

**Exodus Arcon**

**Part Three**

**By Janice Seagraves**



**The start of a new SF series**

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## **Cast of Characters:**

**Aziza Starstrider:** Female from planet Arcon. Mated to Keefe, Prime pro tem and heir to Prime Ynyr.

**Blade:** A military male from Arcon and twin brother to Keefe. Podling to Keefe and Lug. Brother to Paz, Dar and Dab.

**Keefe Starstrider:** Male from planet Arcon. Mated to Aziza. Born of the same pod (all males are born in a set of triplets called a pod, but sometimes two will be identical twins). Keefe is an identical twin to Blade and podling or pod-brothers to both Blade and Lug.

**Laski:** The head medic on Arcon Ship One.

**Paz:** A young Arcon male who will be a scientist someday. Son to Prime Ynyr and youngest brother to Keefe, Lug and Blade. His podlings are Dar and Dab.

**Prime Ynyr Catchclaw:** The leader of the Arcons and mother to Keefe, Blade, Lug, Paz, Dar and Dab.

**The Mother:** The living Goddess of the Arcons. She's a cat like being who can change shape at will.

**Ynyr's mates:** They are also the fathers to Keefe, Blade, Lug, Paz, Dar and Dab.

**First mate:** Lim, the warrior and body guard.

**Second mate:** Neron, the scientist.

**Third mate:** Xin, Ynyr's youngest mate and domestic.

### **Shadow Warriors:**

**Dirk:** leader of the shadow warriors

**Pierce and Steel:** shadow warriors

**Rod:** the Punisher

### **A brief primer on Arcon slang:**

**Domestic:** A mated male (or just one who is hopefully waiting until the female wants him) who works inside the home.

**Mate or mates:** domestic partners or poly groups. Arcon females are the leaders of their families. Since it takes three males to impregnate one female, the females can have up to three male mates.

**Pod:** three males born at the same time like triplets'.

**Podlings:** What Arcon parents call their sons, or an affectionate term the brothers born at the same time or pods call each other.

## Chapter One

Head medic Laski stood in front of the desk of their newly elected leader, Prime Styr. The Arcons' first ever male Prime. Looming next to Laski with his hands clutched behind his back in a military stance was the warrior, Blade. Both wore the silver ships jumpsuits, Blade's had the bands that indicated his military and mated status, while Laski's clothing also had the mated stripe he possessed a red band that meant he was a medic.

Laski felt small next to the larger male, and wondered why they were both summoned. *What does Blade have to do with me? I've only met the male once.*

The Prime looked up from the computer screen. "We have a situation." He tapped the screen. "Our delegates that went down to Earth have all collapsed on the tarmac."

"What happened?" *Our people are down there without even one medic to look after them. What was the prime thinking?* Laski took two steps forward, heart thundering in his chest. He tried to look at the screen to see what the Prime viewed, but it was at a wrong angle.

The Prime glared at him, until he took a step back. "The humans have rushed them to one of their medical centers. I don't trust these humans, so I'm sending you down to Earth."

"Me, sir?" *Goddess help me, a trip down to Earth.* Laski swallowed hard as his insides filled with ice. Being a medic, he knew how dangerous both space and air travel were, unfortunately, he might be getting both. He stood straighter. *My patients come first, wherever they are.*

The Prime leaned back in his chair, lacing his fingers together over his robes of office and his small round belly. Laski wondered if their highest ranking male might be receiving more than the usual ration of food.

"Our delegates are ill. If they continue to be sick, then they can't negotiate with the Earth. With our food stores low, the rest of our people on the ships will starve to death in just a few weeks." The Prime took a deep breath. "This is a vital mission. This isn't a request, Laski, it's an order. You're to get our delegates well and back to work. I'm sending Blade as your bodyguard."

Laski cringed. Of all the males to be stuck with, it had to be Blade. He saw how the warrior tormented his podling and co-mate, Keefe. The male respected no one.

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An hour later, Laski found himself staring out the window at the Earth rushing up at them. It's a deep gravity well they were falling into, and it made him nauseous. The two pilots, Jet and

Ace, seen through the open door of the shuttle cockpit, seemed to have it all under control. *Why doesn't that reassure me?*

“What’s the matter, Doctor? You look green.”

Laski shot Blade a dirty look. Why the Prime had chosen him of all Arcons to be his bodyguard, was beyond him. A military male like Blade shouldn’t even be here, let alone accompany him down to the planet. He didn’t for a second believe he’d been mated. He smelled a lie there.

“I’m fine,” Laski snapped. If his mate was here, then he would have held her hand and pretend to be brave for her. Without her, he hoped he didn’t embarrass himself in front of his bodyguard.

“Liar.” Blade passed him a small bag.

“What the—” Laski glared at the bag, “a barf bag?”

“You look as if you could use it, doctor.”

“I don’t,” he lied again. “Why are you calling me doctor? Only the females can be doctors.”

“If you notice we are rather short of females at the moment. You’re the closet thing our people have to a doctor, so you may as well get used to the title.”

“Humph, I don’t like it. I don’t have the education.”

“From what I understand, you do.”

