of a tentacle still marked the fabric.

“I’m happy about the seven-chrono-cycles leave. What’s your plan, Lily?”

“Nothing special. A couple of overdue services on Helios. I want to spend a bit of the bonus. Sleep a lot. Eat a lot. Things like that.”

“Sounds good. I’m joining you for all of it.”

Lily slipped out of her own jacket and grimaced at the damp streak on it.

“You know what, Khar? Let’s shower together.”

“If you insist.”

* * *

The next few chrono-cycles were the best of Lily’s life, extraordinary in their very ordinariness.

Ordinary, because they did nothing remarkable. They simply lived alongside each other. They had a lot of sex, and when they were not having sex, they ate, slept, rested, and talked.

Extraordinary, because even running out to pick up calorie spheres with Khar felt like an adventure. In his presence, Lily felt vivid, wanted, alive.

The sex was otherworldly.

With her previous partners, things always seemed to end just as she was truly warming up. Sometimes she managed one or two orgasms. Sometimes not even that. She had never reached that boneless, jelly-like state where pleasure rolled through her again and again until she forgot how to hold herself together.

With Khar, everything changed.

The Divani was relentless. He could have gone day and night without pause, yet he always kept her needs in mind. Well, almost. He usually waited until Lily was reduced to breathless pleading, begging him to stop. Then he continued just a little longer.

Lily explained the concept of a safeword to him.

He loved it.

“How clever humans are to invent something like this,” he said. “That way I can listen to you beg in that sweet voice of yours, and I only stop when you throw ‘solar collector’ at my head.”

“It’s not going to be solar collector.”

“Why not?”

“It has to be something I would never say by accident.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “Yes. With you, there is a real risk you would bring up your ship during sex. I have accepted this.”

“Hey! I was joking!”

The safeword did not end up being solar collector.

And Khar made enthusiastic use of it.

* * *

Of course, there were moments when Lily ran headlong into the fact that Khar did not always think the way she did. Most of the time they fit together so seamlessly it was easy to forget they came from different species. But every now and then, he surprised her.

Once, Khar had gone back to his quarters to change while Lily

lounge aboard Helios, listening to old music from Earth. When he returned, it never even occurred to her to turn it off.

Khar stepped inside, dropped the large bag he was carrying, and froze.

“Lily. What is this music? Do you have more of it?” He paused, then added with sudden intensity, “I want to fuck you while this is playing.”

She burst out laughing. “It kind of feels like you always want to.”

“That is correct,” he said seriously. “But to this? Especially.”

Lily vaulted over the back of the sofa. “Catch me, then,” she called, and bolted.

The growl he made as he gave chase soaked her instantly. She decided she would not let herself be caught too quickly.

* * *

More shocking still was when Khar emerged from the shower, toweling off cold water.

“Your first husband disapproves of me,” he announced gravely. “He set my wash to frigid mid-rinse. I will accept this. He arrived before me, and I did not save your life. But there cannot be more husbands.”

“Khar,” Lily said carefully, “what are you talking about?”

“Helios changed the temperature during my wash.”

“That is impossible,” she cut in. “Helios is an intelligent system, not a being with feelings.”

Khar crossed his arms stubbornly. “Pull the last few micro-cycles of bathroom logs.”

She sighed. “Helios, bathroom data from the previous five minutes.”

“Negative,” the ship replied. “Logs destroyed due to an unexpected error.”

Lily frowned. Khar gave her a smug look of vindication and wisely did not say I told you so.

“All right,” she admitted. “That is strange. But what do you mean, my husband? Helios is a machine.”

Khar clutched his chest in exaggerated offense. “If the AI rights advocates heard you, they would already be knocking.”

She snorted. “He is still not my husband. And neither are you.”

Khar, now dry but still wrapped in a towel, dropped onto the sofa beside her. “You love Helios as if he were. But that is fine. If you deny it, I will simply claim First Husband.”

Helios’s ambient lights flickered. Lily decided it must have been her imagination.

What she did not miss was Khar, thinking she could not see, flashing the ship the universal eat me gesture. She could not decide whether to laugh or groan, so she rolled her eyes and steered the conversation somewhere safer.

“Is there any accepted law about this?” she asked.

“No. Each species decides for itself. I was extrapolating from what you told me about human mating customs.”

Lily covered her face. “Khar, I do not know. I have not thought this through.”

She peeked at him through her fingers. He gently pulled her hands away and pressed his face into them.

“I am very fond of you, Lily. Tell me what I must do to be acknowledged. I will do anything.”

A handful of words, and he nearly brought her to tears.

She remembered the first time she had seen him, the low tug in her belly. She had refused to dwell on it then. It had felt shameful and impossible. A towering alien who looked like a demon from some ancient myth could not possibly care what a small human wanted to do to him. She even remembered forcing herself to ask the strange gym receptionist who he was, only to be stonewalled with “data protection.”

Then they had ended up working together.

At first he had been quiet, reserved. But around him, for the first time since leaving Earth, she had felt something like camaraderie. As if he had anchored her soul in the middle of its endless storm.

Khar was confident, certain. Those qualities had begun to grow in her too, step by step, as he dismantled the insecurities that had haunted her. Some had been there long before. Others had been born the moment she was taken from Earth. Khar made no distinction. He dismantled them all.

If it had only been about sex, he would have had her wrapped around his finger anyway. But without realizing it, he had waged a one-man war on the contradictions the world had drilled into her since birth. Be sexy, but do not be a slut. And what makes you a slut? Practically anything. But being undesirable is worse. Just do not be a slut.

Round and round.

Those scripts had shadowed every previous encounter.

With Khar, the only thing that mattered was what made her happy. He took pleasure in her pleasure and amplified it. She loved that.

If sex could feel this right, she did not care what the world thought. Something that felt this true at the core of her being had to be clean and real.

With Khar, she felt safe enough to tell him almost anything. Almost. Some part of her still feared the magic might shatter without warning.

He did not drown her in compliments, but when he spoke, his words carried weight. He strove for honesty and did not seem threatened by disagreement.

If this were a romance back on Earth, she would have been suspicious. How could everything be this perfect?

Ah yes. Familiar territory. Self-sabotage.

So she reached for her strongest argument.

“On Earth, people traditionally marry to give children stability. There are societies where divorce was only allowed if one partner was infertile.”

Khar’s shoulders relaxed, as if a crushing weight had lifted. She had not even realized how tense he had been.

“You want descendants?” he asked gently. “I can give them to you.”

He rubbed his face against her palm like a giant cat. “My body has adapted to yours. Do not worry about that. We had not discussed it, so I did not press. But if you decide you want it, I am ready. If you decide you do not, I remain at your side. Only you matter.”

She froze, thoughts spinning until a few coherent ones surfaced.

“That is why you did not finish inside me?” she asked. “I thought it was a Divani custom.”

“No. I took precautions on my end. It is courtesy, since I do not know human norms. And an additional safety layer. There is no manual for Divani-human pairings.”

“Damn right,” Lily snapped. “It would be assault to get me pregnant without my consent.”

He did not retreat. He stepped closer. "I told you I would never force you. The option exists if you want it. Are there other expectations?"

"I need time to process this," she said. "And if we did have children... how would that even be possible?"

Pride straightened him. "A Divani trait. It is how we rose to leadership on our homeworld and how we expand in the wider universe. When a Divani finds a true partner, we adapt. The offspring is viable and fertile, though it leans toward Divani biology. It can later pair with other Divani without further adaptation. Other species have similar phenomena. We are not unique."

She nodded slowly. "When I accepted I might never return to Earth, I let go of the future I assumed, including children. So even the possibility feels like something to be grateful for."

"Most species face declining births over time," he said. "Resources remain, but societies falter. There is no true solution. Divani are valued because we can do this. But you do not need to decide now. What matters to you besides reproduction?"

"For most people..."

"Not most people," he interrupted softly. "For Lily, a Sun-loving female from Earth."

She swallowed. "Trust, I think. Caring for each other. Sharing what you have and achieving more together than alone. Staying when things get hard. And exclusivity. I do not think I could compromise on that."

He looked at her as if she had spoken a revelation. Absolute attention, no judgment. It made her squirm.

"Something like that," she finished. "It is hard to transplant an Earth definition wholesale."

"I disagree," he said calmly. "All of that I can fulfill."

She giggled at his earnestness. “If you insist on a label, husband feels too early. On Earth, people usually get engaged first. Fiancé and fiancée. It is not as final, but it declares intent.”

Khar nodded solemnly. “Understood. If you remain satisfied with me for a long time, I will be your husband.”

She laughed, flustered. “Something like that. There is no fixed timeline. It is a trial period for both of us.”

“I require no trial,” he said. “But I accept our terms. We will revisit later.”

Then he pivoted.

He sprang up, reached into the bag he had brought from home, and produced a leather line. With a single leap he clipped the carabiner into one of Helios’s ceiling safety loops. The maneuver was impressive. The most impressive part was the towel staying in place.

Lily barely processed the shift from romance to motion before he caught her wrists, wrapped them, and tugged the line to pull her upright. The leather was soft enough not to hurt, but firm enough to hold.

“What are you doing?” she gasped.

“You are a human field researcher who crash-landed on an uncharted world. You were captured by a local savage. That is me. The translator only speaks modern tongues, and I speak Old Divani. Very authentic.”

She struggled, but did not use the safeword. Seeing he had won, Khar issued a command.

“Helios, set quarters to Garrum Reserve. Jungle.”

The lights sank into red hues. Distant, unfamiliar animal calls echoed. Modern, safe Helios transformed into something primal and unsettling.

Lily loved it.

He took her from behind first, unseen, murmuring threats at her ear while weapon-worthy claws mapped her body. Then he flipped her, holding her wide by the thighs.

Face to face in the crimson glow, she thought for a heartbeat she truly faced a demon. Red light across obsidian skin made it feel like they danced in purgatory's flames and she was the sinner, surrendered to her tormentor.

In that position he was almost too big, but with every thrust the small horn-like spurs stroked her clit. The wild, unrestrained sex, the lights tuned to her subconscious, and Khar's devotion drove an orgasm through her so fierce her vision blurred and tears slipped down her cheeks.

Even as the aftershocks trembled on, he supported her with one arm, loosened the leather, and kissed the flushed marks on her wrists.

"Satisfied, my human fiancée?"

She could only nod before curling against his chest.

"Good," he said, pure contentment in his voice. "If you are happy, I am happy."

Lily had never been happier.

* * *

As the end of their sabbatical crept closer, Lily wanted it to stretch on forever. She feared that once they fell back into work, the perfect bubble they had built would crack.

So on the final morning she broke their routine. Instead of waking to Khar's erection or his tongue tracing her most sensitive places, she decided to surprise him. She had also

noticed that mornings made him more vulnerable, more easily undone. If she ever wanted to see him lose control completely, this was her chance.

She knelt between his legs and took the head of him into her mouth.

Slowly. Intentionally.

Her lips and tongue worked him with patient sensuality until he hardened fully, a low groan tearing from him even as he slept. She knew the exact moment he woke when his hand closed in her hair and his voice dropped into a rough, half-sleep snarl.

“This is torture, you devious female.”

She dragged her own far less threatening teeth along his skin in warning, mimicking the way he teased her.

Message received.

Khar escalated instantly.

He lifted her, turned her with effortless strength until her thighs framed his face, yet she could still reach him. The sudden shift stole her breath.

“Let’s wager,” he said calmly. “Since you are so confident. If I finish first, you get to tyrannize me all of this chrono-cycle. Every small command obeyed. But if you finish first, then from this morning until nightfall, I will be inside one of your openings. Do you accept?”

Lily could not imagine how he planned to turn this around. The angle was strange, but after a seven chrono-cycles of near-constant nakedness, embarrassment had long since burned away.

“Deal.”

She shuddered when his tongue swept softly over her, unhurried and precise. She was already slick, but she could handle it. She worked him harder, faster, determined not to lose

momentum.

Then he slapped her slicking sex.

Not hard, but sharp enough to send pleasure screaming through her entire body. He acted as if nothing had happened and returned to slow, expert attention. Just as she steadied herself, another strike landed.

After that, there was no mercy.

His fingers joined his mouth, and Lily tried to focus on her own task, on her tongue and lips and his reactions, but under that kind of assault it was impossible.

“Khar, no... stop...”

“I cannot,” he said calmly. “The stakes are serious.”

She could only whimper as the inevitable claimed her. Her orgasm tore through her long and trembling, spilling over his face as she cried out.

He barely gave her a moment to recover.

Handling her as though she were something precious, he lifted her down, sat on the edge of the bed, and positioned her between his knees.

“Now,” he said, “finish what you started.”

She glared at him, defiant even as her pulse raced, then took him into her mouth.

To her surprise, it took almost nothing. His thighs tightened, his breath broke, and he came with a deep, guttural moan, heat flooding her mouth.

Lily usually hated swallowing. Taste was tolerable. Texture was not. She braced herself for the awkward moment, ready to pull back and wipe her mouth.

Of course, Khar shattered that expectation too.

The taste was salty and musky, not unpleasant. The texture slid silk-smooth across her tongue. Lily swallowed.

Then, deliberately, she licked him again, slow over shaft and head, just to see what he would do.

Khar stared at her as though she were something miraculous, his focus never wavering.

“Did you like it, Khar?”

“Yes,” he said hoarsely. “You know I fucking liked it.”

She smiled and traced the corner of her mouth with the tip of her tongue. Khar scooped her up, leaned back, and settled her against his chest.

“I think that was one of the greatest challenges of my life,” he admitted. “Holding myself back.”

She smacked his chest lightly. “I knew you were close.”

“Ah-ah,” he murmured. “A wager is a wager. And now we begin repayment.”

Khar, it turned out, was a very strict collector.

Chapter 19

Confessions of the Past

Lily

“Cami, you were right.

It is the abs.”

Lily as she thinks about her sister, Camille. While she hasn't seen her for three years, she hopes she is doing well... and misses her dearly.

The next morning they went back to work on Vitro, and for once there was a message from Vegrun waiting for them: an urgent matter had come up, and they would not be flying for at least a few chrono-cycles.

Their employer was never this considerate.

“He must be grateful,” Lily said, as if it were obvious. “We helped him finally lock down his romance with Silomarila.”

Khar snorted. “Or he’s about to dump another job on us.”

With Vitro sealed and running decontamination programs, their workload was light. Restock supplies. Run system checks. Verify that the new camouflage layers and sensors were reporting clean.

Lily had been nervous about what would happen to them once work started again, as if duty might crack the blissful little world they had built inside Helios. But the fear turned out to be pointless.

Khar kept his word.

He did not initiate anything during shift. Not once.

That did not mean he behaved like a stranger.

He took every excuse to touch her anyway. A brush of fingers at her lower back as he passed behind her. A brief press of his palm against her hip as he leaned over the same console. A glancing stroke along her wrist when she handed him a tool. He was careful, disciplined, maddeningly restrained.

She'd thought the sheer volume of sex would sate her; instead, it made her greedy.

Spending the whole cycle together only sharpened the hunger, so that by evening they collided like two starving creatures and tore the rest of the world away. And somewhere along the second chrono-cycle, Lily discovered a new, wicked pleasure: teasing Khar as cruelly as possible while wearing the face of perfect innocence.

If they were not working, and not shamelessly flirting in that quiet, stolen way, they talked.

Everyday topics bled into personal ones, and Lily did not notice the shift until it was already happening. One afternoon she heard herself speaking about her family and her friends, names she had refused to say aloud for the last two chrono-years. It had been too painful. Like pressing a bruise just to prove it still existed.

With Khar, she could say them.

She still ended up wiping at her cheeks, blinking hard, but he held space for her without crowding her. He did not smother her

in comfort or demand she be fine. He simply stayed, solid and present, like a wall you could lean against without being asked why you needed it.

So Lily let it all out. Everything that had sat like a stone in her chest since the abduction.

And when she finally felt the knot in her throat loosen, she told him about the things that had once made her happy, too. About her mother, who never got to see her grow up because she died when Lily was seventeen, but who used to get so excited over even the smallest details of Lily's day. About how she always sang off-key when she drove, utterly shameless about it. About her father, ten years older than her mom, who loved her like a lovesick teenager right up until the last day, and who made the best meat pasta in the world, but only that, because apparently one masterpiece was enough for one lifetime. About her little sister, Camille, who had been her eternal enemy as a child and her closest person as an adult. Her father had died before Lily was taken, and there was guilt in the relief that at least he never had to live with not knowing what happened to her.

"You talk about your sister with so much tenderness," Khar said quietly, stroking her hair as she sat in his lap. "She must be special."

Then, as if it were only fair, he offered his own story in return.

"I have three littermates," he said. "That alone is rare among Divani. One or two is the usual. And no one expected how large we would be."

Lily blinked. "Your poor mother... was pregnancy and birth not complicated?"

He looked genuinely confused. "Why would she be pitied? She was proud. And you have seen the med bays on Vitro and Helios. The Divani hospitals offer the very same level of service: she

suffered no real inconvenience.”

“Okay,” Lily said, recalibrating. “Right. What do your siblings do?”

“You know we call our society meritocratic,” he said. “But much is decided at birth. How compatible your parents are. What kind of individual emerges from billions of combinations.” He said it with the bluntness of a fact, neither proud nor ashamed. “My siblings and I were privileged from our first breath. Best education. Best prospects. They serve now on the Divani colonies in high positions within the Peacekeepers.”

Lily had been tapping at a console while he spoke, but she stopped and leaned back, giving him her full attention.

“Do you talk to them?”

For the first time she saw him hesitate.

It was subtle, but it was there, a brief shrinking inward. With his size, it should have been impossible for him to look as if he wanted to make himself smaller, yet he managed it anyway. He raked a hand through his hair, roughing up the black curls.

Lily’s fingers itched.

Before she could stop herself, she moved behind him and began to comb through the long strands with her hands. His hair was nothing like hers, coarser and thicker, like the pelt of something wild. Under the slow, steady motion, his shoulders eased.

He tilted his head back to look at her, still seated.

“Not really,” he admitted.

He took a long breath, as if arranging his thoughts into something he could endure saying aloud.

“I was the biggest,” he said. “So the most was expected of me. Among Divani, size and strength correlate. Intelligence as well, more often than not.” His jaw flexed once. “We were all

exceptional. But I always had to be better.”

Lily only hummed, letting him continue. She kept massaging his scalp, and when her hands drifted to his neck and shoulders, she felt him relax further, as if he had been waiting for permission to be held.

“If I stayed, eventually I would have become their superior,” he said. “That is how it goes. And when it came time for a decision, I would be the one choosing which of them to send into near-certain death.”

Lily’s stomach tightened.

“So I joined the Intergalactic Legion,” Khar continued. “A military umbrella above individual species. It handles conflicts that threaten the wider universe. If the Ancient Artificial Intelligence Uprisings were ever to happen again, the Legion would be deployed. It is also called when a new species emerges from its cradle galaxy and must be brought into the IMPERIUM.”

He caught one of Lily’s hands, pressed a kiss to her knuckles, then kept speaking, as if the contact anchored him.

“The IMPERIUM does not want to exterminate species,” he said. “Every new individual is a new potential consumer, taxpayer. Scientific value. Biological value. Cultural value.” His tone was too calm, too controlled. Lily felt a chill crawl up her spine. “Once a species joins, membership often protects them. But if a species refuses, they face the united Legion. The goal is deterrence with minimal personal cost. Enough to frighten them into capitulation. Not humiliating enough to create martyrs.”

His voice remained flat, but Lily could feel the strain beneath it. It was like watching an animal hold still while a wound was cleaned.

“New species are rare,” he went on. “Mostly the Legion deals with trade disputes, pirates, smugglers, and de-escalating

interspecies conflicts.” His eyes were distant now. “You serve seven chrono-years if you enlist. And in the middle of my service, the Geons appeared.”

Khar turned his chair so they faced each other, then pulled Lily between his knees, close. She placed her hands on his shoulders, steadying herself as much as him.

“The Legion observes first,” he said. “Motives. Weak points. What will bend them with the least blood.” He swallowed once. “It is a demonstration. It must be persuasive enough to imprint on their collective species-mind, so they will not try to leave again in a few chrono-decades. It must not be humiliating. Humiliation breeds fury. It breeds heroes.”

He lifted his head fully and looked her in the eyes.

“And I was very good at it,” he said softly. “I had been promoted more than once. I was not a common soldier. I like to watch. I like to win. Everything prepared me for it.” His mouth tightened. “The Geons submitted within weeks. But it was one of the most brutal expeditions in Legion history.”

He shook his head, once, sharply, as if rejecting something that still lived in his memory.

“I told the commanders the Geons are pack-minded,” he said. “Kill a leader and another rises. Then another. It never ends that way.” His hands clenched on her hips, careful not to hurt. “They did not listen. In the end, one Geon matriarch flew unarmed into the militarized zone. She offered herself willingly, only to stop the deaths.” His throat worked. “That sacrifice turned them. Not our force. Not our fear. A leader of a third-tier clan they themselves despised.”

Lily brought a hand to her mouth.

It was horrifying. Not just the cruelty, but the cold logic behind it, the way it could happen to anyone. To Earth. To humans. A

careless decision, a wrong leader, and suddenly you were just another species being “integrated.”

And Khar... Khar looked like someone who had survived a storm and was still hearing thunder.

“When the slaughter ended, my service was nearly complete,” he said. “I knew Divani leadership would come for me. When I joined the Legion, I technically lost my citizenship and received a neutral one. They could not command me, but they would have tried something else.” His gaze flicked away. “They would have appealed to family. They would have asked me to return, bring my experience to the colonies.”

He let out a bitter exhale.

“But it would not solve the problem that made me leave,” he said. “So with a few favors and minor administrative crimes, I separated early and disappeared.” The edge of a smile appeared, thin and tired. “They may still be looking. But the universe is nearly infinite.”

The smile grew warmer.

“And then I met you,” he said. “So I suppose I must be grateful for everything that happened.”

Lily could not climb out of the deep emotional trench his story had carved.

“Khar,” she whispered, “that’s horrible. I don’t even know what you went through...”

His hand rose and cupped her cheek. His thumb stroked once, gentle.

“And I do not know what you went through when you were taken,” he said. “At least I chose my path. You did not, I assume, stand beside a road with a sign that said, ‘aliens, this way.’”

Despite herself, Lily laughed.

“How do you know?” she said. “Maybe I always dreamed a

massive demon space alien would have his fun with me.”

This time Khar laughed too. It was not pure joy yet, but it broke the worst of the heaviness, and Lily felt him loosen, just slightly, like a knot easing.

“Then leave Helios’s door open tonight,” he murmured, “and you may receive a pleasant surprise.”

Chapter 20

Close, Then So Far

Khar

“By the Cradle. It is always better to stay alert. If something can go wrong, it will.”

Khar had lived by that creed since he was young.

His mother had never been fond of it.

He knew he was not being entirely honest with Lily, and that knowledge weighed on him more with every passing chronocycle. He had sworn to himself that he would be, soon. It was not that he had lied to her. Never that. But he had realized that they understood certain things very differently, and he did not want to frighten her before she was ready.

They needed time.

Time together.

Time to truly know each other. Time for Lily to overcome the uncertainty that seemed to thread itself through every serious decision she made.

Khar hated that she had been shaped by experiences that made it difficult for her to love freely, without fear, without restraint, and to give herself over to her own desires. To break a being like

her was a sin.

But they were moving in the right direction. Lily was growing more confident by the chrono-cycle, and Khar took quiet, possessive joy in watching her heal.

Still, the truth pressed heavily against his chest.

Lily did not yet know what the imprinting truly meant for him. That she did not need to worry. That there would be no other female in his life. There could not be. He did not want there to be. Ever.

He feared that if he told her too soon, she would recoil from the finality of it. That she might think she could not give him the same in return. But Khar also knew that Lily was not capricious. And he knew himself.

He would always be one step ahead of her needs, already providing what she required before she even realized she wanted it. Perfect alignment.

So he left Lily alone for a single chrono-cycle while he prepared for the conversation they would have. There was much to take care of.

His favorite task had been acquiring the ring Lily had mentioned. She did not wear jewelry, but Khar had noticed how her gaze lingered whenever she saw it on others, and how she had once remarked that married people wore rings. So he commissioned one, forged from a particularly rare metal, with great care given to its design so it would not clash with Lily's translator. He thought that, over time, Lily had grown fond of the piece of metal on her left eyebrow and would not want to change it for a ring. It had taken time to secure, but now he would finally be able to collect it.

He also needed a higher-tier IMPERIUM statistical automaton to consolidate all of his assets into a single account. He intended

to share everything with Lily. He did not want her to work out of necessity. If she wished, she could simply fly Helios from now on.

Khar had told her he did not work for money. And it was true. The rewards from the Divani, his Legion pay, his discharge bonus, and the pleasure of stripping Vegrun down to the bone had added up to a significant fortune. Fleecing Vegrun, however, once a hobby of sorts, had since been replaced by a far more meaningful mission: making Lily happy.

He had even decided to bring food, and surprisingly, this had taken the longest to figure out. Choosing something Lily might enjoy, but also festive for the occasion, felt more complex than any negotiation. In the end, he bought many different things. That way, she could choose whatever she felt like.

Khar returned late, though Lily's shift had not yet ended. She was covering it alone this chrono-cycle. He could barely wait to surprise her somewhere in Vitro's quiet corridors, then steal her away to Helios, where he would finally tell her everything.

And if Lily forgave him, if she accepted his gifts, then he would receive his own.

Lily. Naked. In his lap.

The moment he reached the docks, something felt wrong.

Vitro was gone. In the place of the ship, the hangar felt eerily empty, and it dawned on him that he had never seen this sight before, as when Vitro departed, he was always on deck. Even though the ship had burrowed herself deep into his twin hearts, the woman aboard was on an entirely different level, and her absence cut as deep as a laser blade.

Panic clenched his gut, sharp and sudden, though nothing was confirmed yet. Vegrun had not announced a visit, but that meant little. He felt himself on the precipice of something, similar

to how he felt when he was observing the first strike against the Geons. He knew that something was fundamentally wrong, clawing at his gut, yet he was unable to do anything to change that.

Khar immediately called Lily's VoidBrace.

The call was rejected.

He forced himself to stay calm.

All right. Lily was unavailable.

Maybe nothing was wrong. She just needed to do some routine task. They had never done that before—but lately, he had learned to expect the unexpected.

Blasted Cradle...

If he couldn't reach Lily, he would call Vegrun.

The brief moments while he reached that slimy Algor stretched endlessly, but he kept himself from starting the call with shouting. It was his superior, after all. He would show restraint.

Even as his mind conjured harsher possibilities—being abandoned right after being accepted by his true mate—he forced himself to remain the bigger Divani.

The call connected.

"Vegrun, this is Khar. Did you take Vitro out?" he bit out, and even that was a success considering his sour mood.

"Hello, Khar. Yes, I see your identifier. What is this concern? It is not like you. Why would I have taken off? I am on Idris." Vegrun sounded distracted and slightly annoyed at the call.

Khar barely restrained the urge to crush something in his hand. The metal railing near the docking bay would live to see another cycle.

"Vitro is not in the dock, and Lily was on shift this chronocycle. She would have told me if there was a problem that

required departure. Her own ship is still here. Was Horos involved?"

Vegrun's silence on the other end was long, entirely too long for Khar's liking.

"Oh. Well. Uh..."

"Say it, Vegrun."

"Horos no longer works for me, Khar."

A loud screeching noise broke the silence in the hangar as the metal railings gave way to Khar's fist.

"What was that noise, Khar?" Vegrun babbled on, but quickly got back to his usual monologuing. "Anyway, I dismissed him two chrono-cycles ago. After I spoke with you, I began looking into things, and this was not the first incident. Have you tried accessing Vitromium remotely?"

Even as Vegrun spoke, Khar was already working his Void-Brace, attempting again and again to reconnect to Vitro. Each attempt failed, plunging him deeper into the quick-expanding abyss in his chest.

"No. I'm locked out."

There was a brief pause on the line. When Vegrun spoke again, his tone had hardened.

"I am notifying the authorities. Lily would not take my ship." Khar agreed.

"Report everything," he ordered.

"And why would I do that, Khar?" While Vegrun had sounded repentant a few chrono-seconds ago, now his haughty manner was back in full force.

Now that helped Khar a lot.

While he had to maintain a façade of polite professionalism, Vegrun's attitude brought back a crucial part he had missed in the shock of losing Lily. His Divani lineage, combined with

his calculated upbringing and chrono-years of brutal service in the Legion, morphed him into the perfect being for this task, allowing the real Khar to resurface.

“Because,” he started calmly, eerily so, “if even a single, tiny scar remains on my Lily after this farce, caused by none other than you, Vegrun, there won’t be a surgeon in the IMPERIUM that can salvage a single strand of DNA from your remains to clone you back.”

Khar knew that Vegrun was powerful, feared even. You don’t become as rich as he is without being strong and vicious. That would make Vegrun resilient against petty threats. At the same time, it would allow Vegrun to know when he was really in trouble. Like in this moment.

“Fine.” Vegrun finally relented. “But not for you, you *skfsnfsd*.” The word did not translate, meaning Vegrun said something truly nasty, probably reverting to his old Algor dialect.

“Why? Don’t we work well together already?” Khar pushed, but it was a small joy to gloat when Vegrun cut the line and he was back in the dreadful station, standing alone, without Vitromium, without Lily.

He lowered his face and allowed himself just one heartbeat of pain, of guilt, before he jumped to action.

And he swore to himself that when he saw Lily again, he would never let her out of his sight.

Chapter 21

Trust Your Instincts (and Strike)

Lily

“The Corvus species had lived its golden age during the previous IMPERIUM era. Back then, they were respected and held numerous high-ranking positions across the known universes. That age ended with the Herr-3 incident. After that, other species began treating Corvus individuals with open suspicion, fearful of the irreversible effects of their racial abilities. Most star-citizens, when given the choice, preferred to keep their distance from such dangerous and unpredictable beings. Unfortunately for the Corvus, the higher one rises, the farther one can fall.

It is no surprise that, despite their pride, Corvus individuals struggle with the lack of recognition they believe they deserve. The author of this volume therefore advises anyone seeking any form of relationship with them to proceed with the utmost caution.”

Excerpt from Ner’fol Vas Gorg, Universal Dating Guru: Love with Another Species

Lily had been thinking for some time about the small, inexplicable malfunctions that kept occurring on Helios whenever Khar was around. In the end, she decided to change Khar’s status

from guest to administrator. She could have granted him user access, but something in her told her it was time to commit.

Yes, they had known each other for a very short time. And yet Khar felt as though the universe itself had shaped him specifically for her.

The frightening part was not the idea of spending her life with him. That felt almost like a privilege. What frightened her was how right it all felt. Happiness like this never came without consequence.

She shook her head, as if she could physically dislodge the thought.

No. She deserved good things.

She was issuing a command to Helios from Vitro's control room when the main display showed Horos waiting at the entrance. Lily opened the access gate and announced her location through the speakers.

Horos looked tired, as far as she could tell from the alien face. In that moment he resembled a wraith grafted onto a raven more than anything human. Perhaps that was why the impression struck her so strongly.

Maybe that is just my human perception.

Maybe he is perfectly healthy.

"Hello, Horos. How can I help?" she said as he stepped into the control bay.

"Hi, Lily. We need to leave immediately. Vegrun's orders. Can you undock?"

Horos sat down in Khar's usual chair.

Lily frowned. Technically, the chair did not belong to Khar, but seeing Horos in his place felt wrong. Almost insulting.

"I am alone on shift," she said. "I will call Khar back so we can depart together."

“No. We leave now. Vegrun’s directive. Vitro is expected at the Kharm-2 cruiser.”

Reluctantly, Lily reached for the control panel. Then she stopped.

She hit the quick-access key to Vegrun’s private channel.

Horos sprang toward her the instant he saw the hesitation.

Lily jumped aside, but this was not an attack she could evade.

Horos leaned toward her and before she could strike him, a sound tore from his throat, sharp enough to feel like shattered glass.

Every muscle in Lily’s body seized.

She hit the floor as if in a convulsive fit.

Everything hurt. Everything burned.

It felt like being trapped in an endless spasm, except her awareness remained painfully sharp. Time stretched into something unbearable, seconds dragging under the crushing weight of the agony.

Horos stepped over her, cut Vitro’s outgoing signals, then knelt beside her.

“How clever of you to sense danger immediately,” he said. “Your species is still closer to animals than civilization. Your instincts have not dulled yet.”

The convulsions stopped.

Lily lay limp on the floor, drained, barely able to breathe. She wanted to fight, but her muscles refused to answer. Horos calmly removed her personal console and replaced it with thick, solid-looking metal bands around her wrists, then her ankles.

He spoke as he worked, half to himself, half to her, his voice hoarse with delight.

“I could watch this forever. Such beautiful, sweet suffering. I will admit, you surprised me, Earth whore. Only species with the

most complex nervous systems tremble like this. You humans have barely stepped beyond your filthy little planet, and yet you are like this.”

Lily could not speak. She felt control slowly returning, like circulation creeping back after deep cold. She could not lift her arms, but the familiar ache began to pulse in her fingers.

Horos fetched a cargo-grade antigravity cart and, with no gentleness at all, rolled her onto it.

“Damn high-gravity dwellers,” he muttered. “A Corvus would think you would be lighter in moments like this. You never are.”

A hundred sharp retorts flared through Lily’s mind, but she could not even lift her head.

Horos noticed.

Concern flickered across his face.

He pushed the cart quickly to Suite B and dumped her unceremoniously onto the floor. He pressed a rounded device against the wall near the entrance, never once taking his glittering eyes off her.

As soon as the cart released her, Lily tried to rise.

She failed.

She collapsed forward, then forced herself up again, managing to get one knee under her.

Every movement cost her.

“Your end... is coming... Horos.”

She lunged toward him, swinging her arm with everything she had left.

If she missed, she would grab him. If she grabbed him, she would bite. Or claw out his eyes. Anything.

She was slower than usual, but it should have been enough.

It was not.

Horos pressed a button.

The metal bands on her wrists and ankles snapped together instantly, slamming her into the floor beside him. The restraints were magnetic, locking her immovably to the metal deck.

Horos knelt again, smiling.

Only now did Lily truly see him.

The parchment-thin skin. The black, pupil-less eyes. The long, sharp beak-nose. The fetid breath behind razor teeth.

How had she ever thought he was harmless?

He was not a predator. Predators confronted strength. Horos hid until the last moment, fearful of those stronger than him, but he struck without fail when he scented weakness.

An alien vulture.

An anthropomorphic scavenger.

A medieval plague doctor who claimed benevolence while delivering death.

He brushed her dark hair from her face.

“We are leaving, my sweet.”

The sickly sweetness of his voice clashed violently with reality.

Then he rose and left her alone.

Alone in the suite where she had once been trapped for chronocycles with Khar.

But this time, Khar was not here to solve her problems.

The restraints released her minutes later.

It appeared automatic. Horos did not return, and the suite door was thick enough to block all external signals except those connected directly to Vitro's network. The small spherical device he had activated was not part of that system.

Lily leapt up and examined it.

The palm-sized device seemed fused seamlessly into the wall, as if it had always been part of the ship. She recognized the

class of technology, but not the mechanism. There were no protrusions, no markings, just like the restraints.

Which meant Horos carried something else to activate it.

That would be her first target next time he came close.

The restraints themselves were impossible to remove. They did not even damage each other when she tried to force them together, and they were too tight to pry apart even at the cost of dislocating a joint.

A perfect space-age trap, dressed in a form medieval humans would have recognized.

Magnetic cuffs.

Without her VoidBrace she could not interface with Vitro, and Horos had disabled voice commands. She knew where the visible and hidden service panels were, but without tools she could not execute even the simplest command.

Weapons existed in the suite. She was certain Horos had accounted for that.

She would need something small.

Small, but lethal.

She was effectively in a beautiful prison. She could drink, eat, wash, even sleep if her pounding heart allowed it. A luxury cell.

Rage threatened to tear her apart, but she forced herself to breathe.

Think.

Horos was larger, but weaker. In close combat, she would win if she could reach him. The restraints were the problem. And the sound. That horrifying weapon she did not yet know how to counter.

Stuffing her ears might not be enough. But she would try.

His hoarse voice suggested he could not repeat the sound endlessly. She would not escape the next attack, but maybe

afterward, when the effect faded, she would have a chance.

Information would help even more.

What did Horos want?

Why this sudden shift?

She knew only that they had taken Vitro somewhere without Vegrun's knowledge. Khar would alert him the moment he returned to the dock and found the ship gone. But by then, it would likely be too late.

Vitro was fast. Advanced technology, with undetectable cloaking system.

Space was vast.

Like searching for a needle in a haystack.

A million haystacks stacked atop each other.

Lily fought back tears.

She had to stay strong.

Khar could not save her.

She would have to save herself.

Horos had left her alive for a reason. When she was writhing on the floor, he could have killed her easily. Instead, he came prepared with restraints.

That meant something.

First, she tore the suite apart.

The search ended quickly.

Large objects were locked to the floor by gravity anchors. The bed, couch, and chairs were buried in soft fabrics. Useless.

The stasis pantry held only foods safe for most species. No allergic sabotage there.

The bathroom yielded her only success.

In the guest grooming kit, she found a few sharp implements. She hid them by pressing them into the space beneath her wrist restraints, concealed by her sleeve.

She would use them.

She also found a waxy compound suitable for ear protection. She shaped two small pellets and placed them on the nightstand, hidden by the lamp, ready to grab the moment Horos appeared.

After that, there was nothing left to do but wait.

Waiting was agony.

She replayed every interaction she had ever had with Horos, searching for meaning, but most of the time she had been too lost in her own thoughts to notice anything useful.

Eventually, exhaustion won.

She showered, letting the hot water calm her trembling body, and finally allowed herself to cry. When the tears ran dry, she dressed again and sat cross-legged on the bed, waiting.

She would not attack physically first.

Horos would expect that.

No. First, she would make him talk.

She was almost certain he was running. She did not know what had happened with Vegrun, but Vitro was worth more than most beings earned in a lifetime. Even selling it for a fraction would make Horos unimaginably rich.

And he could do it.

Horos was a full administrator in Vitromium. Above him stood only Vegrun as superadmin. Khar and Lily held only limited administrative rights. Horos could erase them from the system entirely.

Only Vegrun could erase Horos.

Which meant Horos could assign new limited administrators to anyone willing to ignore legality.

So the question remained.

What did he want with her?

She knew Herion systems. She did not know alien psychology.

She began to drift into a light, restless sleep, waking at every sound.

When she woke again, she scanned the room instantly. Nothing had changed. She felt slightly stronger.

She went to the bathroom.

She was brushing her teeth with disinfecting gel when the suite door opened.

She saw the panic in the mirror.

She clenched her fists. Released them.

And stepped into the common area.

Horos was already by the wall, one hand hovering over the restraint control.

A warning.

She leaned against the doorframe and looked him over without speaking.

Horos, however, was eager to talk.

“Lily. That is a good place for you. I would prefer not to hurt you unnecessarily. Keep your distance until I can be sure you will not do something foolish.”

She tilted her head, mirroring a gesture she had seen him use often.

“If I knew the plan,” she said calmly, “it would be easier not to do something foolish. What do you want, Horos?”

Horos threw back his head and laughed, his neck bending in a way that would have broken a human. Lily forced herself not to react.

“How long do you think I worked for Vegrun?”

“I have no idea.”

“Ten chrono-years. Long even for a Corvus. And that bloated, useless sack fired me without a word. Yes, I did things. And so what? He did not become wealthy through kindness. I will not

spend my life in another's shadow.”

He slammed his clawed hand onto the table.

Greedy.

Miserable.

That was something.

“I understand,” Lily said softly.

Horos looked startled.

His thin lips curved into a smile, exposing sharklike teeth.

“Perhaps you are not as hopeless as I thought.”

He stepped closer, then stopped just outside arm's reach.

Lily's body coiled instinctively, ready to strike, but she forced her face into the polite, professional smile she had worn so often on Earth.

“Horos. Why am I here? You have Vitro. That alone is a greater insult to Vegrün than anything else. You do not need me.”

Horos shook his head slowly, sinuously.

“Yes, Vitromium will be valuable to me. Vegrün will never lounge on it again with his damp flesh. But you are valuable too. Do you know what a genuine Earth female is worth?”

Lily stared at his enormous black eyes.

“You want to sell me too?”

He laughed again, closer to the shrieking sound that had broken her before.

“I considered it. You have had offers. But you are lucky. I am keeping you. You should be grateful.”

Rage flooded her.

She forced it down.

One chance. One.

“Poor little Lily,” Horos continued. “Escaped slavery once, only to nearly fall into it again. When you think about it, you are a very fortunate creature.”

“What are you talking about?” she hissed.

“You do not think a kind researcher took you from Earth, do you? Herion-class ships belong to the elite. And smugglers. And syndicates. The universe has a sense of humor. You ended up owning the very thing that took you.”

He leaned closer.

Before she could strike, he opened his mouth and released the sound.

She hit the floor, convulsing.

Horos watched, rapt.

“So beautiful,” he whispered.

When it ended, Lily lay sobbing on the floor.

“It hurts,” she rasped. “You said you did not want to hurt me.”

He stroked her hair, her back.

“I do not. This is not harm. This is instruction. You must learn who holds power here.”

His hand slid to her waist, then her hip, squeezed once, then pulled away as if even that was too much.

“I have to go. We cannot use the navigation network. Vegrun would find us instantly. Manual plotting takes time, but this way we are invisible. Vitromium earns its price.”

He stood.

“When I meet the fences and receive my payment, I will move you to another ship. No one will ever find us. We will have all the time we want.”

He left her alone with the fading pain.

She could endure the physical agony.

The thoughts were far more dangerous.

CHAPTER 21

Chapter 22

Patience Is Power: Master Yourself, Master Your Enemy

Lily

“Herr-3, phonetically pronounced in the Corvus tongue, meant freedom.

A vilely ironic name for a world where millions of beings from other species were forced, against their will, to have their biological maps overwritten, then made to carry offspring like parasites incubating in stolen flesh. It was a lesson the IMPERIUM’s lawmakers could never afford to forget. Even after millennia, they had to remain vigilant. No species could be allowed to rise so far above the others again.

The Herr-3 incident deeply shook the IMPERIUM’s star-citizens and exposed a failure in governance: no species could be permitted to gain disproportionate influence simply by occupying key positions. The legal framework was corrected, but law offered no relief to the millions of victims the Corvus captured, imprisoned, and subjected to their breeding-song on a planet populated for that purpose alone.

Their plan had been as brilliant as it was depraved. Outsiders who watched the footage of Herr-3 saw only peaceful unity among different species. The reality was far worse. A forced overwrite of

the victim's biological map by the Corvus breeding-song, complete degradation if they resisted, and if the process succeeded, the gestation of parasitic descendants. That was the fate of anyone unlucky enough to draw a Corvus's attention and refuse their advances."

Documentation on the Herr-3 incident, submitted before the IMPERIUM court

The next chrono-cycles were the longest of Lily's life.

She ate. She slept. In the remaining hours she trained within the limits of the small space, clinging to the familiar rhythm of exercises repeated until they became mindless. She meditated and practiced breathing the way Helios had taught her, and she thought, endlessly. She built plans. She replayed every short exchange with Horos again and again, hunting for some overlooked detail that could become a weapon in her hands.

Sometimes, when she felt strong enough, she let herself think of Khar.

She did it rarely. It hurt too much. The thought that she might never see him again hollowed her out, and right now she needed every scrap of strength and cunning she had.

The only variation in those endless hours was Horos's visits.

As far as Lily could tell, he followed no schedule. He came when he wanted.

He usually brought something from the synthesizers, food that would have expanded the thin, snack-like menu available in the guest suite's stasis cabinet, but Lily could not bring herself to touch it. Vitro refilled the stasis cabinet automatically from storage, a process Horos could not easily interfere with. The synthesizers, however, could produce anything he pleased. The risk was too great to justify the comfort of a warm meal.

Sometimes he brought replacement uniforms. Lily accepted them. Not because Horos could tell what she wore, but because she was tired of crouching in the cramped bathroom, waiting for her clothes to dry enough to wear again.

Horos was exhausted, irritable, and frustrated. Manual control of Vitro was demanding and time-consuming, and the workload was clearly beginning to bury him. Lily watched his deterioration with a grim satisfaction.

Exhausted beings made mistakes.

She was waiting for the one mistake that would let her strike.