Laski couldn’t argue with him. He’d taken the same courses and done the same work. In fact, he’d taken over many times in the operating room, and didn’t just close a patient as his mate wrote in her reports. He was a good medic and proud of it. His mate knew it too.

Tanya, his chest hurt when he thought of her. Laski missed his mate with every fiber of his being. He didn’t dare mourn her as the others did their mates, not with all her responsibilities which were now his. So he held it all in.

“Maybe there’s something in there to help you?” Blade pointed at the medical kit Laski clutched against him.

“I didn’t think of that.” Laski opened the kit and found the hypo spray, inserted a cartridge into the chamber and pressed it against his neck. Instantly the injection did its job, and his poor stomach finally settled down.

“Look, there’s where we’ll be landing.” Blade pointed out the window.

It was the remains of a large extinct inland sea, and the only thing left was miles and miles of white salt that glistened in the last bit of light from the setting sun.

“Fasten your seat belts, it’ll be a bumpy landing,” called out one of the pilots.

Blade fastened his belt, but Laski hadn’t taken his off. He’d been too nervous. The pilots aligned the shuttle’s flight path to the flares that stretched out across the salt flats in straight, parallel lines. A noise alerted them to the landing gear lowering and locking into place.

Laski glanced out the window at the lights flickering past, it made him dizzy. He felt relief that the injection continued to work. A bump announcing that the wheels touched the salt landing strip, then another harder one that jarred his teeth. As the wheels took the weight of the craft, it rumbled and shook their seats.

*Thank the Goddess we’re down.* Laski touched the Mother’s mark on his chest.

The chute deployed, and they slowed. Only when they rushed up the end of the marked runway did the pilots’ apply the brakes.

“That went better than the last time,” Ace remarked to Jet.

“Thank the Mother.” Laski released a breath.

“Why, Laski, I’ve come to the conclusion you don’t like to fly.”

He snorted at Blade and unfastened his seatbelt.

Ace opened the door and lowered the steps. He leaned out the doorway to speak to the humans outside. “I’m sending down our head medic, and his bodyguard. We need to complete our checklist until our shuttle cools down, and then we’ll head back to our spaceship.”

After he received some kind of acknowledgment, Ace stepped back into the craft. “Laski, the humans are ready for you. They’ll be taking you the rest of the way by airplane.”

Laski stood. “Airplane?”

“The human’s air-transport,” Ace said.

“All right, thank you.” Laski shouldered his MED kit.

Blade stepped into the aisle, shouldering a large duffle bag and let Laski out. “Let me disembark first.”

“Why?”

“It’s my job to guard you.” Blade glanced out the doorway then trotted down the steps. He spoke briefly with someone. “Laski, you can come out now.”

Laski stepped out and stood gazing at all vehicles with flashing lights. A knot of people were held back by humans in uniform. A red, glowing orb dominated the western part of the sky. “Is that what I think it is?”

“Yes, that’s a sunset,” Blade said.

“I’ve never seen one before. It’s extremely pretty.” He stared too long at the orb and nearly missed his footing.

Blade took his arm to guide him the rest of the way down.

A uniformed human stood nearby. “Hello and welcome to Earth. I just told your bodyguard that I need to pat you down.”

Laski stepped back. *These humans are peculiar, and this one wants to touch me. We haven’t even been introduced.* “Whatever for?”

“I assume you were instructed not to bring down anything perishable or weapons of any kind?” The human glanced to his MED kit.

“Yes, but I’m a medic. I only have my MED kit with me. That’s all.” He opened the kit, and the human inspected its contents.

The human lifted an eyebrow. “Do I have your word that those items will not be used as weapons?”

“I’m a medic. I save lives. I don’t take them.” Laski shook his head. *Why would I want to hurt anyone, even a human?*

Blade turned to him. “Being patted down, doesn’t hurt and he’s very fast.”

“Very well.” Laski closed the kit and handed it to Blade. The human went behind him and pushed Laski’s arm up, then went over his body with quick pats and glides of the hand.

“All done, sir.” The human moved in front of him and nodded.

Blade handed Laski’s kit to him.

A group of uniformed humans stepped forward and did something odd with their hands. Laski wondered if humans were trying to hit themselves in the head. *What violent people these human are, why they even try to hurt themselves.*

One human wore a uniform that seemed more decorated than the rest, moved closer and smiled at him. “By the authorization of the president of the United States, I hereby welcome you to planet Earth.”

Laski gave him a quick head bow. “Uh, yeah, thanks, where are my patients?”

“We will take you to Edwards’ Air Force Base to catch a plane, which will take you directly to New York City.”

“Is this New York City where our people are being held?”

“It’s where the United Nation’s official headquarters is located, near where they, uh, collapsed. Your people are at a local hospital. Don’t be concerned. It is the best hospital our planet has to offer, and they are being well cared for.”

“For a human you mean?” Laski frowned.

“Of course,” the human said, and held out his hand, which had too many fingers. “I’m General Halverson, and you are?”

Blade gestured. “This is Dr. Laski. He isn’t a politician. Please forgive him if he is all business.” He bowed. “I’m his bodyguard, Blade.”