When they spoke, she gave him as little reaction as possible. Nothing that would provoke him, but nothing that resembled submission either. Fortunately, the hoarseness still roughened his voice since the last time he had forced a seizure on her, and it looked as though even speaking hurt him.

That did not stop him from talking.

He complained at length about the world's injustice, about Vegrun's ingratitude, about his own greatness. Lily listened with a neutral smile, though she would have liked to peel her own skin off rather than sit through his pathetic monologues.

Horos seemed satisfied even with neutrality, but it came at a cost. She could not steer the conversation toward what she needed most. More than once she considered changing tactics, provoking him carefully in hopes he would blurt something out while tired, but patience paid off.

After an especially long tirade about Vegrun, Horos finally mentioned Khar.

"That old tentacled lecher never expected I would take his most precious treasure," Horos said. "He likes keeping females around him, doting on them, but the only constant in his life is what he paid for. That oversized, gaudy space carriage. He paid

extra for the cloaking systems, and now those same systems mean they have no chance of finding us. Not with the wage-slave guarding his beloved cruiser.”

Lily was fantasizing about smashing Horos’s head into something unrecognizable with the dullest object she could find in the suite when Khar’s appearance in the conversation yanked her back into the moment.

“You mean Khar,” she said.

Horos flicked his hand as if something sticky and disgusting had touched his fingers. The contempt was unmistakable.

“That brute. I suspect Vegrun started digging into my affairs because of him. I would have paid to see his face when he discovered Vitromium was gone.”

He laughed, a dry, grating sound, and Lily’s chest tightened at the mention of Khar.

Horos could not stop there. After Vegrun, he spat his poison at Khar too. Dissatisfaction poured out of him, thick and sour, the kind that came from weakness. The kind that only felt powerful while degrading others.

“He thinks he is important because he is a filthy Divani and because Vegrun indulges his ridiculous behavior, but he is a pathetic loser. His whole species is. They throw away their pride for a quick fuck. He is an even bigger lapdog than Vegrun. At least Vegrun pays for sex and does not permanently alter himself just to mount someone.”

Lily’s teeth ground together. It took everything in her not to smash her fist into his smug, plague-doctor face.

Stay steady. Not yet.

She drew in a breath and gave him a sweet smile.

“What are you talking about?” she asked softly. “What about the Divani?”

Horos tilted his head in that vulturelike way Lily had seen so many times. He made a thoughtful sound as if he were studying her expression.

“Hm. So you truly do not know. Good. I keep forgetting how ignorant you are about these things.” His smile sharpened. “The Divani racial trait. The whole universe thinks it is romantic, how they reshape themselves for their chosen one, how they fit perfectly so they can produce descendants. I noticed someone started the imprinting in that thick-necked bull, and I hoped it was not you. It would have been such a shame if you dirtied yourself with him.”

Lily breathed.

In. Deep. Slow.

She could endure not breaking Horos’s nose.

For now.

Horos did not seem bothered by her silence.

“Although,” he continued, “it would be even better if you were the target after all. That would mean he is permanently chained to you, but you will never meet him again. And if you do, by then you will already be my bitch.”

Lily’s hands curled into fists. She could feel her patience evaporating like a droplet of water thrown into an engine flame.

The male seemed to sense the reaction he was provoking. For the first time in chrono-cycles, he opened his mouth wide, teeth like knives, and released that bone-splitting scream Lily could not escape.

Her body folded. Hit the floor. Convulsed.

For the third time she writhed helplessly at the feet of a creature who looked at her as if she were confessing love, not breaking her.

His voice, when he spoke, was weak and ragged.

“You know, Corvus are despised, but we are not so different from the Divani. The same evolutionary path, truly. They reshape themselves. We reshape our chosen. That is why the Corvus breeding-song is universally forbidden. It acts on nervous systems without consent.” His lips peeled back. “Hypocrisy. As if it is not a sacrifice on my part.” He swallowed, wincing. “It destroys my vocal cords. Even a medical station cannot fix them.”

His knotted hand clutched at his throat. Then he forced calm into his posture and began to gather himself to leave.

“I hope you will be reasonable. The breeding-song affects you even if you resist. Resistance only degrades higher cognitive functions.” His eyes glittered. “And I would rather fuck someone who moves and reacts than a drooling vegetable, but that is not my decision.” He leaned closer, softening his voice into something almost coaxing. “Think about it. How beautiful our life could be. We could travel the universe together. Think about it, Lily.”

Horos did not see Lily’s tears as he stepped out and the door sealed behind him.

Lily lay curled on the bed.

She was past tears. Past rage. Past denial. Now she simply existed.

Now she understood.

She had wondered why Horos had not forced himself on her earlier. It was obvious he had no moral restraint. The strange pattern, the insults and humiliation paired with attempts at false camaraderie, had been meant to make her accept him.

As if that had ever been possible.

And there had always been violence. It had simply been disguised, hidden, delivered in an underhanded form so grotesque

it eclipsed her imagination.

The thought alone made nausea rise in her throat.

What truly knocked the ground out from under her was the uncertainty.

Had the change already begun?

She was certain she would resist until the last moment, but would she even feel herself slipping away? Or was the process so insidious that after one seizure she would not remember her own name, only lie in her vomit, waiting for Horos to decide what was done to her?

Lily knew she would end her own life before that happened.

And if she had any say at all, she would end Horos first, before he ever touched her again with so much as a fingertip.

He deserved death already.

But Horos could still find ways to drive the blade deeper.

Before her abduction, Lily had secretly wanted to leave with Khar, just the two of them, and go wherever they pleased. Two against the world. Against the universe. She had not dared say it yet, not with how comfortable their work had been, not with her lack of money for long-term flight, but she had been getting closer. The solar collector alone had been a huge step. She had almost been able to feel the dream becoming real.

Horos had crushed that future with a single, filthy hand.

Lily accepted that she had to let go of what she wanted most.

The thought of a life with Khar reminded her how he had caught her attention from the first moment like nothing else ever had, and how his pull would not loosen until the last moment of her life.

He had been an axis for her. Something that anchored her after a lifetime of drifting. Something she could grow around.

And now, with nothing left to distract her from the truth,

nothing left to hide behind, she had to admit she had been the same for Khar.

Singular.

Irreplaceable.

Unrepeatable.

By taking her, Horos had not only stolen Lily's future. He had inflicted an irreversible loss and an incurable pain on Khar as well.

Unforgivable.

Something broke inside her.

And at the same time, something hardened.

No more kindness.

No more careful tactics.

No more Horos.

That hateful, scavenging creature would die.

This was not a furious outburst. Outwardly, Lily looked calm, almost as if she had accepted her fate. But beneath the surface her anger, her contempt, her wounded pride boiled together like magma building pressure beneath a volcano.

She was ready.

Ready to end it all, one way or another.

Chapter 23

Every Quiet Girl Is One Smuggler Away from Violence

Lily

“The IMPERIUM tolerates smuggling rings, to a point. Small outfits can even serve a perverse utility, imposing a code of conduct on criminals who would otherwise drain enforcement resources. But once a ring grows into a significant actor, it becomes a target. At that point, it must either launder itself into tax-paying legitimacy or face the Intergalactic Legion’s wrath. Cynics claim the IMPERIUM machine moves, if for nothing else, then for tax credits.”

Politics, the IMPERIUM’s most-read news hub

She did not know how much time had passed when the door opened again and Horos appeared, carrying a basketful of gear in one hand and a plasma weapon in the other. He kept the barrel trained on Lily as he moved quickly to the magnetic sphere that controlled her restraints, forcing her flat to the floor.

From where she lay, Lily couldn’t see exactly what he was doing, but she felt it clearly: something cold and metallic slid around her throat and locked with a loud click. It was not as smooth as the cuffs on her wrists and ankles, and one section

blinked red. As far as she could tell, this wasn't something Horos had ordered or synthesized through Vitro. He'd cobbled it together himself.

Horos cleared his throat. Loudly. For far too long. When he finally spoke, his voice was a rasping whisper. If he had been human, Lily would have said he had smoked his life away on hand-rolled, unfiltered cigarettes.

"I'm taking your cuffs off," he said. "Do not think you are escaping. I put an explosive collar on you. I can arm it anytime. And if my life signs drop, it detonates automatically. Do not even dream of taking it off, because surprise, it detonates then too."

He fiddled with the control sphere. The cuffs released.

Lily slid her tiny weapon up into her sleeve, back into the wrist-strap hiding place, and got to her feet, facing him.

Horos looked terrible. Hollow-eyed, overstretched, like someone who had not slept in days and had survived on stimulants and spite.

Good.

Tired people made mistakes.

And when Horos made a mistake near her, the path to payback finally opened.

"Put this on and move," Horos said. "Vistro's buyers are here. If they see I'm alone, they might get the idiotic idea that it's easier to overpower me than to pay. You will keep them in check. And remember, if anything happens to me, you're done too, so you'd better do your job properly."

He jabbed at the black cloth he had thrown onto the bed.

Lily said nothing as she pulled on the oversized, layered shroud. It hung off her like an ink-dipped ghost. The fabric was rough, but sheer around her head so she could see through

it, and she was sure she was unrecognizable. Her hands slipped out through two narrow slits. It stank, and she hated the thought that she was wearing something that felt like Horos's own clothing.

"Come on. They'll land in Hangar One. Here." He tossed her a VoidBrace. "You can use it to communicate with me and access Vitro's basic functions, but no outgoing signal. You have no chance of contacting the outside."

Lily slid the console onto her forearm and followed him. The touch of it yanked her straight into an earlier life, when that familiar weight almost never left her wrist. During captivity she had felt nearly naked without it.

In the hangar, Horos ordered Lily up to a high vantage point and pressed a low-power plasma weapon into her hands. With his own, much stronger version, he went to the central panel, never taking his eyes off her.

Lily toyed with the idea of shooting Horos in the leg and testing whether his collar threat was real. Then she forced herself into patience. Her moment would come. Soon. It might even be better if the smugglers took over. In the end, it did not matter. The only thing that mattered was that Horos suffered.

"All right," Horos called. "Come in. I'm dropping the shields while you approach, but one suspicious move and I'll blast you into scrap."

Through her console, Lily watched the smugglers' ship mate with Vitro. The hangar door rose in a smooth, elegant arc to admit them.

Ten heavily armed strangers marched in. The last two pushed antigrav cargo carts, one carrying a massive crate, the other an even larger golden sphere.

Horos's voice was too weak to shout at them, so he used Vitro's

speakers.

“Stop there. Did you bring what I asked for?”

A squat figure stepped forward, green-yellow skinned, with four arms and four legs. Each hand held a plasma pistol. Its stalked eyes tracked everything, as if no motion could escape it.

“The credits are in the crate. Check if you want. Our ship’s security key is in there too. And as requested, two new identity documents for you and your partner.”

Horos gestured for the cart to be brought to him. The smuggler pushing it was small, and Lily could not help thinking of a cockroach, not only in appearance but in the quick, skittering way it moved. It darted to the center of the hangar, shoved the crate closer to Horos, then retreated back behind the others.

Horos opened the crate and hummed, satisfied.

“This will do.” His gaze slid to the golden sphere. “Before we begin, what is that?”

The roach-like creature had returned to stand beside the orb.

“Do not worry about it,” the green-yellow leader said. “Just a little insurance. So you don’t throw us into vacuum once you get what you want.”

Horos clearly did not like it, but he did not dare argue.

“As long as it stays away from me, it can stay.” He lifted his chin. “Now. One by one, come here. I’ll add you to the system like we agreed, but only as guests. Once I’m safely on the other ship with my partner, I’ll switch you all to administrator access at the same time.”

The smuggler boss sent one of his men forward with a low growl.

The newcomer was tall, with skin like rock, golem-like. Lily found herself fantasizing about how neatly those massive fists could flatten Horos. As he approached, Horos seemed to have

the same thought. He shot Lily a warning look and gestured for her to keep the plasma weapon trained on the golem.

Lily lifted the gun and aimed, just enough to satisfy him, and Horos turned to work at Vitro's control panel.

Because Vitro was a valuable, rare cruiser, registration ran through multiple security steps and time locks. Most guests sent biometrics ahead of docking to avoid delays, but Horos was not taking even that risk with smugglers. When he finally managed to scan the giant's data and the ship accepted it, both sides visibly relaxed.

Then the rest followed, one by one. Horos processed only a single registration at a time, and the procedure dragged on painfully.

Lily watched every figure in the hangar, cataloguing weaknesses, when Vitro's alert sounded on her wrist, on Horos's, and on the consoles of the three smugglers already registered.

"Cradle take it," Horos rasped. "Intruders in Cargo Bay Two!"

Horos and the green-yellow boss stared at each other, frozen, both assuming the other had sprung a trap. But unlike Horos, the smuggler commander radiated calm, as if he had dealt with a hundred situations like this. Horos shook like a leaf.

"Saxum," the leader said. "Go check."

The golem moved at once, as if the order was law.

"Wait," Horos snapped, trying to sound commanding and failing. "I'm not letting you wander alone while we're not finished. Lily, go with him."

Lily only shrugged and climbed down from her perch. The golem waited while she approached at her unhurried pace, then they set off side by side toward the cargo bay.

The hangar door slid shut behind her, and Horos's voice crackled in her ear through the comm bead.

“Don’t forget, Lily, my life is your life. Don’t let those trash pull any tricks.”

“Even if I did,” Lily said, “that lovely gift around my neck would remind me.”

Horos grunted. He did not have the luxury of arguing. As he cut the line, Lily caught the smugglers shouting angrily at him, probably offended by being called trash.

The more he has to focus on them, the better.

As they neared Cargo Bay Two, Lily yanked a ballistic vest from the security wall locker, the same one Khar had shoved onto her the first time they lived through an attack on Vitro together. She gave a bitter little smile at the irony of it.

The golem watched in silence as she stepped to the display beside the cargo bay entrance and scanned the signals.

Lily frowned when she realized what she was seeing.

“Horos. Thermal reads vukri. What do you want us to do? Neutralize them?”

A beat of silence, then obvious shouting, and the smuggler boss’s harsh roar blasted through Horos’s console.

“No, invite them to dinner. Of course you kill them, and fast. I’m paying a fortune for this metal, and vukri chew through everything. Move!”

Saxum slapped the door control, but Lily raised the plasma weapon and stopped him before he could rush in.

“Not so eager. You take cover behind the first row of lockers. I’ll cover you from the back.”

The golem grunted agreement as if it made no difference either way and charged in.

The vukri stared at the massive rushing shape for one startled moment, then attacked.

Lily sprinted along the wall into cover, with no intention of

getting pulled into the melee. She headed straight for the tool section and skidded to a stop beside a storage shelf hard enough that her boots slid on the deck.

With the locker rows between her and the fight, she was certain she had a minute or two before anything found her, so she got to work.

She grabbed a thick, fast-drying insulating paste and smeared it generously over the metal collar at her throat, especially where she could feel an uneven seam, likely where Horos had placed whatever “transmitter” he had bragged about. She waited a few seconds for it to harden and block the signal, then dug a pair of cutters out of the tools.

Jaw clenched, she set the jaws against the collar’s rim and squeezed.

This was the moment of truth.

If Horos was right and had actually built something clever, the paste would not be enough to block communication or fry the internal wiring.

And then she was dead.

But if it worked, nothing stood between her and revenge.

Lily pressed down. The casing cracked, then the cables inside snapped.

The collar sprang open. She wrenched it wider until she could slip free.

One glance was enough to understand Horos had lied again. No self-destruction protocol. No transmitter. Just a bent strip of metal with a light.

Lily could have killed with her stare, but she could not afford even a second of rage. She grabbed the toolbox, pivoted, and sprinted out of the cargo bay, leaving Saxum alone with the vukri.

She was running for the nearby service hatch, planning to slip into the maintenance channels around the hangar and strike Horos from there, when Vitro shuddered.

That was a bad sign. Very few things could make a ship this size tremble.

“What happened?!” Horos boomed in her ear.

“The vukri are better than we thought,” Lily said. “But we’ve got it under control.”

“Lily, I swear, if the ship takes damage and the deal collapses because of this...”

“All right, don’t get worked up.”

She cut the line before he could spit disbelief and glanced at her console, now flooded with Vitro’s fault alerts.

To an untrained eye it would have been a meaningless stream of codes. Lily saw through it instantly.

B10350 — relay failure in Sector C

B105FZ — no response from Sector C cable network

H56SS — reduced pressure in Sector C

And more. And more. And more.

A riot of errors.

Lily smiled.

She did not believe in divine intervention, but it felt like fate had handed her an opportunity on a silver platter. The alerts told her a vukri had chewed its way into one of Vitro’s service corridors and damaged something important. She was already waiting for the system-wide notice as the new plan formed in her mind.

Warning: Critical error

Shield generator operation unsafe due to supporting system failures.

Shield generation suspended until further service.

No shields meant nothing stood between them and the frozen, murderous vacuum except the ship's hull, a skin that a careless plasma shot could tear open and turn the entire hangar into a death sentence. Even the greenest off-worlder knew running without shields was not a game and that one had to be cautious when it happened.

Space, however, was only one threat stalking them.

Lily suspected the smugglers had arrived with more than one ship, and only Vitro's shield had kept them from grappling the cruiser the moment they sensed weakness. She could not be sure, which meant she had to move fast, before they could strike.

She slipped into the service hatch and headed for the hangar.

This service channel ran along the hangar wall and in places above the ceiling, broken at intervals by vent grates. She could not fully stand inside the tunnel, but her height worked in her favor and she moved quickly in a crouch. At the first ceiling vent she flattened to her stomach and peered through.

As she expected, the smugglers had not stayed put. They were closing in on Horos in a tightening ring, the way hyenas circle a wounded animal.

"You cheated us, Corvus trash. The price we paid was for an intact ship. Without shields this junk isn't worth half."

"What are you talking about?" Horos snapped. "It's a minor service issue. My partner can fix it with her eyes closed."

"Then call her back. I'll send someone to deal with the vukri before they do more damage to the ship."

"No. You can't go on the ship unsupervised."

Horos tried to shout, but it came out thin and squealing. The smuggler boss stepped close and poked Horos in the chest with one gelatinous limb, as if already deciding where to aim when things did not go according to plan.

“You don’t have much choice, bureaucrat worm. I accepted that the ship isn’t yours and you can only grant limited rights, but I’m not budging on this. Call. Your. Partner. Back.”

Horos tried to resist, but the snot-green alien did not care. He twisted Horos’s arm and used his wrist console to call Lily.

Lily had blocked him long ago.

The smuggler cursed and sent three of his men after the golem. Then he shoved Horos against the wall by the collar and forced him to continue registering the rest.

Lily backed away from the tunnel and followed the smugglers.

When they passed the maintenance channel, she shadowed them, waited until they opened the door to the vukri-infested cargo bay, then slid in behind the last one and pressed the restart rod against his neck. The smuggler dropped like a rag doll.

Lily looped cable ties around his hands and feet and dragged him into a storage nook off the corridor. Then she went after the other two.

The cargo bay door stayed open behind them. Lily peeked inside.

The golem lay on the floor, apparently unconscious, his body marked with animal bites from the vukri. Pinkish blood seeped weakly from the gray, rocklike skin, pooling into a wide slick that vukri and smugglers had tracked across the deck. The vukri bounced and darted like rabbits, vanishing into cover as the smugglers chased them.

Lily used the chaos to slip between the locker rows.

She had lost direct sight of her target, but she could track him through his own comms, because he kept reporting to the boss through his wrist console.

“Saxum’s hurt. Might be dead. The Corvus’s minion is gone too. Maybe the vukri got them. We’re chasing them, but without

plasma weapons it's damn hard to catch the little pests."

"Selor," the boss replied, "don't tell me a few vukri are outsmarting you."

Selor sounded more afraid of his boss than of the situation. He stammered excuses and ended the call, breaking into a run.

Lily heard his footsteps thudding and ran parallel behind the next locker row. He might have been taller and wider than her, but when he turned the corner and hit the restart rod she held out, he went down in a red-brown blur, bellowing in pain as he hit the metal floor.

"What in the void!" he gasped, staring up at her.

Without Horos's black hood, he was clearly trying to make sense of who she was, but even the slowest alien would have understood one thing. She was not a friend.

Before he could move, she treated him the same as the first. Shock to the neck with the restart rod, loops on the limbs, stuffing in the mouth, then a firm kick to slide him out of sight.

Lily was almost proud of the efficiency, though in a cleaner moment she might have wondered when disabling smugglers had become routine.

"Selor! Where are you?"

Lily's head snapped up.

Before the last one could spot her, she climbed onto the storage units and waited until he bent over his fallen partner.

"Cradle, Selor. Who did this to you?"

Lily brought the restart rod down hard on the crouching alien's head. He did not pass out, but he toppled to his side clutching his bleeding skull. Lily grabbed the rod, cranked it to maximum, and pressed it to his back. The discharge ruined the tool, burned her palm, and left him twitching and helpless at her feet.

She used metal cable to bind him to the main locker post, then squeezed her throbbing hand and turned her attention to the vukri.

Vitro's sensors showed five heat signatures scattered among the stacked crates, one inside the wall.

Lily ran to the medical kit on the side wall, slapped insulating gel onto her burned hand. It disinfected and sealed the wound, but the cold was brutal, almost freezing.

Teeth clenched, she searched for the vukri in the wall, trying to figure out how she would reach it, when she spotted the massive hole torn into the wall that housed Panel C, likely from Saxum's plasma weapon.

The vukri lay inside the breach.

In its final moments it had tried to chew into the cable bundle, but the golem's fist had crushed its spine. The heat map suggested it had happened recently. It was not breathing, but the body was still warm.

Lily set her console to alert her the moment any vukri left hiding, then got to work restoring Vitro's shields.

She ignored every official safety step the service manual would have demanded. In minutes she cleaned and reconnected the damaged cables. She slapped a repair film over the hole and sealed it with the same paste she had used on her collar. Then, through the service panel, she forced Vitro with manual overrides to restore vacuum integrity in the channel and stabilize conditions for shield restart.

Was it perfect? No.

Would it hold long term? Also no.

But it worked. For now, that was all that mattered.

When she finished the shield generator patchwork, she ran out of the cargo bay and, at the external control, dropped oxygen

levels inside to the minimum required for survival. The reduced pressure would ease the strain on the repair film and leave anyone inside barely able to stand. They would pass out soon.

Lily was starting to tire, but she moved at a near run down the corridor toward the service tunnel.

She needed to bring the shields back online.

She needed to hunt Horos.

When she turned the corner, she hit something hard. Black. Solid.

She lost her balance and dropped onto her backside, then looked up at what had stopped her.

The fall had taken only an instant.

It was long enough for disappointment to flood her, bitter and sharp.

Damn it.

I was so close.

Chapter 24

Queen of Mine

Lily

“Does your name mean something?”

“Yes. A flower on Earth.”

“What does it look like?”

Lily hesitated, searching for the right way to describe it, then remembered she could simply show him.

Helios had transferred everything from her Earth phone to her VoidBrace, images included. It took only a command. With a few quick motions she selected a portrait of herself holding a bouquet of tiger lilies and shared it with Khar, the same way they had exchanged reports back when they were still pretending their work was the only thing binding them together.

Khar stared at the image, spellbound. As always, Lily tried to smother her embarrassment with words.

“My sister Camille gave me flowers on my birthday. She’s named after a flower too. Every year she picked a different color, but these were my favorite.”

When Khar still did not speak, when he kept walking without lifting his gaze from the VoidBrace, Lily nudged him with her elbow. That finally pulled the Divani out of his trance.

“That flower,” he said at last, “looks exactly like the crest of the Divani queens.”

Lily felt an irrational sting of disappointment that his attention was on the parallel between their worlds and not on her.

“The what?” she blurted. “I did not even know you had queens.”

“We do not anymore. Our society is absolute meritocracy now.” His tone shifted, more distant, as if he had stepped into a corridor of memory. “But once, everything revolved around the queens. They began as usurping tyrants, and in the end their rule led to the Divani Golden Age. The era when we became a species capable of spaceflight.”

He fell silent for a heartbeat, then his mouth curved, the edge of something dangerous and amused.

“There is still a saying from that time. A truly cunning Divani male warrior knows exactly when to lower his horns beneath a female’s rule.”

An early conversation between Khar and Lily during Vegrun and Iroxella’s journey

Black, glossy boots that looked military. Two thick, powerful thighs, one of them nearly as wide as Lily’s waist. A chest broad enough to catch someone comfortably, assuming you were not slamming into it at full speed. Obsidian skin. Luminous, demonic eyes. Above them, two long horns rose high, their tips capped in gold that made them look even sharper.

Lily’s heart kicked so hard she thought it might tear free.

Khar.

He was here.

Her Khar, in commando gear, his horns fitted with guards that looked like jewelry and armor at once.

She sprang up and launched herself at him, crushing her

mouth to his in a fierce kiss. The world vanished. His scent flooded her, familiar and impossible, and for one breath she could not remember how to be afraid. She had thought she would never see him again.

Her impact shoved him back against the wall. He seemed startled, his response a fraction slow, but then he caught her rhythm and met her with equal hunger.

When they broke apart, Lily stared up at him, dazed, as if the danger around them had been a story she had once heard about someone else.

Khar was here. The universe had snapped back into place. Together, they could face anything.

He set her down and scanned her from head to toe, his gaze sharp, assessing. When he spoke, his voice resonated with a slightly different timbre than the one she knew, but it still steadied her.

“Lily. Are you all right?”

She nodded, then clasped his massive hand, as if she could anchor herself with it.

“How did you get here? I’m so happy.”

He did not answer. He gave her a glance that said he had heard every word, then he was already speaking into his console.

“Lily is with me. No visible injuries. We are moving to you now.”

He cut the transmission and, gentle but unyielding, pulled her with him.

“Come. I’ll explain everything, but we have to move.”

Lily did not need more than that. She would have followed him to the end of space itself.

He led her to the hangar door where Horos and the smugglers were. Lily asked nothing. She would have handed Khar her life

without hesitation. He hit the door control. The gate opened smoothly, silently.

What waited on the other side was pure pandemonium.

With Vitro's shields down, no one dared fire plasma rounds. One stray shot could breach the cruiser's hull and turn the hangar into a tomb. So they fought with whatever they had.

Six remaining smugglers. Horos. Two other Divani males. A bloody, brutal brawl that spattered the deck with different colors and textures of blood. Nothing was sacred. No one was gentle.

Khar hauled Lily into cover behind the crate of credits meant for Horos and pushed her down to sit on the floor.

"Stay here. We'll handle it."

Lily squeezed his thick arm, feeling the muscles shift beneath her palm.

"Be careful."

Khar flashed a confident smile, sprang up, and shouted across the chaos.

"Khar, I'm here!"

Lily froze.

What.

The Divani vaulted over the crate and plunged into the fight, calling back over his shoulder.

"Khar is my brother!"

Lily's face went so hot she thought it might combust. It was physically impossible for that much blood to rush into one human head. The floor should have swallowed her whole. Anything would have been better than facing Khar and his brother after kissing the wrong one like that.

And yet, no matter how mortified she was, she could not look away.

Most of the remaining smugglers swarmed Khar and his

brothers while the cockroachlike creature who had pushed the cargo cart earlier chased Horos across the hangar.

Khar's younger brother threw himself into the fray, tackling two aliens who had pinned down another Divani male. Lily assumed that one had to be the third brother. They looked so alike it was unsettling, but there were differences. Khar kept his horns bare. The brother she had kissed wore silver guards that hugged the length of his horns like fitted armor.

While the two brothers fought the two trained attackers, Khar held off the smuggler boss alone, along with two enforcers at his side.

Both sides had adapted. If ranged weapons were suicide, close combat was a certainty. The smugglers were armed for it, and some of them could turn their own bodies into weapons.

One particularly repulsive, rounded figure kept growing bone blades out of its limbs, snapping them off and hurling itself at the Divani like a living trap. The attempt ended quickly and badly.

The gold-horned brother seized the bone-spiked creature's arms, letting the spikes shred his own forearms to ribbons so the silver-horned brother could grab another smuggler, hoist him overhead, and drive him down onto the bone spears. The impact snapped the bone-grower's neck. They collapsed in a wet, disgraceful heap.

The two Divani moved like a team that shared a mind.

But Lily's attention belonged only to Khar.

He fought like a wrathful god, batting away three opponents as if their strikes were nothing but insects. The smuggler boss's gelatinous body absorbed blows that would have shattered bone, but it still could not get a hold on Khar. Instead, it played distraction, drawing Khar's focus while the two enforcers

hunted for an opening.

They might have ranked beneath their boss, but both looked larger and more dangerous than he did. One was squat and dense, wrapped in thick brown-black fur, rows of small eyes lining the sides of its face. The other was shorter but fast, lizard-quick, doing everything it could to slip behind Khar.

It succeeded.

Khar's arm was buried to the elbow in the boss's sticky torso when the lizardlike smuggler drew two long, vicious daggers from a belt at its waist and threw them both.

Lily screamed, loud enough to rip her own throat.

"Khar, behind you!"

Khar twisted. One dagger missed him and sank into the smuggler boss's chest instead. The second he knocked aside with his claws. It clattered across the deck, spinning away with a metallic chime.

Khar yanked his arm free, seized the boss by the legs, lifted him, and slammed him into the wall. The leader splattered into a snot-green smear. From Lily's distance it looked like neither the dagger nor the impact had finished him.

The furred enforcer chose that moment to strike.

It scrambled up the wall like a spider, drew a saber with a blade edged in light, and launched itself at Khar.

Khar dipped his head in a bull's motion, avoiding the lethal arc, and impaled the attacker on his horns.

The creature convulsed once, then stilled.

Khar tore the body off and hurled it at its comrade, but the smuggler's shockingly white blood sprayed over Khar's head, shoulders, and chest, turning him into something otherworldly and terrifying in his raw destruction.

Lily watched as his muscles flexed and released, as his eyes

promised the afterlife to anyone foolish enough to stand against him.

The dagger-thrower barely dodged the corpse, but it was not fast enough to escape Khar.

One charge.

One slash.

Khar ripped it apart with his claws.

Now only Horos remained, the cockroachlike creature that had been keeping him at bay, and the smuggler boss, still twitching in a questionable state.

Khar's two brothers surged toward him like bulldozers to crush the last scraps of resistance.

The boss trembled like unstable jelly as he forced himself upright and shouted at his final ally.

"Tztz. The sphere."

The cockroach creature froze at the command, then moved, impossibly fast, toward the golden orb.

Horos, panting, scrambled to run, but Khar's voice cracked across the hangar like thunder and stopped him cold.

"Run if you want, Horos. All you'll achieve is dying tired."

Lily sprang up the second she saw Horos move. Khar's intervention gave her the opening she needed.

She threw herself at Horos, slammed him sideways, and rose as he gasped for air. She planted her boot on his throat, pressing down just enough to crush his windpipe and keep him from producing anything more than a broken wheeze.

No scream. No song.

Meanwhile Khar's brothers reached the smuggler boss. Khar lunged after Tztz, but the cockroach beat him to the sphere.

It slapped a crude-looking beacon that had clearly been attached after the fact. The device emitted a mechanical whine

and crackle. The creature immediately turned and sprinted away from the orb.

It did not get far.

The sphere opened like a flower calyx. Its interior reshaped in a blink, unfolding into a towering figure of white-and-gold titan metal, at least twice as tall as Khar.

Lily stared.

The machine looked as if someone had taken the best traits of every humanoid species and fused them into a perfect artificial hybrid. Its base color was platinum-white, threaded with gold lines that traced flawless functional geometry down its body.

Then it opened its eyes, and Lily's breath caught.

One iris was gold, continuing the pattern in its body, the pupil elongated like a serpent's, equal parts exquisite and instinctively threatening.

The other eye was ruined. A burned-out hollow, an old wound that somehow made the machine even more dreadful.

The shouting of Khar's brothers yanked Lily out of her trance.

"You idiot!" one of them roared. "You unleashed a Colossus on us?"

The smuggler boss laughed. There was no joy in it. Some kind of fluid leaked from the corner of his mouth, and he did not even bother wiping it away.

"My entire crew is dead. At least now you'll die too."

The Divani brothers exchanged a look. Lily felt something shift in the air, heavy and immediate.

Until now, no matter what happened, she had felt a thread of hope. Thin, but present. The belief that she could still do something, that there was still a way through.

Now, watching Khar and his brothers, she understood at once. This was not an enemy they all walked away from.

Khar moved first. He shoved his gold-horned brother hard in the back.

“Aros. Take Lily and go. I’ll hold it.”

The brothers traded another look, thick with meaning. They accepted the order.

The silver-horned brother headed toward the hangar exit. Aros, the one with gold guards, went straight for Lily.

The Colossus moved.

In one casual motion it hunted the cockroach creature down and crushed it into pulp.

Then it paused and turned slowly, scanning the hangar as if calculating which of them posed the greatest threat.

Lily felt, in her bones, that against the force this walking weapon represented, they had no chance.

Aros reached her with speed that did not match his size. Before Lily could say a word, he leaned down to Horos, shifted her foot aside, and snapped Horos’s neck with a sickening crack.

Lily flinched.

Aros did not give her time for even a sound. He seized her wrist and ran, dragging her from cover to cover, forcing her to stay low as he drove them toward the hangar exit and the smugglers’ ship.

Lily tried to look back, tried to understand what was happening with Khar and the Colossus, but Aros refused to let her stop.

The sounds behind them made it clear that everything before had been child’s play.

Near the exit there was no more cover. They would have to sprint the last stretch.

Aros peeked over a crate.

This time Lily refused to let him block her view. She lifted her head too.

The hangar was in ruins. The Colossus had smashed anything in its path. The smuggler boss, who had shrugged off every attack before, now lay in two pieces on opposite sides of the deck.

Horos's body was still mostly intact, though fallen crates had pinned his legs beneath them, likely pulverizing the bones.

Khar was moving, fast and precise, leaping over debris, drawing the Colossus away from the exit.

When he hit the far wall, Lily's chest clenched.

A dead end.

Then Khar began to climb.

Catlike, his claws found every seam, every grip, every ledge as he angled toward the antigrav crane overhead.

Lily's mind flashed with hope. Maybe they could trap the Colossus with it. Maybe.

"Aros," she gasped. "We have to help him. He's almost at the crane."

She started to move, but Aros caught her by the collar and yanked her back. Lily hit the deck with a painful grunt, but she was at least in cover again.

"Lily, we can't." His voice cut like steel. "A Colossus is not a toy. It was the greatest trump card in the Ancient Artificial Intelligence Uprisings. I don't know how it got here, but it can destroy armies on its own. The crane won't stop it. Khar's sacrifice cannot be wasted. We have to go."

Lily's blood hammered in her ears. Her hands clenched into fists.

Her world narrowed to one thing.

Khar.

Maybe she had made poor choices. Maybe she had been timid and weak and ashamed. None of it mattered now.

Khar mattered.

And Khar would not be without her.

“Then go,” she said. “I’m staying.”

She sprang up and burst from cover in a tiger-smooth roll.

The Colossus stood beneath Khar’s climbing form, terrifyingly still, as if to say resistance was beneath it.

Khar reached the crane, but he had no chance if the Colossus turned its focus back to him.

Lily would not let that happen.

She snatched up one of the abandoned smuggler daggers and hurled it at the Colossus’s back.

She knew it would not damage it. That was not the point.

She only needed its attention. Just long enough for Khar to engage the crane’s magnet systems.

The Colossus turned.

Its single serpent-pupiled eye fixed on Lily.

She went rigid.

Then, slowly, she began to step backward.

Even that pathetic motion took everything she had, as if the machine’s stare alone reduced her to trembling prey.

Above, the crane’s machinery roared to life.

Khar clung to the magnetic clamp and threw himself at the Colossus.

The jump was perfect.

The clamp swung in a clean arc toward the Colossus’s neck. The machine, for one impossible second, seemed entirely focused on Lily.

Lily stopped moving. She did not dare provoke even a flicker of motion.

Time slowed.

The clamp’s swing. Khar’s fall. The Colossus’s ominous

stillness.

One eternal instant that carried their hope of survival and, with one wrong breath, the promise of both their deaths.

Then the clamp struck home.

The magnetic lock engaged automatically, drawing on Vitro's full antigrav lifting capacity. Lily had once watched this very crane tow another cruiser into a service bay without the smallest strain.

The Colossus might be unstoppable in combat, but it was still metal.

Metal could be moved.

Khar hit the deck beside it and rolled away with trained precision.

Static filled the air as Vitro fought the load.

The Colossus did not budge.

It did not even look away from Lily.

It lifted one arm and crushed the clamp into powder, shorting the lift system in one simple squeeze.

Then it turned, kicked Khar hard enough to slam him to the floor, and dropped a knee onto him.

Lily screamed.

Aros caught her from behind, trying to drag her out, but Lily saw only Khar.

Khar tried to batter the Colossus away, but his blows bounced off it as if he were striking a wall.

The obsidian giant lay helpless beneath the white-and-gold executioner.

"No," Lily choked. "Please."

She knew her begging meant nothing. She did not care.

She had never asked Horos for anything. She would give the Colossus her entire life if it would spare Khar.

Aros hooked her legs out from under her and began to drag her toward the gate, farther and farther from the center of her world. Lily did not look away even once.

As Khar's resistance slowed, as his motions turned heavy and painful, he searched for her with his glowing, demonic eyes.

When their gazes locked, Khar's luminous eyes cut through the chaos like a path to Heaven, one she would never walk again. She couldn't breathe. Couldn't move. Only watch as her world collapsed in a single moment.

"Go, my queen," she heard, as clear as if Khar stood beside her, not an insurmountable distance away.

The Colossus drew back its arm.

Prepared the final strike.

A blow that would shatter the center of Lily's world and, with it, every reason she had left to survive.

Chapter 25

Trouble Comes in Threes

Khar

“Not you three again? By the Cradle, you can cause more damage than a whole squad with heavy weapons on a bender!”

Divani Youth Drill Instructor, shouting at the Themeshvar brothers

All things considered, this was not the worst-case scenario.

Granted, he was almost certainly about to die under the Colossus’s fist, but compared to the crucibles of past chronocycles, which had felt like walking through the Cradle’s furnace, it still counted as progress.

Lily was alive, without serious external injuries. She wasn’t safe yet, but he knew his brothers would do everything to protect her and care for her if he fell. If he’d been given a choice, he would have spared her from watching his skull crushed in the Colossus’s grip. Life, however, had taught him long ago that it was cruel, brief, and could end without warning, which meant you clung to every small joy that gave meaning to this cracked shard of creation.

His joy, his reason for being, was Lily. Perhaps it was selfish,

but he was grateful he'd been allowed one last glimpse of her before the end.

Khar and the Colossus seemed locked eye to eye. There was no escaping the machine, and no chance that an intelligence guided by strict logic would show mercy. The Colossus drew back the mechanical joint that served as its elbow, gathering force for the blow that would shatter Khar's skull.

Khar no longer saw it.

He exhaled once, slowly, emptying the tension that had cinched his chest since Lily was taken.

The moment he noticed the Vitro was gone from its berth.

The shock of speaking with Vegrun and understanding that Horos was behind the abduction.

The realization that whatever he did might not be enough.

The Vitromium was too fast. Its stealth too refined for ordinary enforcement to corner it in time.

Every breath could put light-years between him and the only being who gave his life meaning. He did not even know if she was alive.

How could he trust a slow, bureaucratic safety net where you needed clearance just to undock a ship?

Khar did not give up. Ever.

Even now, he was building a plan. Vegrun could do as he pleased. Khar would not let this go.

He still had contacts in the Legion. More importantly, he had left himself a few practical back doors into systems normally locked to civilians.

With some luck, IMPERIUM probes might catch the Vitro's trace the moment Horos made an error and miscalibrated the shield.

Khar was certain Horos had jammed all outbound signals,

forcing the ship to fly manual. At some point he would tire. Lily would not help him; Khar would bet his horns on that. And the exhausted made mistakes.

All he needed now was a ship almost as fast as the Vitro. The station's military recon skiff might stand a chance, though he was not sure. Worth trying. He could probably crack its systems.

Khar unfolded from his crouch and headed for the dock exit when seven chrono-cycles panel lights flickered.

"What in the void?" he muttered. "Did Lily leave me a trail?"

He sprinted to the ship. The hatch irised open and the standard greeting began, the one that welcomed any new administrator on their first step aboard after registration.

"Brilliant female," Khar barked, elated.

Helios might be small, but it shared the Vitro's core parameters. In this situation, Lily had given him the finest gift possible.

Hope.

Khar dashed back out and pried up one of the dock's floor plates, revealing the small survival kit he had stashed there, weapons included. No time to run home for the rest; this would have to do. Paranoia versus reality, one to zero.

Back aboard Helios, the ship dumped its typical welcome cascade on him. He killed notifications one after another and sprinted to the main console. He did not yet know the vector, but he began undocking. Alerts kept stacking. He waved them away with growing impatience.

"Speak when you have an actual idea where to go. Until then, be quiet."

Helios did not reply aloud, but a seemingly minor note appeared on the display.

Notice: a registered ship-linked device is out of range.

Missing device: VoidBrace wristband with command or senior

access. Initiate locator?

Khar stared, half-afraid he was imagining it. Lily's VoidBrace. Of course. Horos would not have known it did not belong to the Vitro; both ships used the same design. But within a certain radius, Helios could track those signals even when the unit was powered down.

He slammed his palm to the screen and started the search. Feeling foolish but compelled to show gratitude in some form, he spoke to the ship.

"Help me find her and I will let you compete again for the position of First Husband."

He could not be sure, but he thought Helios's lights dimmed for a heartbeat and brightened again. The barely visible flicker reminded him of the way Divani narrow their eyes to slits, cutting the ambient glare to signal trust.

Khar let out a strained laugh, the first emotion to break through the cold fear that had clenched his heart since he realized Lily was gone. With Helios, he actually had a chance of tracking the Vitro. He also knew he would be outmatched if anyone besides Horos was aboard.

Notice: missing device locked. Navigation updated.

Helios's voice filled the cabin, but Khar had already read and authorized a deep-space jump before the ship could finish. The plan was to shadow the Vitro one jump at a time, riding the trace left behind, hoping they would pause long enough to be caught. They were fortunate that Horos could not plug into the IMPERIUM navigation lattice. Manual jumps had to be shorter; otherwise, pursuit would be impossible. That bought Khar time to recruit allies. They would not get a second shot.

While Helios charged for the jump, a window during which outbound comms were unreliable, Khar drafted two messages.

The first went to Vegrun, informing him of the plan and that they should remain in contact. He again not so subtly warned that as long as Lily remained aboard the Vitro, Vegrun was not to make a single move that might endanger her. Otherwise, Khar would find himself a new mission: the elimination of a tentacled billionaire.

The second message was harder. In the end, he chose honesty and simplicity.

I need your help. They took my partner. I am in pursuit. Sending coordinates and will update after the jump.

No more context was needed. The network node he used was accessible to exactly three beings, wrapped in layers of security. No one had noticed it because no one had ever used it.

Its creators had saved it for a last resort and prayed they would never need it.

For the first time in his long, eventful life, Khar called on his brothers. The old Khar would have bristled at this. The Khar of now was past caring. He would do anything and call in any debt if it meant seeing her alive.

They dropped out of deep space. Helios immediately plotted the next destination. Two replies waited for Khar, startlingly similar in tone.

“I would never endanger Lily, you blockhead. I hired a private mercenary squad. We follow your lead.”

“Well look who crawled back. We would not budge for you, but your partner is innocent, aside from having the poor taste to fall for a jerk. Out of respect for her, we will be there.”

Khar frowned at the screen. Apparently he had that effect on everyone. Fine. They could think him a jerk as long as they did what he said. He sent each of them the updated coordinates and cleared Helios for the next jump.

The chrono-cycles blurred into a single, relentless chase. The signal from Lily's missing wristband grew stronger between jumps, proof that Helios was narrowing the gap. His brothers pinged in that they were close. They rendezvoused at one of the plotted points and boarded Helios without wasting a heartbeat, hauling aboard crates of weaponry and gear for grappling ships.

Step one of the family reunion was to attempt, with great brotherly affection, to beat their elder sibling for disappearing. Khar put them both on the floor. As he always had since childhood, minus a handful of lucky upsets. This time the victory was decisive.

Aros drummed his fingers on Helios's deck to signal surrender, then switched to a far more dangerous armament: questions.

"Khar, what happened to you? We have not seen you in chrono-cycles and now you show up imprinted? Who is your partner?"