“Then, gentlemen, we’ll not waste any more of your time.” The general dropped his hand, and then nodded to another human who waved to someone behind them.

As lights came on in front of a vehicle, it slowly moved forward, crunching salt under its wheels. Little red, white and blue flags on all four corners streamed in the light breeze.

They got into the vehicle which smelled of rubber, oil and strongly of something Laski couldn’t identify, but the scent seemed to come from the seats.

“This is the president’s car,” said the general, as he sat facing them. “He sent it as a special loan for your trip to the air force base.”

“Tell him, thank you,” Laski muttered. He wondered how much longer he’d have to put up with this male. Only their new Prime was this puffed up with his own self-importance.

Two wheeled vehicles with a human perched on top escorted them, and cars followed with flashing lights, and sirens blasting. The knot of humans yelled at them as they went by. One held a sign that read; “Aliens go home.” Which Laski could read because of the learning device in the hibernation capsule that he slept in on the journey to Earth.

Right after they went by, there was a mad rush as the humans jumped into their vehicles giving chase.

“Those strange humans aren’t going to follow us, are they?” Laski glanced out the back window.

The human waved a dismissive hand. “Don’t concern yourself with the reporters, doctor. They won’t be able to get into the air base.

“One human held an unfriendly sign,” Blade said.

Both the general’s shoulders went up then down. It seemed to be the human version of a shrug. “A nut. Nothing to worry about.”

The vehicle drove down a rutted trail cut in the salt, and then its tires hit the black pavement with a curious broken orange line down the middle. The noise level instantly dropped. Cars passed them going the other way and seemed to avoid the line. *If they crossed the paint mark, would it blow up?*

It wasn’t long until they were at a gate which blocked their path. “This is it, gentlemen, Edwards Air Force Base.”

A guard walked a four legged beast around the car, and the other one checked on the driver’s credentials, and then looked in at them. His gaze went over to the general, but when he met Laski glance his eyes widened and he jumped.

Laski frowned at the human. *He reacts as if I might hurt him, and I’ve never raised a hand to anyone in my life.*

The male looked back to the general and did the thing with his hand, which Laski realized was a salute. “You can go in, sir.”

“As you can see, gentlemen, our security is tight,” the general said with his chest puffed out.

The gate opened, and they drove through. It seemed quiet from what Laski could tell. Not a lot of activity going on, but it could be the lateness of the hour. The sun had fully set. They soon drove onto a long, wide road where winged aircraft set in rows. They parked near a large aircraft with its engines running, and a ramp set against it.

“This is Air Force One, on loan from the president. This is where I leave you. The president’s aide, Mr. Jones will accompany you through the rest of the journey. Good trip, gentlemen.”

Blade pounded his chest over his heart with a clenched fist and bowed his head.

Laski muttered, “Thank you.”

The driver opened the door for them. Blade slid out first, then looked in to nod a Laski.

Laski slung his medical kit over his shoulder and exited.

A dark haired human shouted to be heard over the loud sounds of jet engines revving up, “Hello, gentlemen, my name is Conrad Jones. I’ll be joining you for the last leg of your journey.”

“Why exactly do we need you?” Laski asked. “I’m just going to the hospital to take care of our people.”

“I’m your human liaison, or go between. I’ll make sure you get where you’re going, and intercede with any problems that might occur.” Conrad reached for the MED kit. “Can I take that?”

“No.” Laski moved to the side.

“Very well.” Conrad glanced to Blade. “Can I take that for you?” He gestured to the duffle bag.

Blade shifted the bag higher on his shoulder. “Thank you, but I can manage.”

“Then would you, gentlemen, follow me?” He led the way to the sleek, white and blue jet.

They walked up the ramp and into the cabin of the airplane.

Conrad led the way down a corridor and past several small rooms.

Laski looked around at the blue carpet, and the tan seats, and then stared at a round insignia of a bird with a hooked beak that seemed to be on nearly every wall. “Where are we going, exactly?”

“Right now, we’re in California. We’ll be flying across the country to the east coast to La Guardia Airport, and then we’ll drive to the Hospital. It’s one of the best hospitals we have in New York City. Your people are being well cared for.”

“We’ll see about that.” Laski sniffed. *What do these humans know about Arcons?*

A young female dressed in a dark blue outfit stepped forward to greet them. “Welcome to Air Force One, gentlemen. My name is Julia, and I’ll be your stewardess. Please be seated.” She gestured at four comfortable looking seats, two to either side of a table. “The pilots are going through their prep for the flight. It shouldn’t be much longer.”

“Thank you.” *She must be the female in charge of this plane.* Laski gave a deep bow and sat down. He glanced out the window at several humans wearing uniforms and helmets. *Blade should feel right at home here.*

Conrad took a seat across from him and nodded to the female.

Blade set the duffle bag against the wall then prowled around the aircraft looking for what Laski couldn't imagine. He came back and sat next to him. "The aircraft is secure."

A click and buzz sounded from the speakers. "This is the captain. I'd like to welcome our visitors from another planet. Please fasten your seatbelts as we will take off shortly."