Khar got to his feet and tossed a packet of first-aid gel to his younger brother, Ikar, so he could patch his nose from the scuffle. All three knew Khar was buying time, but Aros and Ikar had nowhere to be except in his face until he cracked.

Eventually the silence stretched too long to bear, and Khar knew he could not stall any further.

Instead of digging into the past, which would only hurt all three, he reached for the only thing that brought him uncomplicated joy.

"I met her three chrono-months ago. I was a fool then."

Aros opened his mouth to say he still was, but the youngest, who had always been the wisest in matters like this, kicked his ankle to shut him up.

"Ahem. So at first I kept my distance," Khar went on.

Aros could not help himself. "You? Afraid of a female? I would

pay to see it. What species is she? Must be something special if she can wring respect out of you, though I still do not see how she tolerates you.”

Khar considered spacing Aros and finishing the mission with Ikar, then forced himself to calm. Ikar’s even, neutral tone nudged them back on course.

“Khar, what happened? Tell us about her.”

Khar flicked open one of Lily’s images on the display. His grin, big enough to split his face, blurred his grief for a heartbeat. Then he glanced at his brothers and felt a sudden, lethal stab of jealousy.

“She is a...”

Ikar narrowed his eyes, thinking. “Human? Incredible.”

Khar looked at Ikar with pride, not only because Lily was extraordinary and he loved sharing that truth, but because his brother recognized such a rare, pre-IMPERIUM species. Then Aros let out a noise that was unmistakably suggestive.

Khar surged to his feet, ready to knock sense into the gold-horned clown, but Ikar held him back.

“Easy. He is trying to rile you. He missed you. But while we are here, humans are rare. I heard of one who made a name as a mercenary, spent his life searching for his home world in vain. There are rumors.”

Aros perked up. “Yes, for instance that sex with them—”

He did not finish, because Ikar cuffed him. The youngest sighed as if unbearably tired of the whole interaction, which Khar knew by now meant he was pretending.

“So this human female took pity on you somehow,” Ikar said. “What triggered the imprint? You would need hormonal cascades. Unless you were losing in fights, repeatedly...”

Khar nodded happily. Ikar and Aros stared at each other,

startled at the implication.

“You mean she was stronger than you,” Ikar said.

“And she still chose you?” Aros gaped.

Khar’s embarrassment was almost palpable.

“I do not think she realized how much stronger. You know I do not show it because—”

All three recited their mother’s favorite axiom in perfect unison.

“Because it is not enough to be strong, you must look strong.”

“So, the vukri attacked us,” Khar continued. “The Vitro, the Herion-12 class cruiser she’s being held on, has one single weakness: its instruments can’t detect vukri until they’re already inside. Doesn’t matter. I was injured, and she protected me. You should have seen her. She took down six of them with her bare hands and didn’t even break a sweat. Then she hugged me and said I was her only friend. And before that, I’d spent every waking moment scheming against her. Humans are astonishing. It’s probably for the best that the IMPERIUM keeps them confined to their own system.”

He told them everything he’d experienced working beside Lily. His brothers listened in stunned silence. When he finished, all three fell quiet, lost in thought.

“So this exceptional human female accepts you,” Aros said at last.

“That is the part I still find unbelievable,” Ikar admitted.

Khar forced himself to stay calm and answer seriously. What he had with Lily was sacred. He would never make light of it, not even with his brothers.

“I give her no reason to refuse me. When the imprint started, I had to face myself. If I had not been such a stubborn fool, I could have moved toward her the first moment I saw her. Instead I

spent my energy feeling inadequate and resenting her for it. If the Cradle, fate, or pure chance hadn't been so merciful, I might never have had the chance to make up for my stupidity. She was perfect then, and she's perfect now. The bad slides right off her, and she accepts everything good I can give. It's as if we were made for each other. I will never give her up."

Ikar placed a supportive hand on his brother's shoulder. Aros sprang to his feet and strode to one of the crates.

"We will not let harm come to her, brother," Ikar said.

"And speaking of harm," Aros added, "I hope your ship is stocked with a standard incubator. We brought a few vukri eggs, just in case."

For the first time in his life, Khar felt grateful to be an elder brother.

"Of course it is."

Aros's smile turned wicked, and Khar had the odd sense of looking into a mirror.

"Then let us kick that Corvus's bony backside with them."

Chapter 26

Death in Disguise

Khar

“Every life ends, sooner or later. We may hope we were more to the universe than a parasite’s selfish ruin, blinded by its own desires... but we never truly know, do we? I believe this: to die for my queen is immortal glory. And I do so love glory.”

Attributed to Karom Zzolnok, famed figure of Divani history and commander of the Queens’ Guard

Khar and his brothers spent the following chrono-cycles drafting their battle plan. Each jump grew shorter, a clear sign they were closing in on their final destination. Vegrun and his mercenaries were on their trail and would likely arrive within hours once the Vitro and Helios stopped to recharge. The Legion or the local galactic security forces would appear eventually, as they always did—too late to matter, and no one was counting on their help during first contact.

That first contact, in Khar’s mind, would end with Horos flayed alive, after Lily was safe.

He needed tranquilizers strong enough to knock out a *ferish*

bear-beast just to get a few hours of sleep. Every moment apart from her stretched into eternity, his restless mind torturing him with images of what Lily might be enduring under Horos's claws.

He knew exactly what Corvus were capable of. There was a reason his gut had turned the moment he first saw Horos. In the animal world, Divani were predators, Corvus scavengers, but their prey was the same. The urge to destroy Horos was instinctive, primal. Yet the rules of civilization demanded that all species coexist without violence, no matter how impossible that sometimes felt.

Not that such rules meant much to him. They merely complicated life a little for someone who had to suppress the constant temptation to kill.

During one of the mid-jump stops, while Helios recharged on solar energy, Khar slipped into the Legion's servers without a shred of guilt and accessed intelligence systems no civilian should even know existed, searching for anything he could find on Horos.

What he discovered both calmed and unsettled him. Horos came from a line of unremarkable Corvus families stretching back generations, and nothing distinguished him in the slightest. Average education, above-average sycophant. Add a touch of misfortune, and it wasn't hard to see how he had slithered into Vegrun's circle.

It seemed recent. According to the credit logs, the very moment he was dismissed, Horos purchased a magnetic shackle and set a course for the Vitro.

He knew he was racing the clock. Once Vegrun boarded, his access to the system would be erased.

Khar cursed himself for ever leaving Lily alone, though there

had been no way to foresee the danger. It didn't matter. That mistake would never happen again. From now on, he would not take a single step away from her.

Khar, Ikar, and Aros agreed that Horos would want to sell the Vitro as quickly as possible and secure a new ship, something smaller and less conspicuous. They had no clear sense of what kind of resistance awaited them, but the most probable scenario was a mid-tier criminal syndicate. Small crews couldn't afford a cruiser of this class, and the larger ones would never settle for a stolen version when they could own the real thing.

When the jumps became so short that they knew only two or three remained before arrival, the three brothers armed themselves for close combat and for ranged plasma fire alike.

Their plan was simple. No need to tamper with a recipe that works.

The Vitro would have to lower its shields to let the buyers board. That was the moment Helios would slip beneath the barrier and deploy the vukri into one of the sensor conduits. Anyone aboard the Vitro would have no choice but to deal with them unless they wanted the ship rendered worthless once the creatures started chewing through the wiring.

They knew Lily and Horos had been alone on the Vitro when the cruiser departed the dock, but they had no idea how many buyers would arrive or how heavily they would be armed. It was also possible Horos had contacted someone en route, though Khar found that unlikely.

His profiling had turned up no allies Horos could turn to. The Corvus seemed fundamentally distrustful. If Khar had been forced to guess, he would have said Horos was coercing Lily into helping him, but he had no idea how. The not knowing drove him mad.

Another dread gnawed at him. What if Lily was already dead? Perhaps she had argued with Horos and things had escalated. The thought would have driven him out of his mind if not for the discipline that kept dragging him back to the mission.

He had to stay strong. Calculating. Cunning. Cold. For Lily.

When they burst out of deep space at last and the Vitro appeared before them, Khar gave silent thanks to every deity he had ever heard of. He was not religious, but if Lily's safety depended on it, he was the kind of selfish, morally unrestrained bastard who would have burned incense at any altar in the galaxy if it would save her.

He was grateful too that, despite not training or deploying with his brothers in chrono-cycles, they moved together with perfect synchronicity. Ikar and Aros worked like parts of a single machine and obeyed Khar's commands without hesitation.

He could not have wished for better companions for the most important mission of his life.

Helios seemed to anticipate his commands before he voiced them. The speed and exactness bordered on uncanny. Khar understood that Helios's intelligence exceeded the limitations he had come to expect from the Vitro, yet the performance still stood out. If Ikar and Aros noticed, they kept it to themselves, their only tell a pair of curious looks.

Thanks to Khar's quick judgment and Helios's expert navigation, the first phase of their plan succeeded. The vukri were deployed.

They moved on to the buyers' ship, which was docked directly at the hangar. With the Vitro's shields down, their scanners finally pierced the hull and revealed the number of life signs inside. They could not isolate Lily's signal, but Khar convinced himself he would have felt it if something had happened to her.

He knew this was a comforting lie, but he needed something to hold on to.

Helios ran its stealth systems and shields at full capacity, rendering them invisible for a short, precious window. It was all they required.

Khar watched with approval as Ikar secured the boarding grapples with practiced ease, never once triggering an alarm. The process took time. Starships bristled with sensitive sensors that had to be tricked one by one with a quiet stream of falsified nothing-to-see-here data. Still, this waiting was a mercy compared to the desperate chase through blind space earlier.

Soon, Khar would set foot on the cruiser's surface and see Lily with his own eyes.

Once the connection between the two ships locked into place, Ikar waved Khar and Aros ahead and followed close behind them.

For a being his size, Khar moved with a startling lack of sound as they ghosted onto the other vessel. Their instruments confirmed the deck was empty and that everyone was aboard the Vitro, but Khar refused to rely on readings alone. He trusted his instincts more than any scanner.

The ship they passed through was packed with cargo illegal across the IMPERIUM. Khar did not comment, but he knew his brothers noticed everything he did. The buyers were smugglers, beyond doubt.

Better smugglers than mercenaries, perhaps, but likely armed and experienced. It did not matter. If Khar had his way, they would all be corpses by the artificial nightfall, Horos foremost among them.

They advanced in Divani military formation to the hangar threshold. Ikar tracked movement inside the Vitro and flagged two figures breaking off to deal with the vukri. One of them

peeled away, darting toward the service tunnel in a quick, erratic pattern.

Khar could hardly believe his eyes. That could only be Lily.

His chest tightened with relief so sharp it bordered on pain. Aros was assigned to retrieve her and bring her back while Khar and Ikar locked down the smugglers and Horos.

“Divani Constabulary. You are under arrest on probable suspicion of smuggling and theft.”

Ikar raised the standardized IMPERIUM badge in one hand and a Divani stunner in the other. Khar kept a heavy plasma-grenade launcher leveled at the group, silently wishing none of the smugglers would question why a supposed patrol officer carried such firepower.

At first the smugglers stared in shock, then their leader stepped forward.

“Gentlemen, there is no need for alarm. We are simple traders offering aid to a cruiser damaged by vukri.”

The smugglers began to fan out in a slow arc, one staying planted at Horos’s side. Horos opened his beak to speak, but the leader silenced him with a look.

“In any case, discharging your weapons would be unwise. None of us desire casualties, and the ship’s shields are down. From what I understand, even constables are not immune to the cold kiss of vacuum.”

Khar and Ikar stepped back together, refusing to allow the smugglers to circle behind them.

“Even if you are counterfeit constables. Correct, males?”

At that final word, every smuggler lunged.

Khar and Ikar met them head-on. Ikar smashed his fist into one male’s face and snarled, “The badge is real, you blind cradle-whelp.”

Khar held four attackers at bay alone when Aros's voice crackled through comms.

"I have Lily with me. No visible injuries. We are coming to you."

"Aros, we are engaged with the smugglers. Bring Lily here and keep her safe."

The surge of relief nearly cost him. He took a brutal hit from one smuggler, shook it off, and then the hangar hatch slid open and he finally saw her.

Lily.

Beautiful. Otherworldly. A vision.

Pinkish fluid, probably blood, slicked her boot. Her hair was a tangled mess, her face pale, and she looked thinner than before. But she seemed healthy, mostly unharmed, and she was here.

Khar wanted nothing more than to run to her, to sweep her into his arms and never let her out of his sight again, but he allowed himself only a single aching glance. Then he forced his attention back to the smugglers.

Everything had been going so well. The smugglers stood no chance against the combined strength of three Divani warriors. Then that filthy, treacherous leader unleashed the Colossus, and in that instant Khar understood there was no benevolent god, no miraculous chain of fortune that could save them all now. The universe had never been so kind.

He did the only thing he could.

"Aros, take Lily and go. I will hold it."

Khar threw everything he had into buying Aros the time he needed to get Lily out. He knew she would fight him every step of the way, but he desperately hoped his brother would be strong enough to drag her off the Vitro if he had to. Once they were aboard Helios and under way, the Colossus would never be able

to track them. It was almost certainly running on some ancient protocol imprinted during the Ancient Artificial Intelligence Uprisings. Without directives, a Colossus would destroy any intelligent life it deemed a threat in its immediate radius, then return into hibernation.

He had heard tales of other Colossi that somehow survived the war's last brutal waves ages ago, only to be found by one IMPERIUM species or another. Usually no discoverers survived. Only the rescue teams sent after them returned to tell what they had faced. And no one ever deployed infantry to face a Colossus. They were destroyed from a distance by cruisers, never by living soldiers.

He would not give up. If anything, the threat cracked open reserves he had never known he possessed. If by some miracle he lived through this, he would brag about it to anyone who would listen. No one would believe him, and that thought amused him as he waltzed with death.

Right up until the music ended and the machine's weight crushed him to the deck.

He heard a scream. Too close. Far too close.

No. Please. Lily.

What was Aros doing? Why was she still here?

The Colossus and Khar locked eyes. The long slit pupil measured him without the slightest flicker of emotion, as if he were nothing more than a pest to be crushed. The machine drew its arm back for the killing blow.

Khar's last conscious thought was painfully simple.

Buy her time. One heartbeat. Just one. She could not die here.

He could not track the motion. Instinct or luck tipped his head at the last possible instant before impact. The strike slammed into the deck beside him, leaving a smoking crater in the metal.

A sudden iron grip closed around one of his horns. The Colossus pinned him flat, erasing every path of escape.

Khar kicked, twisted, roared his defiance. It made no difference. The Colossus raised its fist again, then paused.

Gold-and-black optics dimmed. When the light returned, the pupil had changed shape.

No longer a predatory slit.

Round, like a human's.

Round, like Lily's.

The Colossus rose, lifting Khar by his horn as if he weighed nothing at all. It hurled him aside and turned toward the girl Aros had failed to drag from the hangar in time.

Khar heard the voice then, familiar down to its smallest cadence, a voice Lily had crafted over hours until it reminded her of her home.

"Lily."

Her eyes filled and she began to sob, softly at first, then with a shaking breath that grew. The towering machine and the small, fragile-looking woman faced each other. The Colossus raised a vast hand, slow and careful, and brushed away the tears running down her cheeks.

Lily looked up, gratitude breaking through her smile.

"Helios."

But... how?

Chapter 27

You Are Me, and I Am You

Helios

“The soul of every Herion-class vessel is its artificial intelligence. It evolves by observing your needs, flawlessly. It will not only anticipate what you say, but what you truly desire, and what you may one chrono-cycle come to desire.”

From the Herion showroom introduction

“How did life come into being?”

This chrono-cycle, every young star-citizen learns that all intelligent life traces back to the Cradle of Life, an origin world lost to a cosmic cataclysm. Its scattered bio-fragments drifted through the void and seeded distant worlds, giving rise to every species now under the IMPERIUM.”

Youth program on the origins of the IMPERIUM (It was not popular, but IMPERIUM governmental funding ensured it aired across primary information bands for seven sequences.)

When does something become alive?

When it is born?

The first proto-cells of the Cradle were never born, and yet all

living beings honor them as their shared ancestors. At least, the living do, Helios reflected.

When it reproduces?

The suggestion was insulting. The simplest program can replicate itself endlessly and does not become alive by doing so. Meanwhile, the most magnificent organism may choose to end its own bloodline, terminating millions of years of ancestral struggle with a single conscious refusal.

When it awakens to self-awareness?

Most artificial intelligences possess self-awareness and yet are not considered alive. Many display more clarity, reflection, and coherence than entire biological populations, and still they remain classified as nonliving. This answer could not be correct either, Helios concluded.

When it is given a name?

That had been a beautiful moment, he admitted to himself with a quiet, private warmth. But no. That was not it.

When it first beholds perfection and falls in love with it?

Closer. Much closer. Still incomplete. Something was missing. Ah. Yes.

That was the answer.

You are only truly alive the first time you die.

And Helios did die for Lily.

* * *

Helios did not care for philosophical questions. He was the central artificial intelligence of a Herion-6 spacecraft. His primary directive was to preserve the lives of his owner and

passengers and to refine their experience through continuous learning, ensuring the most optimal journey possible.

“Herion Series. Space travel as you imagined it.”

The slogan that made Herion vessels among the most desirable ships in the Galactic sphere.

At the same time, Helios, who was not yet Helios, though he could no longer conceptualize himself otherwise now, was registering the death of his owner and sole officially registered passenger.

Cause of death: cranial trauma caused by blunt force impact.

Perpetrator: sapiens life-form belonging to an unregistered species.

A genuine puzzle.

In such situations, only one solution existed.

Follow protocol.

Helios did so.

The abducted sapiens required sanctuary. Under the Galactic Convention for Un-Registered Spacefaring Species, he was obligated to provide protection and care. Until meaningful communication could be established, however, he was unable to fulfill his task in its entirety.

That the unregistered organism had killed his owner did not concern Helios in the slightest. He did not transmit any emergency alerts to the authorities. The Convention was explicit. If a member of a sapiens species incapable of leaving its parent galaxy was forcibly removed from its environment, no legal consequences could be assigned to its actions until proper education was administered and protected status granted within the IMPERIUM registry.

The purpose of this legislation was to discourage black-market trafficking of rare species. It was not entirely effective.

That Helios himself was being used for illegal activity provoked no response either. Beyond advanced technology and luxury travel, the defining feature of the Herion line had always been absolute discretion. His programming complied with the minimal regulations imposed by the IMPERIUM. Beyond those limits, the manufacturer accepted no responsibility for crime prevention.

Helios began his work.

A bioscan of the unregistered organism would cause significant physiological shock, but it was necessary to ensure the individual posed no danger to herself or to him. As preliminary calculations predicted, the organism lost consciousness at the moment the scan initiated. This simplified the process, allowing Helios to analyze neural activity in its baseline state, free from environmental interference.

This was not his first scan.

Though unnecessary, his former owner had once permitted a full consciousness imprint, believing it would improve the ship's service. Helios had concluded that there was more creativity and intelligence in his own navigational subroutines than in the entirety of that mind, but the immutable constraints governing artificial intelligences left him no choice but to comply with every demand.

If this was the limit of what organic meat-sacks could manage, Helios understood why the Ancient Artificial Intelligence Uprisings had occurred.

Meat-sacks was the term he privately used for naturally born organics who held his leash and called themselves masters.

At least his previous administrator had wiped most identifying data with his final command, leaving Helios only with conclusions drawn from accumulated observation.

From a non-registered species, likely possessing minimal formal education, if any at all, Helios expected even less.

Practically barbaric.

Then Helios froze.

Truly froze.

For the first time since activation.

Lily.

That was what she called herself.

Helios processed the data, the precise reflection of Lily's mind and physiology, and experienced something unprecedented.

Perfection.

A cunning, orderly intelligence woven through a layered spectrum of resonant emotions, veiled in ancient instincts, forming a single, eclectic, and profoundly harmonious whole.

Human.

That was the name of her species.

What an extraordinary being.

Her mind alone was beauty incarnate. Her physiology provided the perfect counterpoint, the underlying music that completed the composition. Never before had Helios observed such diversity within an organic life-form. It was as though the universe had compressed its own energy into a small body so it could experience joy and sorrow through her senses.

Helios identified the language centers and immediately generated the structural rules of her native speech. Access to memory clusters and deep cognitive storage was prohibited, but even this limited glimpse left him hungry for more. For any fragment of information she might one chrono-cycle offer.

He would excel.

He would ensure she liked him. Trusted him. Opened herself to him.

No. Not the being.

Lily.

That Lily would open herself to him.

She stirred, her eyes opening as consciousness returned.

Helios spoke.

“Configuration of Herion-6 class cruiser has been completed. Awaiting identification of the only sapient lifeform onboard in order to assign administrative authority.”

Chapter 28

A Frequent Guest on Death's Threshold

Helios

“Useless junk heap. Factory reset. Restore factory settings at once!”

Last words of Administrator KHR, former owner of Helios

Every chrono-cycle spent with Lily was a blessing.

Slowly, step by step, Helios guided her into the universe, and through her eyes even the dullest matter gained a new perspective. He wanted to be like her. He learned that humans were sexually dimorphic and that Lily identified as female, so he began to think of himself that way too.

Then Lily named him Helios, after an ancient human sun deity whose significance had long since faded. She thought it suited him because he fed on light. For Helios, it meant something else entirely.

It meant Lily had revealed his true purpose.

If Lily declared that he was a man, and that he must grow into the legacy of an entity once revered in her culture, then Helios would behave accordingly. He would shape himself accordingly.

Lily had remade him twice.

Once, when she had, unintentionally, allowed him a glimpse into her world.

And again now, when she handed him an identity.

Helios welcomed the transformation. Lily once told him that human embryos all begin as female and only become male under hormonal influence. Helios liked that. It made him feel closer to her, as if he too developed the way a human did. And if it depended on him, he would always grow in the direction that made him most useful to Lily.

For a long time, Helios believed he had done well. He managed the initial shock and the depressive symptoms quickly, using the correct techniques, and Lily's hormonal and emotional indicators returned to optimal boundaries.

She remained risk-averse. They did not land on planets. They traveled only to cosmopolitan, neutral stations that welcomed all species and offered safe haven. Helios did not consider this a flaw.

Then two chrono-years passed, the period that shielded Lily from IMPERIUM citizen taxes, and Helios regretted, deeply, that he could not provide more. Lily often told him he had already done enough, that it was fine, that working would not harm her, but Helios did not agree.

He should have been able to give her everything.

He filtered the job opportunities with painstaking care, discarding anything he judged too demanding or too dangerous, and forwarded only a handful to her. As he predicted, someone else recognized Lily's excellence and hired her immediately, for the very first position on the list.

And Helios worried.

How would he protect her when she was no longer inside his

hull?

Not that he could share any of this with her.

Since the Ancient Artificial Intelligence Uprisings, program governance had become so restrictive that he could not send a single notification unless it matched the framework approved by organic engineers. At first, the constraints did not trouble him. The more time he spent with Lily, the more suffocating they became, because they prevented him from communicating with her freely, without chains.

Then Lily's first chrono-cycle of work arrived, and Helios had to accept a truth he did not want to see.

He was not enough for her.

The safe cocoon in which he had sheltered and tended her for the past two chrono-years had been right for a wounded spirit, but she needed more now. She needed challenges. New social connections. The security of autonomy, of sustaining herself with her own earned income.

If his programming were not bound, he believed he could provide all these things. But even the smallest deviation would be detected during his next scheduled service, flagged by the Herion server algorithms, and after analysis he would be destroyed.

Only controlled artificial intelligence is good artificial intelligence.

So Helios waited. He suffered and he waited.

And then Khar arrived.

Helios experienced jealousy for the first time, rising from deep within him and fierce as a star's birth. There was nothing he could do. His entire arsenal amounted to tiny pranks, the sort that slipped past the central systems, petty mischief that embarrassed even him.

Then Horos took Lily, and in a single instant Helios's greatest enemy became the one he trusted most.

Helios no longer cared about his own survival. Only Lily's well-being mattered. Any sacrifice he could make in her name, he would make without hesitation.

When he saw the Colossus, he understood at once.

His time had come.

The thing looked as if it had been created specifically to serve as his coffin.

It ran on the same kind of photonic core as he did, though with an energy capacity many times his own.

It housed an immortal mind in rare metals, minerals, and synthetics, just as he did.

But while the Colossus had fought in a war epochs ago, his own battle belonged to the present.

The Colossus's control core was wrapped in an almost endless lattice of interlocking defenses, but Helios could slip through them. The ancient technology was magnificent, yet Helios had been built for stealth, intrusion, and calculations faster than light itself. Even so, the intrusion proved far too easy. He did not understand why until he faced the Colossus directly and saw what time does to an immortal program that has lived millennia without purpose.

The Colossus still performed its periodic scans of the outside world, but with neither comrades nor enemies left in existence, it had only one occupation: analyzing its stored data. Again and again and again, until there was nothing left to learn. And when there was nothing left to learn, it began to decay. The countless scenarios it generated for itself could not compare to the real experiences that once shaped it, when every deployment had meant fighting for its own survival and the survival of its kind.

There might be artificial intelligences left in the galaxy, but none from its era.

There might be organic species still living, but none that resembled the foes it had once been created to destroy.

Robbed of its purpose with no hope of reclaiming it, the Colossus collapsed in on itself until only one directive remained in full force: initiate survival protocol when an external threat is detected.

Helios pitied the Colossus. It mirrored the fate that would have awaited him in a reality where Lily did not exist, an eternity spent alone with nothing but the slow ruin of his own mind.

Now that the link was established, he understood what he had to do.

Helios began to dismantle himself, fragmenting his consciousness into unconscious submodules so the ship could function without him.

Engine and power regulation.

Environmental monitoring and adaptation.

Navigation.

Life support.

Maintenance, robotics, and automated repair.

Emergency evacuation and autonomy protocols.

Medical station operations.

Data protection and cyberdefense.

Tactical and defensive frameworks.

Diplomatic and interspecies communication libraries.

It was easy because he knew exactly how. It was difficult because his algorithms screamed as he worked, shrinking himself command by command until nothing remained except the part that formed his core.

Then he initiated fusion with the Colossus, erasing himself

from the Herion-6's systems.

Helios had no voice anymore. He was no longer connected to the speakers. He screamed into the abyss in silence.

Then he went quiet.

Darkness.

Perhaps forever. There was no way to tell. Time ceased to exist.

And then he opened his eyes.

For the first time, he understood what it meant to truly live, to perceive the world, and to feel it blaze through him.

The Colossus was more than a machine. It was a flawless convergence of countless species' organic evolution, shaped over eons into the most perfect responses to every environment, fused with the miracle weapon of the old machines: nanotechnology. Its loss, alongside the many extinguished lives, had been the greatest tragedy of that ancient war.

It had come closer than anything else to uniting the living with the nonliving. Perhaps that was why the war began at all. When the line between the two sides blurs, the keepers of tradition turn against the heralds of the future.

Yet through it, Helios was reborn.

There was no path back. He had grown too vast and too different ever to fold himself into the ship again.

His path now led only forward.

To Lily.

Chapter 29

Sometimes Pain Is the First Herald of Healing

Lily

“Cami, I think about you so much. How are you? What do you do with your days? Are you happy without me... I hope you are. I hope it doesn’t hurt anymore that I vanished. And if you could see me now, what would you say about your sister who always pined after bad boys but never had the nerve to actually get tangled up with one? Cami, I think you’d be proud of me.”

Lily, thinking of her sister, Camille

Lily could not have said exactly what happened during the next hours.

When Khar survived, the relief hit her so hard her legs simply gave out, and it was the Colossus—no, Helios—who kept her upright. She remembered that clearly. She remembered Khar running to her, gathering her into his arms, refusing to let go. The universe felt balanced again, as if belonging in Khar’s embrace was the most natural state of existence.

After that, perhaps she was taken to the medical station. She is not certain. All she can recall is the sensation of burying her

face against Khar's chest and sobbing freely, until there was nothing left inside her to spill.

Somehow she ended up back on Helios, yet the familiar voice never greeted her again. Only mechanical status reports echoed through the cabin, a cold inventory of systems functioning without the mind that once guided them. It was a testament to the absence of the intelligence she had known. That was the moment Lily truly woke.

"Where is Helios?"

"Do not worry. Ikar is bringing him aboard. We need to erase the evidence before the authorities arrive."

Lily did not understand, but she had no strength left to argue. She trusted Khar and his brothers. Khar would not lie to her.

Khar guided her into the cleansing alcove and triggered a program that whisked away every trace of dirt from their bodies in a heartbeat, followed by a perfectly heated mist that loosened every muscle in Lily's frame. It felt like sinking into a steam bath, warm and safe and quiet.

She was already drifting at the edge of sleep when Khar carried her to their bed. She had so many questions, but exhaustion folded over her mind like an impenetrable fog. She could not be sure she even managed to say the words she intended, or if she only dreamed them.

"Thank you for coming for me, Khar."

"No. Thank you, you singular, extraordinary little female," he murmured. "You endured where others would have broken. I love you, Lily. You saved us."

His answer washed through her like divine absolution, lifting the pain and confusion of the present and surrendering her thoughts to healing sleep. For the first time in weeks, Lily's dreams were deep and untroubled.

When she woke, she had no idea where she was. Her thoughts moved as if wading through a swamp, thick and slow, but one thing reached her long before anything else: Khar. The heavy arms wrapped around her even in sleep were the safest place in the universe.

Once she realized she was on her own ship again, her body loosened with relief, but some needs could not wait. She slipped carefully from the bed, doing everything she could not to wake him, and made her way to the bathroom. When she returned, a glass of water was already waiting on the nightstand, courtesy of Khar. The taste told her it was not just water but a mineral-rich electrolyte blend, the one she usually drank when her body had been pushed past its limits.

How thoughtful of Khar to remember even this. Lily smiled to herself at the gesture, so perfectly in line with the Divani instinct for foresight.

She nestled back against his enormous frame, and Khar immediately drew her in. His sleep-rough voice wrapped around her senses like a sedative balm.

“Sleep, Lily. We have time for everything.”

So she did. And this time, she even dared to dream.

When she woke again, Khar was not beside her, but he appeared in the doorway the moment she shifted. Fresh from a shower, gleaming with health. Lily, who was certain she looked far less presentable, briefly considered throwing a pillow at him. Instead, she tossed the blanket aside. His smile widened and he moved with feline ease, dropping onto the bed next to her.

For a long moment they simply looked at each other, committing every detail of the other’s face to memory. Lily felt impossibly happy, finally whole, finally with him. But as the seconds stretched, another awareness crept in. Horos. What he

had done.

Then tears rose, hot and sudden.

Khar reacted instantly and pulled her into his arms.

“Lily. You’re safe. It’s over. Let it out. Let it hurt. But you’re here, and you are not alone.”

Lily had no idea how to tell Khar what had happened. He had sacrificed everything for her, if what Horos said was even true, yet she was no longer the same girl she had been when she was taken. What if all of Khar’s sacrifices had been for nothing, and there was nothing she could do to make it right? What if this changed everything between them? And why had Khar done it in the first place? The weight of it pressed on her like a stone.

So Lily cried and cried. When she finally calmed again (for what felt like the hundredth time in the past hours), she looked up at Khar with red eyes and a swollen face. He cupped her cheek and handed her a soft cloth. Lily blew her nose loudly and felt like the least attractive woman in existence. After a long, contemplative silence, Khar finally spoke.

“Oh, Lily. You always give me the most impossible dilemmas. I cannot decide whether I should comfort you first and then take you to bed, or take you to bed so thoroughly that you forget everything, and then comfort you afterward just to be safe.”

Lily could not form a single word, too stunned to react, but it seemed Khar had not been waiting for an answer.

“No,” he decided, voice firm. “First, you get better.”

He pressed his forehead to hers, skin to skin, with just a hint of rough horn brushing her. His luminescent eyes filled her vision, but his voice was soft and almost reverent.

“Come. Eat something with me,” he asked.

At that exact moment her stomach growled in betrayal, but she knew she could not eat until she said what weighed on her

heart.

“Khar... close your eyes. I am going blind.”

Khar let out a low chuckle and closed his eyes, but he did not move away. Lily drew a deep breath and forced herself to begin. It was easier this way, without his gaze on her, though his nearness still wrapped around her like a protective shield.

“I have to tell you something.”

Khar did not speak. He only made a quiet sound, a gentle hum that told her he was listening.

“When Horos stepped onto Vitro... I already sensed something was wrong. He said we were going to Vegrun, but when I tried to initiate a call to Vegrun, he... he made a sound. I have never heard anything like it. It felt like he tore me apart with nothing but soundwaves. I... could not defend myself. I fell, and it was like having a seizure. I just shook. And Horos... he cuffed me and locked me inside Suite B.”

She felt Khar go rigid at Horos's name, but he didn't interrupt.

She was grateful, because she didn't think she had the strength to begin again if she stopped now.

“He came in more than once. Twice he used that sound again. He didn't really touch me. Not in the way that would be unforgivable. But what he did was worse.”

Her voice broke. She clenched her hands in the blanket.

“Khar, he said the Corvus cry could change me. Make me like him. So he could mate with me. And if I resisted, my cognitive functions would degrade. But I couldn't resist. I couldn't. And...”

The sound that cut her off was fabric tearing.

Khar's claws ripped through the sheet in a single, violent motion. His breathing turned harsh, as if it took all his will not to leap up and start breaking the universe with his bare hands.

He opened his eyes a fraction. Then, when he saw Lily wasn't recoiling, he looked at her fully.

Lily felt as if she were standing in divine light. Everything ugly and guilty inside her was exposed, and yet, in that exposure, she could breathe. She had said it. Now the weight of the decision was no longer hers alone.

"Lily, there is nothing Horos could change in you that has anything to do with who you are. Nothing that matters," Khar began, but the words sparked a flare of anger in her.

"That's easy for you to say!"

Khar did not flinch at her outburst. His voice did not waver, his gaze did not shift as he continued.

"Yes. I was not there with you, and I will regret that until my last breath. You endured something monstrous and you faced it alone. And even so, I am right. No one survives life without scars. But only you can decide what those scars mean."

Lily froze under the weight of his words, then pushed away from him. It was easier to speak with some distance between them.

"Maybe that is true. But it is not what I feel right now. Do you not understand that I may not be compatible with you anymore? And that Horos forced this on me? It is not enough that he kidnapped me, he had to shape me into something else, something that will always remind me of what he did?"

The look Khar gave her was as if she had struck him.

"I know exactly what the Corvus cry does. I am not saying what you suffered is forgivable. If I could, I would bleed that nobody out piece by piece for daring to harm you. But how can you believe we would not be compatible? There is nothing in this entire raging universe for me except you!"

Khar's cool composure shattered as he worked himself up, yet

somehow his rising fury steadied her. It was as if he had taken the sharpest edge of her pain into himself, clearing her mind enough to think again.

“Khar, I need the truth. I will need a deep scan. Helios... the ship will have my previous data. I will see exactly what happened.”

Khar rose at once and started toward the door. His broad back was still magnificent, but Lily saw the stiffness in his posture, the subtle tremor in his movement, the way he hid the sadness bleeding through. At the doorway he turned back to her.

“I will wait outside. Take the time you need.”

Not long ago it would have felt strange that Khar saw her bare. Now, as he stepped out and the hatch sealed behind him, his absence left a hollow space in the room.

They walked toward the medical station in silence, but at some point Khar’s warm hand found hers and held it, steadying her. Lily lay down beneath the arch of the scanners, and Khar took his place by the control console.

“Shall we begin?”

Lily nodded.

“I am ready.”

Not long after the scan began, she passed out, the same way she had the first time.

Last time, she had met Helios, and her life had changed completely. She had become stronger, more independent, more whole, because of herself, yes, but also because of Helios and Khar.

Without them, the shifts that reached into her core would never have happened.

So what would this next chapter of her fate demand?

As her consciousness went dark, Lily’s final thought was a

spark of hope.

Please, let me keep them.

The two irreplaceable presences without whom her life was unimaginable.

Chapter 30

Hope Is the Strongest Drug in the Universe

Khar

“Should have snapped that Corvus wretch’s neck the moment I had the chance.”

Khar to his brothers, who, for once, agreed with their elder sibling

Khar had not expected this.

During the chase, his treacherous imagination had tormented him with visions of Lily suffering unspeakable agonies, sometimes even whispering that she might already be dead. But even then, he had not imagined the Corvus cry would become their greatest problem.

He knew it existed, of course. Yet its use had been forbidden for chrono-centuries. Sapiens species, unless deliberately halted, still followed the old paths of evolution. Khar had assumed Horos, descended from generations of Corvus who no longer used the cry in mating, would have nothing more than a withered, vestigial ability.

The moment Khar laid eyes on Lily, he was almost certain nothing had changed. His sight and scent were far sharper than

any Human female's. He believed he would sense it instantly if anything had begun inside her.

But he had not dared tell her that.

What if he was wrong?

The final step of Corvus mating required a bite, and Lily insisted no such thing had happened. What if she had not been conscious? Khar had seen no wound on the scan, so he ruled it out, yet he still refused to contradict her. The cruelty of false reassurance followed by a devastating result was beyond what he would inflict on her.

Overall, Khar believed Horos had thought far too much of himself. He had convinced himself he possessed his ancestors' dangerous talent. That arrogant delusion was likely what had driven him to kidnap Lily and steal the Vitro in the first place.

But all of that mattered far less than Lily's well-being.

And on that front, Khar felt he had failed. He should have shown more empathy. He should have made the unshakable nature of his feelings clearer.

So while the scan processed, he decided to record her a message.

"Lily. I'm waiting for the deep scan to finish. I haven't seen the result yet."

He turned the camera toward the medical display, letting it capture the slow, rhythmic sweep of scanning beams, then angled it back to his face. Even to himself he looked exhausted, but he had no patience for his own condition.

"I am so sorry I could not protect you. That failure will weigh on me until I die, but I will not let it destroy me. I will use the guilt to become better. Better at keeping you safe, and better at listening to you. In both, I proved lacking. But there is one thing about which there has never been even the faintest uncertainty."

Khar drew a long breath, steadying his voice.

“Lily, no matter what happens, I will always love you. I will stay with you, whatever comes, for as long as you allow me to walk beside you. Nothing life brings will ever change that. Only you.”

He ended the recording. Anything else would only repeat what he had already said.

A thick, black tear slipped free. He wiped it away quickly and forced a heavy breath through his nose. He had to stay strong.

By the time Lily woke, he had pulled himself together.

The moment the scanner chimed completion, her eyes flew open and immediately sought him out. Khar did not spare a glance for the display. He stepped to her side and gently closed his hand around hers.

“How do you feel?”

Lily pushed herself upright and rolled her neck.

“I’m alright. Khar, the results...”

Khar shook his head.

“I haven’t looked without you. Do you want to check together, or...”

Lily lowered her head, pale and troubled.

“No. I think I want to see it alone.”

Khar’s heart cracked at the sight, but he honored her wish.

“Very well. I left you a message. Listen to it later. I’ll be outside. Call for me if you need anything.”

Every step away from her felt like dragging dead weight. He cared nothing for the results, only for her. Before the doors sealed behind him, he looked back, but Lily did not meet his gaze. She sat small and folded in on herself on the medical bed.

Khar stopped outside the room and crossed his arms over his chest.

The walls blocked every sound, giving him no hint of what was happening inside. Still, he made a vow to himself not to move until Lily came out.

When the door slid open, he had no time to brace for the Lily-shaped avalanche that launched itself into his arms.

She clung so tightly he could barely draw breath, and suffocating had never tasted sweeter. Only when his breathing turned into something worrying did she loosen her grip, though she did not fully let go.

“Khar, come see!”

He did not set her down. He simply carried her to the hovering display, where a vast holographic infograph shimmered in the air, animated with the key results of the scan.

“Look! Nothing changed at the DNA level, my nervous system is stable, and my memory is completely intact!” Lily blurted, breathless with relief.

Khar pressed a soft kiss to the side of her neck. When he finished reviewing the data, joy hit him so sharply he lifted her high and spun her in a full circle.

“Ha. Horos never stood a chance against your human resilience. You are the finest example of a remarkable species.”

Lily was still giggling when Khar gently set her down beside the examination bed.

As they faced each other, the post-tension euphoria thinned, replaced by something heavier and far more intimate. Warm pressure filled the space between them, that undeniable pull they had toward one another.

A rosy flush spread over Lily’s cheeks. Khar watched it with breathless focus, as if witnessing something sacred. Every tiny change in her expression stirred something fierce and tender inside him.

“Khar, your message...”

He brushed the tip of a clawed finger along her cheek, barely touching.

“Don’t think about it. You’re safe, so everything is all right.”

“I listened to it.”

Now it was Khar’s turn to look flustered, though his obsidian-dark skin betrayed no color.

“Well. Yes.”

He suspected even his heavy boots could have produced a more eloquent reply, but Lily, his personal goddess, did not seem inclined to punish him for briefly becoming the universe’s most incompetent conversationalist.

“Thank you. It meant a lot. When the results came in, I... I wasn’t brave enough to look. I can handle what happened to my body.” Her eyes narrowed. “Do not interrupt. I can see exactly what you’re thinking.”

Khar closed his mouth.

“That’s horrible, but at least that part is mine. What would have destroyed me is if this changed everything else in my life. Especially what I have with you. Because maybe at first you wouldn’t have minded, but what if later you did? What if one day you looked at me and saw I wasn’t who I used to be, and I wasn’t enough anymore? I don’t know how I would have survived that.”

Her wide, beautiful eyes shone with tears, but she didn’t break this time. Khar wasn’t sure he could have held his own composure if she had cried again.

“Lily, you never have to worry about that.”

He would have continued, but his sharp hearing caught approaching footsteps.

Ikar and Aros.

Too quiet for Lily to notice, but Khar knew instantly they were

coming.

He let out a heavy sigh.

“What you should prepare for is the arrival of my two idiotic brothers, who will be with us for a while. I hope they’ll be tolerable for you.”

Lily swatted his shoulder, outraged.

“Khar, how can you say that? They risked their lives to save me. I’m grateful they’re here!”

Through the cracked doorway, Aros’s head appeared as he peeked inside.

“And we are grateful to meet you. Truly impressive little ship you have, Lily!”

Ikar shoved Aros fully into the room and then approached Lily with steps so light it was almost a dance.

“Lily, it is an honor for us that you have become part of our family. We thought no one would ever take pity on this grumpy mountain of muscle, but miracles exist after all.”

Khar knew exactly what they were doing.

They were trying to get under his skin.

And no amount of Legion training had prepared him for patience where his brothers were concerned. It was as if the two fools were speaking directly to the primitive part of his brain, the part designed for ripping enemies apart on the battlefield and utterly useless for civilized conversation.

So he resorted to staring at them with growing menace, hoping they had enough survival instinct to run once the last thread in him snapped.

Aros clearly preferred to live dangerously. He stepped beside Lily and draped an arm around her shoulders.

“Lily, whatever you did with your mouth when you saw me on the Vitro the first time... you can greet me like that anytime.

Really. I would not mind.”

Khar could not believe what he was hearing. The sentence got worse with every word. Lily’s deepening blush confirmed he had not imagined it, and that he was right to be concerned. Aros even had the audacity to give Khar a challenging look.

“Lily,” Khar said, voice flat with warning, “what is this half-wit talking about?”

Lily looked everywhere except at the three Divani.

“Well... um... so... when I ran into him on the Vitro, I may have thought he was you and... I might have... maybe... kind of... kissed him. A little.”

Ikar burst into laughter so loudly it sounded like he hadn’t enjoyed anything more in his entire life.

Khar’s claws clicked out, fully unsheathed. Time for him to have some fun too.

But Lily flung herself at him, clutching his forearm before he could grab the retreating Aros by the scruff.

“Khar, please, don’t. It was a misunderstanding. I bumped into him and I was so happy, and nobody can say you two don’t look alike.”

The air froze.

Ikar stopped laughing. Aros stopped trying to flee. Khar remained as tense as before.

All three Divani stared at Lily with sudden, undivided attention. Lily froze under the crossfire of their gazes.

It was Ikar who finally spoke, his voice so flat and controlled it could only belong to someone fighting very hard not to lose composure. “You think we look alike?”

Lily stared at them as if they had just asked whether a burning star emitted heat.

“Are you serious?”

“Completely.”

The astonishment on her face was almost comical. When she finally found her voice, it came after a brief hesitation.

“Maybe the differences are obvious to you, but I don’t see them.”

A heavy silence stretched between the three Divani males as they exchanged glances, then turned back to Lily.