They quickly clicked their belts in place. The jet engines revved to a higher noise, and the plane started to move. Laski gripped the arm rest, his stomach tightened, and he took several large gulps of air. The craft quickly picked up speed. In a couple of minutes, it was in the air and climbing. It wasn't until it leveled off, that Laski pulled his nails out of the cushion.

Julia, the stewardess, unfastened herself from a seat and approached them. She gave them a bright smile, with her blunt white human teeth. "Would you gentlemen like something to eat or drink?"

Laski's jaw dropped. *A female is asking me what I want.* "I-I-I—"

Blade placed two fingers under his chin and shut his mouth for him. "We'll both have water."

Laski shot him a narrow eyed glare. When she walked back with two bottles of cold waters he was speechless again.

"Thank you," Blade told her.

Julia set the water on the table in front them. "If you, gentlemen, would like anything else just let me know."

"All right." Laski swallowed hard. "I'll be glad to let you know what I want, as soon as I can think of something."

"Miss, I'll have an orange juice," Conrad told her.

"Okay, I'll bring it right out," she told him and disappeared into a small room.

"She's pretty, isn't she?" Conrad smiled.

"Yes," Laski nodded a little too rapidly and told himself to stop.

"What do your females look like?" Conrad asked.

Laski thought about his mate. "They're shorter than Julia and have lavender hair."

"Lots of curves," Blade added.

"Sounds nice," Conrad said.

The female walked back and handed Conrad a drink.

“Thank you, Miss.”

“If you gentlemen need anything else, I’ll be right over here.” She pointed to a seat along the opposite wall.

Conrad glanced back to Laski. “So all the females on your world look alike? Just as all you males look the same?”

“We don’t look alike.” Laski glanced at Blade, and his hair in a high ponytail. It was a sign his mate was a high ranking official. Laski’s queue was set low because when his mate was alive she’d been in service, just as he still was.

“Well, look at you both, white complexion, red eyes, white hair with green tips, and tall. You’re both what, well over six-feet?”

“I am six-foot-six, by your measurements,” Blade told him, sitting a little straighter. “Laski’s barely six-feet.”

“But, enough alike to be brothers?”

“With him?” Laski hooked a thumb at his bodyguard. *Who in their right mind would think I was related to Blade?*

“Yes.”

“Goddess, no. Blade has a bigger build, broader shoulders, and he’s more aggressive. I’m slimmer and trimmer, which suits my occupation of being a healer. I also have a mild manner.”

Blade snorted and rolled his eyes. “Sure.”

“Shut up, Blade. I’m making a point here.” Laski turned back to Conrad. “We’re not comparable at all.”

Conrad arched an eyebrow. “More aggressive?”

“Why yes, he’s military.” Laski turned down the corners of his mouth.

Conrad’s gaze swept over his bodyguard. “Blade, you’re in the army or something?”

Blade nodded. “We just call it the military, and there are also guards, bodyguards, and the Shadow Warriors.”

“Shadow Warriors?”

“Maybe we shouldn’t talk about this?” Laski glanced at Blade. “It’s probably classified information.”

“Point taken.” Blade picked up his bottle and took a long swallow.

“Good, when our Prime asks how that information got out, I’ll blame you.”

“Thanks, you're all heart.” Blade smirked.

## Chapter Two

The hours passed. Blade got up and prowled around the Air Force One again. He returned to his seat, and then gazed out the window at their shepherding silver fighter jets, silhouetted against the dark night sky. When he looked further out, stars could be seen overhead.

“Bored?” Conrad asked.

Blade rubbed his chin. “I have a question.”

“We got time. Ask away.” The human leaned back in his chair.

“What type of fuel do your air-transport use?” Blade asked.

“A special fuel made from petroleum.”

“Isn’t that a volatile fuel?” Blade’s eyes widened. *How am I to protect Laski from that?* “I saw on your television broadcast a plane such as this one taking out a whole building.”

“You’re talking about 9-11, aren’t you?” Conrad set his elbows on the table, his gaze intense. “Were you here at that time, lurking about in our solar system?”

“No, we weren’t. We watched the anniversary show. It was sad how many humans were lost. So you don’t have an inexhaustible fuel source?” Blade gazed out the window again.

“Nope, we don’t.” Conrad shook his head.

“You need something that’s more sustainable.”

“Do you have something in mind?” The human lifted an eyebrow.

“That’s up to our Prime.”

Conrad leaned forward. “You have something up there in your big spaceships, don’t you? What do your ships use for power?”

“It’s not up to me to share it.” *He’s asking about our matrix crystals, and the only place to mine them is back on Arcon. It wouldn’t do these humans any good.*

“Prime, that’s your leader right?”

“Yes.”

Conrad gazed up at the stars. “So you can watch our TV shows from orbit.”

“Yes.”

“Interesting.”

“You’re acting like a youngling, asking too many questions,” Laski snapped.

“It’s better than sitting and sulking.” Blade frowned.

Conrad smiled. “And you two say you’re not brothers?”

“We’re not,” Blade and Laski said at the same time.

Julia the stewardess stood. “Gentlemen. It’s late. Would you like dinner now?”

“No, I’m fine.” Blade smiled.

“What’s on the menu?” Conrad asked.

“Chicken or roast beef served with mashed potatoes, gravy, and mixed vegetables,” she recited.

Conrad rubbed his chin. “I’ll have the roast. The chicken always tastes like an old boot, and about as tough.”

“How about you, sir?” Julia asked Laski.

Laski sat straighter. “Oh, uh, same as Conrad I guess.”

“You’re risking human food?” Blade lifted an eyebrow ridge.

“I might as well find out if it’s palatable. We may be staying here for the next few days.”

Blade nodded. “True.”

In a few minutes, the female brought out a steaming tray and sat a plate in front of Laski and Conrad. It looked and smelled delicious.

“How is it?” Blade salivated, but didn’t want to take a chance on eating. He needed to stay alert in case Laski took ill from the food.

Laski took a bite and then lifted both eyebrow ridges. “Hmm. It’s good. You should try it.”

“No, I’ll wait and see how you do.” Blade watched him eat and his stomach growled.

The doctor ate about half of his meal, then he stopped with a hand to his stomach and his forehead furrowed. “Excuse me.”

Blade stood to let him out of the seat.

Laski jumped up to run to the bathroom, then came back and dropped into his seat. His complexion matched the green at the tips of his hair. He gestured to his plate. “Little human, can you take this, please.”

As he sat, Blade studied Laski, the sudden lunge for the bathroom concerned him, but if he said anything the doctor might bite his head off.

“I’m sorry, did it make you sick?” Julia picked up the dish.

Laski made a vague motion with his hand. “Yes, but it might be the flight. I get motion sickness.”

“He does,” Blade agreed, “you should have seen him on the flight in, I thought he would have become violently ill then.” *I better not eat. It still might be the food that made him sick.*

“Delayed reaction.” Laski let out a breath. “The injection I gave myself must have just worn off.”

“Do you want a lemon-lime soda and crackers or something else?” Julia asked.

“No, thank you.” Laski fumbled around in his MED kit and brought out a bottle containing a blue medicine. Pouring a cap full, he tossed it back.

“What’s that?” Conrad stared at the medication that had been kept in most homes on Arcon.

“Medicine.” Laski beetled his brow. “This helps settle the stomach.”

“I hope you feel better.” Conrad went back to his meal.

## Chapter Three

The speakers crackled. “This is the captain. Please fasten your seatbelts. We are over New York City and slowing our air speed as we prepare to land at La Guardia Air Port.”

Laski clicked his seat belts back into place, and then gripped the armrests. He tasted bile. Landings were worse than taking off. As the plane swept lower, they passed tall buildings that reached up from the Earth, and threatened to touch the sky. *These humans may be smaller than us, but they make up for it with these large structures.* He breathed deep, telling himself to relax.

Beside him, Blade wore earphones, hummed a little tune and tapped his toes.

“Can you please stop that?”

Blade took the earphone out. “Stop what?”

“Being so damned complacent,” Laski snapped.

Blade snorted. “Don’t be so tense, doctor. These humans are experienced at flying, or they wouldn’t have been assigned this task.”

“One mistake is all it takes for us to smash into one of their buildings.” Laski pointed out the window.

He gazed past Laski. “Those are unusually large structures. It should be fascinating to be on the ground looking up at them.”

“By the Mother.” Laski squeezed his eyes tight. “I’ll be glad when we are on the ground.”

“Dr. Laski, are you getting sick again?” Conrad asked.

“No-no, not this time, it’s just...” he trailed off, mashing his lips together. He didn’t want to admit his anxiety.

“He’s afraid to fly,” Blade finished for him.

Laski glared at his bodyguard. “I’m not afraid, it just makes me nervous.”

“It’s the same thing.”

“No, it isn’t.” *Blade doesn’t understand. He’s a military male and afraid of nothing.*

The wheels hit the tarmac and bounced, once, twice, and Laski gasped bracing himself against the seat cushions. Then they were down, and he let go of the breath he held.

“I’d have thought a race that crossed the vastness of space wouldn’t be afraid of anything,” Conrad commented with a wry glance at the medic.

As the plane taxied in, Laski wiped the perspiration off his face. “From what I understand, we have the same fears as you do.”

“Interesting.” Conrad nodded.

Laski could tell the human was filing that information away; probably to make a report to their president just as he must do with the Prime.

They finally rolled to a stop. The female led the way toward the exit of the airplane and opened the door. “We’re here, gentlemen. I hope your flight was a pleasant one.”

“It was fine, and thank you for being here to brighten the trip,” Conrad said and took her hand.

*Flattery and hand touching. Was he trying to woo her?* Laski adjusted his MED kit over his shoulder.

Julia took Blade’s hand next. “It was very nice meeting two aliens from another planet. I hope you enjoy our little world.”

“Thank you. From what I’ve seen so far, your planet has a lot to offer.” Blade smiled.

Laski moved up when Blade started down the ramp. “Nice meeting you,” he meant to say, but when Julia took his hand, he got tongue tied. Her scent was flowery and seemed to suit her, but he didn’t detect any natural pheromones. *An artificial scent, so they can’t produce their own?*

“I’m so sorry you got sick,” she said with a sincere expression on her pretty human face.

His cheeks heated up, and he could only nod at her.