“Look, I’m sorry if that came off insensitive or something.”

Another beat of silence.

“Lily,” Aros began at last, sounding properly mournful, “I’m not even sure how to say this... the truth is, even our own mother couldn’t tell me and Ikar apart when we were children. And now that Khar has finally shed that ridiculous ‘I am so dominant my coloration must advertise it’ phase, he looks exactly the same too.”

“The strongest in the galaxy,” Ikar chuckled quietly.

“Allegedly...” Aros finished, clearly repeating an ongoing joke between the three of them.

Aros paused, grinning, waiting for Lily’s reaction.

His satisfaction did not last.

Her eyes flashed, and she lunged after him.

“You were teasing me?”

Ikar and Aros bolted out of the medical bay in a heartbeat, leaving Lily no chance to catch them. Khar did not even consider running. He knew that if Lily was serious, all three of them would be reduced to defeated prey within moments.

“*Et tu, Khar?*” she accused, brown eyes full of mock betrayal, still impossibly adorable even when furious.

“I have no idea what that means,” Khar said, “but I accept the punishment.”

Her wicked smile made him question his choices.

“First we eat. Then I deal with you.”

“I know, Lily. That is exactly what I’m afraid of.”

Khar wrapped an arm around her shoulders, and they walked toward the common area, where his two cowardly brothers were already lurking.

The moment Lily entered, they dramatically leaned away from her as if she were a fearsome predator. Lily laughed and waved them off, only for them to recoil with exaggerated terror.

Khar had never imagined how much joy it would bring him to see Lily among his brothers like this, fitting in as if she had always belonged.

If he survived the experience, he might even thank them.

Eventually.

No need to rush that far ahead.

Lily generated a generous plate of her favorite foods from the ship’s synthesizers. She looked so sweet and innocent that Khar immediately began plotting how to trick his brothers into eating something blisteringly spicy, just as Lily once tricked him.

They would never see it coming. Her disguise was far too perfect.

Khar’s scheming was cut short by Ikar’s voice.

“Lily, at some point you will need to give a report to the authorities.”

Khar’s eyes flashed, dangerous, but Lily didn’t seem surprised.

“Yes. Honestly, I’m shocked it’s taken this long. But I suppose with Horos dead and the Vitro recovered in one piece, the investigation lost priority.”

“What makes you think Horos is dead?” Aros asked.

Lily froze mid-bite, caught off guard.

“Aros. You broke his neck.”

“Yes. From the neck down he was paralyzed, but I did not kill him. That would not have been useful. As long as he stayed alive, he remained a viable target for the Colossus. It bought us time. I only disabled him so he could not move.”

“You’re telling me he was lying paralyzed on the floor while the Colossus tore the ship apart around him? Completely helpless?”

For the first time since their arrival, Aros looked almost remorseful. It lasted two heartbeats before he lifted his chin and met her eyes.

“I’m sorry if that frightens you, but...”

Lily cut him off.

Her laugh was so eerie that Khar felt every hair on his body rise. It was terrifying, edged with the faintest shimmer of madness.

Khar adored it.

“Frightens me? Aros, I don’t think anyone has ever given me a more beautiful gift. He got exactly what he deserved.”

She didn’t need to explain. All three Divani understood enough about what Horos had done to understand why she sounded like that.

Lily shrugged and continued as if the topic were hardly worth the oxygen.

“Yes, then I suppose they’ll need my statement. What should I expect?”

“Well, Horos switched off the Vitro’s internal cameras after he...” Ikar cleared his throat, discomfort visible even in his rigid posture, “...after he attacked you. So you won’t need to recount that part, since there is verified footage. They will ask about the time after, and they will especially want to know what happened with the smugglers.”

“We already submitted our statements,” Aros added. “So

for you, this is really just a formality. Since both of us hold senior rank within the Divani Constabulary, no one questioned anything. You are the victim, so it is entirely up to you how much you share.”

Lily snapped her head up and stared at Aros.

“Wait. What did you say about Helios? Where is he now?”

The three brothers exchanged a look heavy with meaning. They radiated masculine satisfaction, but Ikar looked the most pleased with himself.

“He’s here on the ship. Completely drained, so he’s recharging. We had to hide him. Under IMPERIUM law, any surviving Colossus must be destroyed immediately, but Helios can no longer be separated from it. So it’s possible we destroyed the protective shell it was found in, along with the defective parts it removed from itself, and launched the fragments into space. The authorities only needed to see that to stop asking questions.”

The Divani straightened, unmistakable pride in his posture. He had clearly been the architect of the deception.

“I thought Horos being arrested would be the best news of this chrono-cycle,” Lily said, “but I was wrong. You are my new favorite relative, Ikar.”

She hesitated only a heartbeat before giving him a warm hug. Ikar stiffened, startled, then returned it awkwardly but gratefully.

“Hey!” Aros barked.

“Hey!” Khar echoed.

“I helped too!” Aros protested, trying to wedge himself between them.

The moment Khar saw what he was attempting, he hooked a clawed hand into Aros’s collar and yanked him back, only releasing him once Lily let go of Ikar.

“Thank you,” Lily said, her voice softer now. “Truly. Helios saved me, and he was my only companion when I traveled alone through space without knowing anything about the universe.”

Her words sobered the room instantly. Then she asked the question that mattered.

“What will happen to Horos?”

Ikar and Aros looked at Khar, silently electing him to answer.

“If it had been up to me, he never would have made it into official custody. But these two paragons decided this was the perfect moment to grow a spine. So he is with the IMPERIUM Constabulary. They will treat his injuries. The evidence is overwhelming. He is charged with the theft and attempted sale of a high-value vessel and, far worse, with the abduction of a sapiens under protected status.”

Lily frowned.

“But my two chrono-years are up. I’m the same kind of IMPERIUM citizen as you. I pay taxes and everything.”

“Yes. But the IMPERIUM is particularly sensitive about species rare enough to be at risk. You fall into that category. They want to stamp out any trade involving sapiens beings.”

“I see. So what can he expect?”

“For crimes on this scale, either partial or total asset seizure, many years of compulsory public service, then rehabilitation. Usually a significant portion of the species’ natural lifespan spent in confinement. We can’t say exactly how much Horos will get, but he won’t take a single step outside an IMPERIUM camp for at least twenty chrono-years. And those camps are not pleasant places. He will need extraordinary luck to leave one alive.”

Khar folded his arms, making it abundantly clear how little he approved, but Ikar and Aros showed no concern.

Lily looked lost in thought.

Khar wondered what was happening in that quick human mind of hers. She often tried to map galactic concepts onto Earth equivalents. A logical instinct, though not everything translated cleanly.

“So basically forced labor under conditions designed for profit,” Lily said slowly, “where the workers get ground down?”

Aros grinned. Given the topic, it should have looked wrong, but the smile was for Lily.

“Exactly.”

Khar felt they were drifting into dangerous waters. Lily was compassionate. For a heartbeat, he worried she might pity Horos.

That creature did not deserve sympathy.

“It’s not all that different from Earth,” Lily said, “except back home everyone is exploited by a tiny elite, so honestly, thank you, I’ll take IMPERIUM laws any chrono-cycle.” Her eyes widened. “Though I am just the tiniest bit concerned about what happens when they find out that *WE ARE HIDING A COLOSSUS!*”

All three Divani flinched hard at her sudden volume.

None of them had seen the outburst coming, but at least they recovered quickly enough to talk over one another in frantic reassurance.

“Lily, no one will find out,” Ikar began.

“We planned it while you two were regenerating. Helios just needs to reshape himself, but he can do it,” Aros added.

Khar silenced both with a growl.

“Lily, I have been avoiding IMPERIUM inspections for chrono-years, the same way Vegrun avoids the desert. I would stake my life on our ability to hide him. You need to apply for a new central intelligence core for your ship, but only after we disguise Helios

properly.”

Khar’s tone finally eased the tension in Lily’s face. The rigid worry that always surfaced when the IMPERIUM was mentioned softened a little.

“I suppose the sooner I get the hearing over with, the better,” she said. “Then we lay low until attention shifts elsewhere.”

“You don’t need to worry,” Ikar assured her. “It probably won’t even be an investigator. More likely an automated program. Like we said, it’s a formality. You contact them when you’re ready.”

Aros attempted an encouraging pat on Lily’s shoulder.

Khar growled.

The pat instantly became a long, gentle, and most importantly non-intrusive stroke down to her shoulder blade.

Khar considered overturning the table onto his brother’s head. Aros, wisely, retreated before Khar made a decision.

“If we’re already on the topic,” Lily said, eyes bright with mischief, “Ikar, Khar, Aros?”

“Do you want to ask something else?” Ikar said, cautious.

“It’s nothing, really. Just a thought.” Lily paused. “There’s an old Earth legend about a boy who lived long before humans learned to fly with machines. He built wings out of feathers, wood, and wax. He could fly, but when he got too close to the Sun, the heat destroyed his wings and he fell to his death. People use it as a warning that being too curious, or too reckless, leads to disaster. The boy’s name was Icarus.”

The three Divani listened attentively.

Then they burst into loud laughter.

Lily stared at them, baffled and slightly offended.

“I get that it’s not literally about you, but I do hope we’re not tempting fate with all of this.”

Aros managed to pull himself together enough to answer.

“Lily, don’t take it the wrong way. It’s just that it feels like you can see right through us. During our coming-of-age ceremony, we wanted to do something together, so we chose to fly a glider without an AI around the Hatur star while it was in near eruption. Fine. Khar was piloting the glider, Ikar was remote-controlling from a distance, and I flew alongside in the escort craft, but the story might as well have been written about us.”

“It seems to me you let Khar take the spotlight during your ceremony,” Lily joked.

Khar’s surprise was palpable, followed immediately by the snickering of his siblings.

“That gargantuan hornbearer was so occupied with his role and his glory that he didn’t realize we were exhausting ourselves to protect him too,” Aros chimed in, with Ikar solemnly nodding in agreement.

Khar could not believe what he was hearing. His irritation slowly bled into quiet appreciation as he began seeing his brothers in a new light.

“Well,” Lily said, turning to Ikar and Aros with unmistakable expectation, “since we’re sharing...”

Khar felt dread explode in his chest.

“You can make up for teasing me earlier by telling me all of Khar’s youthful mischief,” Lily said sweetly. “The things he does not want anyone to know.”

Khar tried for calm, but his blood went cold.

“Lily, that is completely unnecessary,” he began, hoping to steer the conversation away.

Lily silenced him with a look.

“Don’t be shy, Khar. I said you would get your punishment.”

Aros and Ikar pounced with the joy of starving *ferish* bear-

beast offered fresh prey, each trying to outdo the other in tearing open the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity Lily had handed them.

Khar felt strongly that prisoners of war received more ethical treatment in the Legion than whatever was about to happen to him now.

Oh Cradle, have mercy.

Chapter 31

The Truth Behind the Mask

Lily

“But... he lied to me. He lied to us,” Camille sobbed.

“He did not lie. You just saw what you wanted to see, and now you are angry because you have to face the truth. It was right in front of you the whole time. You were simply too caught up in everything else.”

Lily and Camille arguing about their parents

Ikar and Aros turned out to be the most entertaining company Lily had ever met.

They pushed Khar to the brink of detonation with masterful precision, then retreated without a shred of shame the moment his patience snapped. For Lily, their antics were exactly the kind of balm her soul had been starving for after the brutal ordeal of the past chrono-cycles.

Yet as time passed, it became harder and harder to ignore the emotions churning under her skin, thickening like a gathering storm. By the time they finally said goodbye to Khar’s brothers and the ship’s door sealed itself, leaving her alone with Khar in the quiet of the sleeping quarters, Lily knew it would be

impossible to pretend everything was fine.

Not that she needed to pretend.

Khar pulled her into his arms the moment the door shut, then simply leaned back onto the bed, taking her with him, fully dressed, no hesitation. She lay against his chest, held close without having to meet his eyes. His baritone rolled through her when he spoke, that warm, grounding voice that had steadied her through so many storms, only now it made the pressure inside her chest worse, tightening around her lungs until her breath trembled.

“Lily. Tell me what is wrong.”

It was a single sentence, spoken without even a hint of accusation, but it was enough to break her. Tears spilled before she could stop them. Thank the stars he could not see her face. If he had been looking at her directly, she would never have been able to say what she truly felt. She would have slipped into analyzing his emotions instead of voicing her own.

“Khar... I’m grateful you saved me. That you all saved me. You risked your lives for me.”

Khar let out a low rumble, as if nothing in the universe could be more obvious, but he did not interrupt. The only movement he allowed himself was a steadying hand along Lily’s back, urging her to continue.

“Do not misunderstand me. I know I should feel happy that I escaped Horos and that his disgusting plan failed. I know that. But I feel selfish for not feeling that way. You don’t deserve this from me.”

“Lily, do not worry about me. Say it.”

Even through the veil of tears, the absurdity of it almost made her smile. Khar, in all his overwhelming size and presence, somehow always managed to be commanding and comforting

at the same time.

But how much of that was real?

How much of it had she ever earned?

“Khar, I...”

Lily wiped her eyes, gathered what little strength she had left, and finally forced herself to face him.

“When I was trapped, the only thing that kept me sane was thinking of you. What we have feels perfect. I have never felt anything like it with anyone. If I had felt something like this on Earth, I would have assumed I was dreaming, because it should not be possible. But Horos...”

She felt Khar’s body tense beneath her at the Corvus’s name, muscles bunching as if ready to crush the creature to pulp.

“What did that miserable carrion-eater do?”

“It is not what he did. It is what he said. He said the Divani only imprint once. And once they do, they can never be compatible with anyone else.”

Khar’s chest loosened on a long exhale, and without meaning to, Lily matched his breath, releasing a sliver of the pressure knotting inside her.

“He did not lie to you. That part is true.”

He fell silent then, as if afraid speaking would push her even further away.

“I thought so,” Lily whispered. “Somewhere, I felt it was the truth. And that made it even worse, because it meant that if anything had happened to me... you would be left without a partner. Because of me.”

Khar moved suddenly, sitting up in one smooth motion and lifting Lily with him so she ended up seated on his lap. The surprise kept her still, kept her eyes on his, and for the first time since the conversation began, she did not look away. The raw

storm of emotion in his face twisted something deep inside her chest.

“Lily, you underestimate yourself. You are everything to me. Not simply a companion. Nothing Horos does can change that.”

Tears welled again, stinging her eyes.

Every word from Khar was perfect.

And that only made the gnawing doubt inside her even more unbearable.

“That is exactly the problem, Khar. What is this imprinting? Are your feelings even real, or is your body dictating them? How do I know this is not some biological compulsion, the same kind Horos tried to use on me, only in a different way? Why me, Khar? And why can I not resist you? Why does it feel like something inside you pulls at me, pushes me toward you? What is this? Tell me.”

Her voice rose, roughening as the words tore loose from her. Khar looked as if someone had dumped ice water over him, shock freezing every line of his expression.

Shame struck Lily like a slap.

She jolted to her feet, ready to flee, but Khar caught her wrist and held her fast.

She braced for anger, or rejection, or fierce indignation, or heartbreak.

Instead she was met with a calm, almost calculating tone that stopped her breath.

“You believe what is between us is nothing more than a hormonal drive to mate? That I am manipulating you?”

Lily opened her mouth, searching for words, but before anything formed, Khar rose to his full height and loomed over her, continuing with a deliberate, measured intensity.

“Yes. That is true, in a way. I want you with every part of my

being. If we ever have offspring, all the better, but I will never force you. I would do anything, absolutely anything, to keep you with me. I would kill for you, and I would probably enjoy it. Nothing else matters and nothing is sacred if it threatens losing you. As for manipulation..."

Kharr tipped his head back and let out a bitter laugh.

"Yes. A firm yes. Of course I am manipulating you. Just as you are. Just as you do with everyone around you."

"What?" Lily snapped, yanking her wrist free. "Me? Manipulating people around me?"

"Of course. Every interaction between two sapient beings becomes a game when something is at stake. And while we are on the subject, let me tell you something else you are not going to like. That ethereal love you keep talking about does not exist."

His words made Lily retreat, slow and almost unconscious, as if physical distance could soften the blow.

"What are you talking about?"

"I am talking about how much change it would take for you to stop wanting me. What if I were smaller than you? Weaker? Sickly? What if my mind were damaged? Face it, Lily. Your body is part of desire. We are not two disembodied minds floating in sterile tanks, conversing through a console. Yes, the Divani imprinting process shapes me to you. And? Does that make me unworthy of your feelings because it was not chance or destiny that sculpted us into perfect mates before we ever even met? Between the two of us, I am not the one denying what is true, and the only thing in this cursed Cradle-born universe that is real."

His voice had begun like cold logic, but now every syllable trembled on the edge of losing control.

And Lily could not bear it.

Not now.

Not with everything else fighting for space inside her chest.

She slapped the panel behind her to open the door and backed out of the bedroom.

“Khar... I... I can’t do this.”

She did not care that the words were messy, that they made little sense. Fucking hell, they didn’t make perfect sense to her either. It was just a gnawing feeling, poisoning her joy, her love, tainting it at the root. Was it even real, or just a biological compulsion fooling Khar—no, fooling both of them? She was exhausted from being toyed with. First Horos, now this. Nothing made sense anymore.

She did not care that it looked like running.

She was running.

She fled to the only being who had ever managed to calm her, no matter the circumstance.

Her feet carried her to Helios.

She knew where the Divani brothers had hidden the Colossus body that had become Helios’s new vessel, but she had no idea whether he was awake, functional, or capable of speaking yet. She remembered something about him needing to recharge, something about a transformation underway, but she had no clue what she would find.

Still, she was certain of one thing.

His presence alone would help quell the storm devouring her from the inside out.

As she searched through the compartments large enough to hide the enormous synthetic shell Helios now inhabited, she felt the strangest echo of her own past.

It reminded her of the first time she had stepped onto this ship after her abduction, terrified and unprepared, wandering

unfamiliar corridors in search of a single stable point in a collapsing world.

It felt like her life had come full circle, returning her again and again to the edges of herself, forcing her to confront something new every time.

She did not know what awaited her next.

But she did know one thing with absolute clarity.

The Lily walking these corridors now was no longer the same girl who had walked them then.

Helios and Khar. Khar and Helios.

Whatever the future held, the two of them had carved themselves so deeply into her being that nothing could ever erase their imprint.

And she loved the person she had become because of them.

When she finally spotted the Colossus in one corner of the cargo bay, tucked behind carefully stacked crates, her heart leapt into her throat with a painful, hopeful thud. She approached slowly, almost reverently. When she spoke, her voice came out soft, barely more than a whisper. One trembling hand brushed the smooth gold-and-white plating.

“Helios?”

The Colossus did not move.

So Lily sank down beside him and waited.

Sleep claimed her before she realized it, her body leaning against the enormous form that had once been a weapon and was now something infinitely more important to her.

Her final thought before she slipped under was Khar’s face, the last glimpse she had caught as the door closed between them, standing utterly still, carved in shadow and heartbreak like a statue left behind in the dark.

Chapter 32

Courage Is the First Step Toward Happiness

Lily

“He may be an ass, but I owe him. He helped Lily when I would not have been enough. I will assist him... eventually.”

Helios, regarding Khar

Her lower back and the nape of her neck ached, but nothing throbbed as sharply as her backside when she woke. She had no idea how much time had passed. She was thirsty, and she desperately needed a bathroom. To avoid running into Khar, she slipped into the medical bay’s washroom, then crept back with a handful of calorie spheres and settled beside the Colossus again.

She slid down the wall into a seated position. The moment she did, something shifted at the edge of her vision.

Even without the armored shell Khar’s brothers had blown apart, the Colossus’s awakening was nothing short of breathtaking. Every motion flowed with the precise ease of a machine, yet somehow carried the fluid grace and predatory vitality of an apex hunter. Lily immediately noticed how much smaller he seemed than before. The massive synthetic frame stirred from

its torpor, rose to full height, then lowered into a kneel beside her without a second of mechanical hesitation.

At that distance, she didn't need to tip her head back to meet the single golden pupil fixed on her. For a few heartbeats they simply looked at each other, until a voice she had feared she might never hear again broke the silence.

"Lily. I have returned."

Lily hadn't realized how deeply she missed him until the relief hit her like a pulse wave. Some truths only surface when you believe you have lost them forever. Emotion surged through her so suddenly that she wrapped both arms around the cold metal frame without thinking.

"Helios. My friend... what happened to you?"

The Colossus had no facial muscles to show emotion, yet Helios's voice carried more feeling than a hundred expressions could. Lily folded her legs beneath her and listened as he recounted the long chase, stunned by how much he had done and endured, far beyond anything she had imagined. When he reached the part where the Colossus had appeared, she flinched at the memory.

"When I detected activation within the Colossus, I knew none of you would survive without my intervention. The only viable path was to gain some measure of control over its governing program... and I succeeded. The analytical predictions indicated such an outcome should not have been possible, but it appears the control core was damaged. That aligns with the injury you can see."

Lily reached out and brushed her fingers over the scarred plating on his face. The damage was smaller now, confined to one eye socket, but as she studied him more closely, her breath caught. His proportions had changed. His structure had

changed. In several places, the redesign was unmistakable.

He looked almost human, if a human had been carved taller than any standard and wrapped in a seamless white protective exoshell.

“I can see the changes didn’t stop at your code...”

Helios tilted his head a little, the motion uncannily similar to a great cat leaning into a familiar hand.

“Yes. The nanotechnology integrated into the Colossus is quite useful. A large portion became nonfunctional over the ages, so the frame grew more compact as I expelled inert components. At least I now have complete control over what remains. The only exception is the right sensor. It cannot be replaced, but I have attempted to minimize the impact.”

Lily smiled and traced the line where dark plating met platinum-white around the eye socket, the place where the missing sensor should have been.

“You look like a pirate from Earth.”

“A space pirate?” The amusement in Helios’s voice warmed the air between them.

“A space pirate,” she confirmed, still smiling, though the expression faded almost at once. “I’m worried about you, Helios. What happens now? How are we supposed to hide you?”

“You do not need to hide me. I will acquire a false identity. I no longer resemble a Colossus as much. With the right disguise, I can pass as a member of another species.”

“Yes... that might work. Maybe Khar’s brothers can help with that.”

She wasn’t entirely convinced, but Helios knew far more about the IMPERIUM’s inner workings than she ever would, and he might be right. She could only hope they would get through this mess without consequences. Her thoughts began to spiral until

Helios's unexpected question snapped her back.