“Are you all right?” Julia leaned toward him. “You’re turning purple.”

“The doctor is fine.” Blade looked through the doorway at them. “He just gets that way in front of females.”

“I do not,” Laski snapped, but then realized he was in front of a female and ducked his head. “Sorry. It’s just been so long since I was around any females, and you’re very pretty for a human.”

“Oh, a compliment, thank you,” Julia said and turned a lovely shade of pink. “That’s the first one I’ve gotten from an extraterrestrial.”

“Now you got her blushing.” Blade smirked.

“I better go,” Laski whispered.

She smiled. “It was nice meeting you.”

“Thank you, and you too.” Laski reluctantly let go of her hand, hitched the kit higher on his shoulder, and walked behind Blade down the ramp.

Laski squinted against the bright morning sunshine and took a deep breath, but got a lungful of jet exhaust, which made him cough. Their jet escorts flew overhead, heading Goddess knows where. The tarmac seemed boxed in by the sky high buildings. Nearby more planes were parked. A passenger jet passed nearby, gaining speed. He turned and watched it take to the air.

He shielded his eyes with a hand and noted a car waited for them. Another of their black vehicles with flags on all four corners. The windows were tinted so dark he couldn't see anyone inside. *Just how many cars does their president have?*

The driver held the door for them. Blade bent his tall, muscular frame, so he could look inside then nodded to Laski, and they both climbed in.

Conrad had already seated himself across from them. “It's just a short drive from here to the hospital, gentlemen.”

“Then I can attend my people?” Laski hunted through his kit for a dark pair of goggles. It was used for medical purposes, but would work just as well to protect his eyes from the bright sunlight.

“Yes, I'm sorry it's been a long flight, doctor.”

“If we had been allowed to land closer, then it wouldn't have taken so long.” Laski slipped on the goggles, but ground his teeth at the delay.

“Do you have a pair of those for me?” Blade asked, staring at his kit.

Laski sighed. *He needs to be able to see to protect me.* He dug out another pair. “Here.”

Conrad watched them with a narrowed gaze. “Your shuttle is similar to our retired space shuttles, and it needs a lot of room to maneuver. There was a fear that it might not be able to land at our airports.”

Laski fastened his seat belts. “You were afraid our shuttle might blow-up?”

“Yes, or run into a building.”

“Like your 9-11?” Blade asked, as he pulled on his goggles.

“Yes, we weren’t sure, you see. My apologies for the inconvenience. But your delegates did land at the salt flats, same as you did.”

“I can understand your concern, but it kept me from my patient hours longer than was necessary.” Laski adjusted the MED kit in his lap.

“I will pass on your concern to our president, so maybe in the future we’ll find an alternative landing site that is closer to New York City.”

“Yes, that will be much appreciated.” Laski gave a head bow.

The driver took them down a wide road where everyone drove much too fast, then across a bridge. Finally, they pulled into a parking lot behind a massive brick building.

Conrad nodded to the building. “This is the back entrance to the hospital. They know you’re coming.”

Blade stepped out first and looked around. He signaled for Laski to exit. Conrad got out with him.

Two males dressed in black stepped forward. They wore black glasses, so Laski couldn’t see their eyes and had something in their ears. *Are they deaf?*

“I’m Agent White and this is Agent Black,” said one of the males, while the other looked around with a hand that hovered near the opening of his jacket. “Mr. Jones, are these the alien doctors?”

Conrad gestured with one arm. “This is Dr. Laski, the Arcon doctor. The other one is his bodyguard, Blade.”

Agent White nodded. “Gentlemen, if you will follow us?”

Agent Black spoke into his wrist. “The Arcons are here.”

Laski followed behind their human escorts and walked beside Conrad. Blade brought up the rear, carrying the duffle bag.

“We have your people in the isolation ward,” Agent Black explained as they walked. “The reason for this was, of course, their safety. Second, because the doctors weren’t sure if what they have could be contagious to humans.”

“That was prudent,” Laski muttered, shortening his long-legged gait to the human’s shorter one. The condition he might find their people ate at him. He needed to see them soon, and wished he could hurry these humans along.

A slight smile curved Agent Black's lips. "Dr. Hope took one look at them, and said they had sunstroke."

"What is this, 'sunstroke'?" Laski frowned. *Why does this human find sunstroke humorous?*

"If you're out in the sun too long, it can make you sick."

"Your sun sounds dangerous."

"Sir, if you're careful, it isn't," was the quick reply.

They all filed into an elevator that clicked and clanked all the way up to the third floor. Laski clung to the handrail the whole time, his heart pounding hard against his ribs. The door slid open to an area which had a sharp tang of human air-sanitizer.

After a careful sniff, Laski decided it smelled odd, but it did the job well enough.

A second set of guards met them with a salute. They wore uniforms different from the military males at the air base.

Agent White looked to the new guards. "Corporal Smith, this is Dr. Laski, the Arcon Doctor, and his bodyguard, Blade."

"If you will come with us, gentlemen. Your people are just down the hall," said Corporal Smith.

The lights were dimmed here. Laski pulled off his goggles and smoothed down his long hair, and so did Blade.

Laski glanced back. The first set of guards stayed on the elevator, and the door closed. *How many guards were they likely to meet here?*

A third set of guards stood at either side of a door.

"Private Grey," said Corporal Smith. "This is the alien doctor, who was sent down to take care of their people."

"Welcome, Doctor." Both saluted. Private Grey opened the door for him.

"Finally." Laski hurried inside.

Three beds lined up against one side of the room with some sort of medical equipment attached to the wall behind each one. A shaded window allowed only a bit of morning sunlight in. Two of the three delegates reclined on the beds. One delegate appeared to be missing.

"Laski," said one, waving at him.

Laski marched over to examine his face, and then took his hand, turning it over. It was almost solid lavender. “Ambassador Treves, you’re burned. Who did this to you?”

“According to Dr. Hope, we’re sunburned.” Treves nodded to someone wearing a white coat, bent over the diplomat in a bed against the far wall.

He walked over and patted the human on the shoulder. “Excuse me, what are you doing to my patients?”

A human female turned, and pulled something out of her ears. “What? Oh, another one? You don’t look sick.” She touched his forehead.

His knees felt weak. He should have expected this. His own mate had been a doctor after all. The female’s light brown hair was neatly pulled back into a low ponytail, and highlights danced across the waves. Green and gold spokes circled the brown in her eyes. She smelled of mint and antiseptic soap. A heavenly combination.

She ran her hand down to his cheek, and his head swam. “You have no fever, but you’re turning purple. I need to get you in bed.”

Blade’s bark of laughter brought Laski out of his trance. Tanya wouldn’t approve of this alien female touching him. He swallowed hard thinking of his mate. “Excuse me,” he said again, “but what are you doing to my patients?”

“Your patients?” She pulled her hand off his head and glanced around at the diplomat.

“Dr. Hope.” Neal sat a little straighter. “Let me introduce you to Laski. Please forgive his abruptness’ but he is our head medic on Arcon One.”

“I just escorted him all the way down from our orbiting spaceships,” Blade added from where he still stood by the door.

“Oh, a fellow professional?” She grabbed Laski’s hand and shook it vigorously. “Thank God you’re here. Dr. Laski, is it? I’ve been working in the dark. Your physiology is quite a bit different than ours. It’ll be nice to have someone qualified to tell me the baseline for your people.”

“Uh?” Laski stared at his hand that she held, then back to her. He needed to say something but he couldn’t convince his mouth to move.

“Hey, let me get your blood pressure, that way I get a baseline.” The female doctor ripped off a cuff from Neal’s arm and wrapped it around Laski’s. It fit snugly. Dr. Hope inflated it manually by repeatedly pumping a rubber bulb until it squeezed his arm painfully tight. She had her earphones in again, and the round part she pressed against the inside of his elbow.

He opened his mouth to complain, but she slowly released the pressure in the cuff.

She looked at the dial, and frowned. “Your blood pressure is higher than the patients. Are you feeling all right, Doctor?”

“What is that thing?” Laski tore his gaze from Dr. Hope at direct it to the cuff.

“Pressure cuff. I can gauge your blood pressure with it.” She removed the device.

“If you’ll permit me, I’ll show you what I use.” Laski glanced at her.

“Sure.” She removed the listening device then flipped it over her head with a well practiced movement.

He set his MED kit on a hospital bed and opened it. From its section, he pulled out a vitals register device, called VRG. Took hold of Neal’s arm, and set the VRG on the inside of his wrist. “His blood pressure is slightly high, and so is his temperature.”

Dr. Hope gazed down at the VRG. “This doesn’t do me any good, it’s written in your language.”

“My apologies, but I don’t have one in English.” He frowned for a moment. “Take Blade’s blood pressure and temperature. He’s always calm.”

“Your name’s Blade?” Dr. Hope glanced over at his bodyguard.

Blade nodded.

“Can you come over here a moment?” She gestured to a chair. When he sat down, she placed the cuff around his arm. “Hmm, it is very low.” She turned back to Laski. “Is this normal for your species?”

Laski took Blade’s other arm and placed the VRG on the inside of his wrist. “It’s a little on the low side, but adequate baseline for an Arcon at rest.”

“Okay, that gives us one baseline.” She grabbed a clipboard, and started jotting down notes. Dr. Hope took something out of a box that hung from a strap on her shoulder. “Open.”

Blade obediently opened his mouth, and she shoved something under his tongue. “Mmmurf.”

“Don’t bite it, leave it in place.” When her box beeped, she took it out. “It’s a hundred and one degrees. Is that normal for you people?”

Laski checked the VRG. “It’s a little high, but he has exerted himself, and that brings up the temperature.”

“Exerted himself?”

“He was carrying our luggage.” Laski gestured toward the door, and to the duffle bag that sat next to it.

“How about you, were you carrying anything?”

“Only my MED kit.” Dr. Hope shoved the temperature taking device under his tongue.  
“Mmmurf?”

When the box beeped, she took it out. “It’s one hundred, is that normal?”

He set the VRG on his own wrist. “Yes, I have a normal temperature.”

“Good.” She went back to writing on her clipboard. “It’s higher than humans, ours is 98.2.”