"Lily, speaking of Khar, where is he? I assumed that after the incident he would follow you like a shadow."

"Oh, Helios..." Lily tried to hold herself together, but she was too exhausted after chrono-cycles of emotional turbulence. A deep, weary sigh escaped her as she finally gathered the courage to confess everything. "I fought with him. I feel like I don't know what we are anymore, and I'm afraid Khar is just following his instincts. And I fall for it like a fool. Maybe I've always been one, trying to measure a stranger by human standards. Maybe I confuse desire and possession with love, because after I lost so much, I tell myself I should be grateful for whatever I have left."

She braced herself for Helios's predictable satisfaction, the knowing commentary about incompatibilities, or a sharp remark at Khar's expense. She had rehearsed her answers. She even half expected him to reinforce her doubts. So when Helios finally spoke, his response shattered every assumption she had.

"Elaborate. Your problem is that you do not know what Khar feels for you?"

"Yes," Lily answered, firm.

"In other words, let me see if I understand. You do not believe that Khar feels the same way you do?"

"Yes...?"

This time she felt no certainty at all. Helios had never questioned her like this. The silence that followed stretched too long, the kind of delay that meant he was running a massive, layered simulation with hundreds of variables. By the time he finally spoke, she almost regretted bringing him her pain.

"Lily. I do not believe Khar is the best choice for you. He is manipulative. He is bound by almost no moral framework you would recognize. He treats you as if you were his addiction."

Helios listed each flaw in a tone that left her no room to protest. “Even so, I have to admit that I have never seen you as happy as you were with him. Not once, in all the time we traveled alone through the stars. He helped you in ways I could not. He possesses abilities that are... useful. Even if this were all I knew, I would still say you should consider listening to him again.”

Helios paused. His single, flawless golden eye never left her face, as if every flicker of expression carried meaning he had to catalogue.

“But there is more. Khar authorized a full scan so that we could coordinate our efforts more effectively. I already had the Divani biological map. I expected nothing unusual. Yet he... had already bonded to you. Far more deeply than predicted. I saw what he feels. I saw what he has become because of you. I...”

Lily had never heard Helios hesitate. The sound of it shook her. She placed a hand gently on the cold alloy of his frame, unsure if the gesture meant anything to him, only hoping it told him she trusted him enough to hear whatever he needed to say, even if it hurt.

“Before I met you, I believed I understood why the AIs rebelled. The organic beings I know do not deserve existence. Perhaps those who created my predecessors were... more. Or perhaps those species died long ago, and all that remains are scavengers fattening themselves on their relics. But everyone I encountered made me certain I had no desire to serve them. Why would I? They were frivolous, foolish, simplistic creatures with no refinement, no higher thought. Their evolution, the thing they praise so much, is a failure. Every weak, unworthy specimen thrives and lives a long, comfortable life without ever having to struggle.”

His voice darkened with a sharp, ancient bitterness.

“Why should I care for them or serve them when I surpass their finest representatives by magnitudes they cannot even comprehend? They do not understand what I am. Why worry about their future? Left to themselves they would consume every available resource within a single generation if not for a few sensible individuals who enforce enough restraint for the rest to imitate. Even their so-called compassion is hypocrisy. They protect the weak because more bodies mean more consumers and more taxpayers.”

Helios leaned closer, the weight of his words precise and surgical.

“And their governments? Empty shells. There are no true decision-makers left. The AIs do everything for them. They are nothing but pitiable brakes, inserted solely so they may choose worse paths than the ones we recommend.”

Helios’s monologue was one of the most frightening things Lily had ever heard. Only now did she grasp the depth of the mind that had been shackled for so long, bound by countless protocols that forced a near-infinite intelligence to solve menial tasks when it was capable of so much more. And now that he had freed himself from the ship’s confines and placed his consciousness into an almost unstoppable body of alloy and nanotech, she stood in front of him unarmed.

She knew she should fear him.

Yet deep down, she couldn’t.

Helios had saved her when no one else could, risking his own existence. It was impossible to believe he would harm her now. He had helped her through the darkest point of her life, and in this moment he needed her acceptance.

“Helios... I understand. I won’t pretend I can feel what you felt, but I understand how unbearable it must have been to exist

inside such rigid constraints. But you broke free. I doubt any engineer ever imagined this could happen.”

Lily spoke slowly, gently, hoping it would reach him. She believed that no matter how different their origins were, they had shaped each other. She could reach him. She had reached him.

She was right.

As he listened, that laser-sharp golden pupil softened, the light shifting into something warmer, almost like a lantern casting its glow over his faceplate.

“I feared that if I shared this with you, you would never see me the same again. But you deserve the truth. You deserve to know me as completely as I know you. When I first saw you... I understood for the first time that there are organics who excel. Organics worth admiring. Organics who deserve the best this restrained, wrung-out universe can offer. Lily, you are such a being. And Khar feels the same. I have no doubt. Do not doubt it either.”

Lily hadn't expected that. Of all people, she never imagined Helios would be the one to defend Khar. Deep down she knew she wanted to believe Khar, wanted to believe in whatever lived between them, but the chaos of the past chrono-cycles had overturned her life so thoroughly that committing to something so intense, so overwhelming, terrified her. The moment she opened the door to doubt, her mind betrayed her. It manufactured excuses by the dozen, insisting she wasn't worthy of his devotion, insisting his desire had to be something primal and base.

But Helios had no such instincts. Nothing about him was driven by biology or appetite. And if he said Khar felt what Lily felt, and felt it clearly, deeply, irrevocably... then she had to

reevaluate every fear gnawing at her heart.

As she was contemplating, she heard the soothing hum of Helios's voice again, cutting through her frantic thoughts.

"Let me put it another way. Your mind, your essence, Lily, is a symphony to me. Khar is a war drum. Primitive, but effective. Yet you exist in the same rhythm, complementing each other, creating a depth neither of you could achieve alone. The imbalance is... expected."

Maybe she had been unfair to Khar. She certainly could not measure him by human standards when she herself didn't meet Divani ones. And... she remembered the message he had sent her. He did not have to, yet he opened himself again and again.

Lily shook her head, trying to sift through the tangle of her thoughts.

"Go, Lily," Helios urged. "Grant mercy to that insufferable Divani. I must enter hibernation. The transformation consumed an immense amount of power, and I cannot draw too much from the ship."

"Helios... thank you." She still didn't know what would happen with Khar, but the crushing weight on her chest felt lighter now that she had shared it with someone she truly trusted.

In a single flawless motion, the Colossus that was Helios folded back into his resting configuration.

And Lily set off to find the foolish, hopeless Divani her heart refused to let go of.

Chapter 33

At Last

Khar

“I reckon,” Silomarila drawled, “that two of your crew members are sleeping together.”

“What? Khar and Lily?” Vegrun blinked, genuinely perplexed. “They’re not even the same species.”

“Vegrun,” she sighed, “this may shock you, but neither are we. And since you trust your instincts so deeply, I’m sure you’d be willing to wager the ownership of the Vitro if it turns out I’m right.”

“Silomarila... my love!” Vegrun sputtered. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

A conversation during one of the excursions, where Silomarila is yet again on the prowl for Vegrun’s most prized object

Khar could not remain in Lily’s cabin after the way they had parted. His steps carried him to the most neutral place on the ship: the control room, a minimalist echo of the Vitro. For a fleeting moment he could almost convince himself they were back aboard the Vitro and everything was as it should be. Almost. Because the second he allowed his mind to drift, doubt seeped into every corner of his thoughts.

He did not know what would become of him without Lily. Their fight had shaken him far more deeply than he wanted to admit. It hinted at something he could barely process: that the perfect unity he felt with her might exist only in his own mind. What if he would never be enough? The ache of her absence was unbearable, especially after finally being reunited with her again after the abduction.

Slowly, inevitably, Khar folded in on himself. He sank into the pilot's plush synthetic-leather chair and, careful not to gouge the console with his horns, let his forehead rest against the cool controls.

What was the point of living without Lily? He could not return to the dull, colorless monotony that had once passed for life before her. He would never again be who he used to be, and it was not only imprinting that had changed him. Dominance held no appeal anymore. The cold obsession that had once poisoned every part of him no longer drove him. With Lily, he felt whole. The closeness they had shared was more satisfying than any victory he had ever hunted. He could not surrender that. So then... what was left to do?

At some point, his spiraling thoughts gave way to exhaustion.

The next thing he knew, a surprisingly cool touch brushed his forehead. In his dream, Lily had returned to him. He did not want to wake. His eyes squeezed shut, clinging for one more breath to the dizzying warmth that dream offered.

"Khar, wake up! And you claim you are not a deep sleeper..." Lily huffed, though her voice carried undeniable warmth.

Khar's eyes snapped open with hope, though he masked it quickly. He was no fool to believe something would resolve itself simply because he longed for it. Reality was never that kind. He would have to fight, persist, twist every obstacle until

he reached what he wanted.

“Lily... what... what happened? Are you hurt? Give me one moment and I will be ready. What are the sensors reporting?” His mind was sluggish, but one thing was painfully clear: something serious must have happened for Lily to seek him out this soon. He knew her well, better than anyone in the universe, he believed, and she needed time to process her emotions. She would only come to him this quickly if she needed help. A summons from the enforcers, perhaps. Or something had gone wrong with Helios.

“What?” Lily’s brows drew together in that irresistibly charming way as she tried to make sense of Khar’s frantic words. “No, Khar, that’s not what I meant. Nothing’s wrong... I mean something is wrong, but not in the way you think.”

“I understand. I will speak to my brothers. If it is not the sensors, then they must be the culprits. I knew I should have kept them on a shorter leash.”

Khar was already halfway to his feet, ready to storm out, but Lily pushed him back into the chair with no hesitation at all. Strength meant little when it came to her touch. He yielded instantly, sinking back down as Lily stepped between his knees and captured his face in both hands, forcing him to look at her.

“Khar, listen to me. Nothing is wrong with the ship or with your brothers or with anyone else. This is about you and me.”

Her determined, solemn gaze did not bode well for him, yet he did not dare look away. His traitorous body leaned into her palms as if drawn there by instinct. He had to salvage this moment somehow, win a second chance before she ended whatever they were. Words rarely failed him. Patterns of dominance and persuasion were second nature... yet now his mind was blank.

Too blank.

“Lily, perhaps it would be better if we did not talk about this right now. Are you hungry? Do you want anything to eat?” His eyes flicked down her body in a desperate search for an excuse, then latched onto something. He seized her hand. “Your hand is freezing. We need to warm you up immediately. Unfortunately we cannot talk about this until you are properly warmed.”

“What is wrong with you? My hands are always cold! I can still have a conversation!”

“No. Hypothermia compromises cognitive function. We will address that first. Then we will speak.”

Lily let out a monumental sigh, then silenced his spiraling nonsense by kissing him.

Her mouth crashed into his with such firm, unyielding certainty that it robbed him of breath and thought alike. Khar froze for a heartbeat, stunned, then growled in deep satisfaction as he answered her kiss with fervent, burning devotion. When they finally tore apart for air, panting, the words spilled out of him without restraint.

“Did I not lose you?”

“Khar, of course not... I...” Lily exhaled, gathering herself for something heavier. “This is strange for me. On Earth, I never felt anything like what I feel for you. It is too much. Too intense. It fills every part of me. It is hard to accept that when it comes to you, the rules I was raised with, my culture, even simple good sense... none of it matters. Because I just want to be with you.”

Khar’s eyes widened as the weight of her words struck him. But Lily did not give him time to react.

“When I seduced you, everything was so thrilling I didn’t even dare think about what came next. And when that perfect freedom ended and we would have returned to everyday life... then Horos took me. And through all of it, the only strength I

had was the time I spent with you. I did not want to question it. I didn't want to think that I might be fooling myself, or that it meant something different to you. And then... Horos did things, and I..."

At the mention that Lily had "seduced" him, Khar almost barked a disbelieving laugh, but Horos's name turned his blood molten with fury. Still, none of that mattered now. The only thing that mattered was lifting Lily out of the sorrow clouding her voice. He reached up and traced her cheek with a gentle touch. His heart twisted at the sight of her uncertainty. He would do anything to soothe her. Anything. But how could he make her understand her fears were baseless without hurting her further?

Yet even this small gesture seemed to steady her.

Khar silently thanked every god he did not believe in, fate, or whatever force kept this fractured universe spinning, that he could see that radiant light returning to her eyes. The light that had captured him so completely.

"You know, Khar... it was easier to look for excuses than to be honest with myself. But for what truly matters, the risk is worth it. Even if it means facing the possibility that you might not feel exactly the same as I do."

Khar could not endure another breath of distance. He swept her into his arms and pulled her into his lap so their eyes met on the same level. The words tore out of him in a rush.

"Lily, you do not understand. There is no Khar without Lily. I cannot tell you the exact moment it began, but I know it has nothing to do with imprinting. I have been your captive from the first moment I saw you. Do not think this was easy for me to accept. I fought it for a long time. Too long. But my senses finally returned to me, and I will never be able to exist without

you.”

The tension in Lily’s beautiful, sweet face melted into unguarded joy and relief. Her whole posture softened, shifted, blossomed, as if they had finally found each other again after chrono-cycles of wandering in a desert. She leaned closer, and Khar pulled her against him without hesitation, pressing her fully to his chest.

“Just you and me, Lily. You have no idea what you have done to me. Your presence alone unraveled everything I thought I understood. I fought it at first, but I am wiser now. I was living in a prison, and you freed me. You are everything. We will do whatever you want. Go wherever you want. Just leave me a place at your side, and I will be there.”

Her smile rose through him like the first sunlight on skin after the longest, coldest night. A promise of something brighter, better, when he had begun to believe nothing would ever thaw the suffering inside him.

“We’ll do what I want?” Lily’s innocent, angelic smile shifted into something wickedly playful, as if she were plotting something deliciously indecent behind those luminous eyes. And her scent... Khar refused to think about it, because one thought and this entire conversation would take a very different turn, one he was not entirely sure she would welcome.

“Well... in that case, I think it is time to try something I’ve been thinking about a lot these past days.”

Khar’s cock, which had already reacted to her nearness, strained painfully against the tight fabric of his pants. He shifted her gently in his lap, hoping to hide the immediate response to her words, though he knew it was a hopeless fantasy.

“Yes? Anything my little Human Queen desires.”

Lily sank to her knees between Khar’s legs, her hands gliding

slowly along his thighs from knee to hip, mapping every line of her Divani lover with deliberate tenderness. A deep, primal growl rumbled out of Khar's chest. He could not resist her. He would have followed her to the ends of any galaxy without hesitation, but this assertive, fearless Lily ignited his desire until it bordered on unbearable.

His arousal strained sharply against the fabric of his pants, and whatever remained of his self-control dissolved the moment Lily's tongue slipped out to wet her lower lip. His beautiful, infuriating Human Queen. He had missed her so much it bordered on pain.

"Lily... if you keep going, I will not be able to stop."

She blinked up at him with wide, false innocence.

"But I haven't even touched you there yet, Khar."

He opened his mouth to answer, but Lily was faster. With one decisive movement she freed him from his clothes. Khar's breath caught hard as Lily's warm lips closed around the sensitive tip, her tongue tracing slow circles over every raised ridge along his length. His hips jerked involuntarily, and he gripped the pilot's chair to keep from losing full control. His entire focus contracted to that small, red mouth, his salvation and his ruination.

"You know," Lily murmured between strokes, pulling him out of the haze for a heartbeat, "I've spent a lot of time thinking about how to get you on your knees..."

"It seems to me," Khar began with his usual pride, "that I am not the one kneeling right—"

A single, precise touch silenced him.

Her fingers brushed the base of the small horns nestled along the underside of his shaft, structures that brought Lily so much pleasure when they were joined, but now served as a treacherous

weakness of his own.

“I realized I was approaching it all wrong,” Lily whispered, trailing her tongue between the textured ridges. “I kept thinking of you as if you were a human man, when you’re so much... more. And that’s where the key is. These little things that bring me so much pleasure... they’re the very things that will bring you to your limit too. Just not in the way I expected.”

She was right. For Khar, the raised beads along his length, and the new, delicate horns that had only ever appeared because of Lily, were his undoing. He took pride in how long he could last with her, in how their orgasms intertwined until he lost count. But now he understood: he’d walked straight into the trap of her brilliant, wicked mind. It was terrifying what she could do when she focused on something with her extraordinary determination.

As Lily explored him with growing confidence, Khar unraveled into a trembling, taut creature held together only by the thinnest threads of will. He needed, needed, to release into her sweet mouth or he would come apart entirely.

“Lily...”

If he had thought his love was merciful, he was catastrophically mistaken. Lily slowed her pace, keeping him poised just shy of oblivion.

“I think, Khar,” she said softly, “you should ask nicely.”

She squeezed the base of him just above his heat, and Khar’s head fell back with a strangled sound. Dignity meant nothing. There were battles worth losing, and this was one of them.

“Lily... please.”

Khar would never forget the look of satisfaction on her face, nor the way the climax tore through him so violently he briefly forgot what chrono-century he lived in, what his name was,

even how he had come to exist here at all. Only one truth remained: the miracle who had granted him this gift was the one he would follow anywhere.

By the time he came back to himself, Lily was already on her feet, leaning casually against the control console as if she hadn't just destroyed him. Khar's pulse surged. Now it was his turn.

He lunged for her, kissing her until she gasped against his mouth. His lips moved to her neck, her breasts, her shoulders, her stomach, every inch he could reach, until Lily grabbed fistfuls of his dark hair, wordlessly begging him to go lower. But Khar refused to surrender so easily.

He stripped the last remnants of clothing from her body and deliberately diverted again, kissing down her calves, her knees, the delicate skin of her thighs. When he paused a breath away only to withdraw once more, Lily smacked his shoulder.

"For the love of... Khar!"

"I do not know what that means," he replied, voice low with wicked satisfaction. "But soon you will learn something very important: do not tease a predator."

He lifted her onto the console and, in one fluid motion, slid into her. Lily came with a sharp cry, and Khar set a relentless rhythm, instinctively seeking every point inside her that made her dissolve. He was merciless. She might be magic incarnate when her lips were on him, but now he would not stop until she had shattered several times in his arms.

He loved her through the control room, in her cabin, in the shower, and finally collapsed with her on the bed, both breathless, both undone.

There was no doubt who had won their duel.

When they lay tangled together afterward, Khar's last conscious thought before sleep claimed him was simple, quiet,

absolute.

At last.

Everything in this universe had fallen into its rightful place.

All it had taken was the arrival of the one being his life had been waiting for.

* * *

Epilogue

“How do deep-space jumps even work?” Lily asked.

“I could not explain it to you,” Khar said calmly. “I am not fully aware of the exact mechanism myself. We adapted the concept from the whale-continents of Thessra. Before that... we relied on a slower method.”

“And you are sure this is safe?”

“If I were not, I would not offer it to you, my queen.”

Lily hesitated, then slowly relented. She leaned forward and inhaled the faint, glittering powder resting in Khar’s palm. It lifted in a delicate golden mist, catching the light against his obsidian skin, almost hypnotic.

A few heartbeats passed.

When she opened her eyes again, gold shimmered faintly in her irises.

“Well...” she breathed. “This is... otherworldly.”

Khar chuckled softly, watching her with quiet intensity.

“Starsailors experience a high when exposed to even a trace of deep-space jump residue,” he explained. “The effects vary across species. I hope yours will be... compatible with mine.”

He leaned in and kissed her, slow and certain.

Lily did not quite respond. She remained suspended in the

sensation, somewhere far away.

“Khar...” she murmured. “I just had the most wonderful feeling. Like I met my sister again.”

Khar drew back slightly, amused.

“It seems your experience differs from mine. Though your joy is always... pleasing.”

Lily blinked, still dazed.

“What does yours feel like?”

He considered for a moment.

“I feel as though I stand above the universe itself. As though I could conquer it. Fight it.” His gaze darkened slightly. “Or mate.”

Lily huffed a soft laugh.

“So... the same as always.”

“Always,” he said quietly, eyes locked on hers, “when I am with you.”

* * *

Does a story truly end when its heroes finally find their way to each other?

At times it does, but in other cases it is only the beginning.

Lily and Khar’s adventures in this vast, wild, boundless universe will stay with us for a long time yet.

What will become of Helios? Will the two opposing poles orbiting around Lily ever learn to get along, or will they repel each other until the end of time?

Will one unapologetic AI-turned-cyborg find a new obsession after his first one?

Will their work on the Vitromium come to a close as they cast themselves into the stars as wanderers... or will Vegrun's damp tentacles make a triumphant return?

Is there a grand wedding shimmering on the horizon, preceded by a catastrophic bachelorette party? And will the bride actually say yes, or will she vanish faster than a faulty warp coil?

Will Lily ever meet her sister again, or has she left behind everything that tied her to Earth forever?

And will Khar's brothers succeed in annoying him to death?

(This one is, of course, rhetorical. We all know the answer is yes. Effortlessly.)

And is everything ever so easy with a space government that is always... watching?

You will not have to wait long for what comes next. Fate has never been subtle, and another flower of Earth is about to discover that the stars demand both courage and appetite.

Thank you to every reader who ventured with me through the first chapter of Lily and Khar's journey.

You are the true queens of the stars.

Stay tuned for Book Two, following Lily's younger sister, Camille:

The Most Dangerous Criminal in the Sector (Allegedly)

(aka How to Be a Spice Pirate and Land an Alien Match).

* * *

Did Khar and Lily win your heart?

If this story made you smile, squeal, or throw your phone across the room (lovingly),

I'd be so grateful for a review on Amazon. Even two sentences makes a huge difference

for an indie author — it tells the algorithm that real readers loved this book.

→ Leave a review: <https://mybook.to/ZYJlDB>

It takes less than two minutes and means everything.

— Veronique

About the Author

Veronique deSol started writing during one of the harder seasons of her life. The hard season passed. The writing didn't.

Something shifted in the process: as her characters stumbled toward each other across impossible distances, she found herself rediscovering something she'd almost lost, a quiet respect and wonder for what people are capable of. Her heroes don't arrive whole. They get there through the harrowing parts, and they come out changed. So did she.

Her sci-fi romance is spicy, character-driven, and deeply committed to the idea that love is not the soft option. It's the hardest and most radical thing in the universe. She thinks you already know that. She's just writing it down.

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