“From what I’ve observed, Arcons have a larger and leaner body mass than your average human, and our world was cooler too.”

“It’s an adaptation to your planet then?” She arched an eyebrow.

“I suppose that’s true,” he admitted.

“Where on your planet did you live?”

“Underground. Our world had been bombarded by solar rays and the surface was unsafe.”

“That explains the intolerance to our sun.” Dr. Hope gazed from Laski to Blade. “You two are quite a pair. One has a normal temperature and high blood pressure. While the other has a high temperature and normal blood pressure.”

“We’re not related,” Laski said quickly to discourage her from that thought.

“I never thought you were. He’s taller than you with broader shoulders, and you have a slighter build. Blade’s calmer while you’re...”

“Yes?”

“More excitable, which might explain the blood pressure.” She nodded toward the cuff.

Blade snorted.

Laski glared at him. “Naff off.”

“See.” She smiled, showing even white teeth and her eyes twinkled with mischief.

The missing diplomat, Roth, walked out of the bathroom. Wearing a gown tied in the back and his long, skinny, white legs stuck out from the bottom of the pajama bottoms. He looked

around the room and stared at Laski. “Greetings, Laski, it's nice to see you finally made it. Do you have any of the blue stuff in your bag?”

Laski walked over to him. “What’s the matter, Roth?”

“I ate some of the human's food, and it was quite tasty. I was surprised. But I got queasy. It must be from the sunstroke.” He leaned a hip against the bed.

“Let me examine you.” Laski patted the mattress.

Roth hopped up on the bed, and Laski set the VRG on the inside of his arm. “Most of your readings are normal, but I can’t tell if you ingested any toxins. I’ll need to draw some blood.”

He withdrew another tool out of his kit and drew out a little blood from the inside of Roth’s elbow. Laski pushed the power button on the small computer built into the MED kit. When the screen blinked on, he opened a door on the side and inserted the blood.

“What is that?” Dr. Hope pointed toward the small device.

“This will scan his blood for toxins.”

“You’re worried that Roth was poisoned?” Her voice rose at the end as if she found his assumption offensive.

Laski kept his gaze on the tiny computer screen. “I’m concerned that your foodstuff might have substances, which we can’t digest.”

The computer beeped, and the screen filled with numbers, letters, and words in their language.

“What does it say?” She stared at the screen.

“Roth’s hemoglobin readings are normal,” Laski said. “There is no poison in his system.”

“Can I have the blue stuff now?” Roth rubbed his stomach.

“Yes.” Laski pulled out the blue bottle and poured out a cupful.

Roth quickly drank it down. “Ugh, never thought I’d miss the taste of that Mother awful stuff, but it does the job.”

“Better?” Dr. Hope asked.

“Yes.” Roth got back under the covers, and Laski helped him cover up.

The medic took out a special lotion, poured out a palm full, and rubbed it on Roth’s face and hands. The lotion was lavender in color then turned clear.

“What is that?” Dr. Hope asked.

“An unguent, for healing burns.”

She held out a cupped hand. “Let me have some, and I’ll do Neal.”

“Sure.” He gave her some, and she coated Neal’s face and hands. Laski briefly imagined her doing that to him. *Stop that. She is a professional, and so are you.*

## Chapter Four

“Is this suite to your satisfaction, gentlemen?” the hotel manager asked. He’d brought them in, through the underground parking to the hotel, where Conrad arranged for them to have an entire suite to themselves.

“Yes, it's quite adequate,” Laski replied while Blade checked every single room, closet and cubbyhole. “It’s about ten times bigger than my room aboard the ship.”

The manager smiled. “It’s the presidential suite. Only the finest for our visitors from another galaxy.”

“Um, thanks. Your president does get around.” *That human seems to have a vehicle in every city and a room in every hotel.* He set down the MED kit on a large round table, opened it and turned on the computer.

“Excuse me?” The manager lifted his eyebrows, an unusual feature that every human he met seemed to have.

Conrad walked over to the manager. “It’s very nice. I’m sure our visitors want to settle in. They’ve had a long trip.” He turned to Laski. “Gentlemen, anything you want will be billed to our state department, just use the phone to call it in.” He turned back to the manager. “Can you show me to my rooms?”

“Certainly, sir, right this way.” The manager turned to open the door.

“Before you go,” Blade popped out of the bathroom, “what’s the time limit on the showers?”

The manager stared. “There is no limit, sir. Please take as long as you need.”

Blade grinned, showing his sharp canines. “Good. I will enjoy the shower, enormously.”

“Very good, sir.” The manager shut the door behind him.

Laski glanced at Blade. “Do you think they locked us in?”

“Let me check.” Blade strode across the room and opened the door.

A human guard stepped in front of him. “Do you need anything, sir?”

Blade stared at the human. “No, I was just checking.”

“Checking for what, sir?” The guard seemed professionally polite, but he didn’t move.

“If the door was locked, and if we had a guard.”

“The door is locked when you shut it. It’ll take a key card to get in, sir. A guard will be stationed here for your entire stay.”

“Good to know, thank you.” Blade shut the door. “Apparently it’s locked to everyone but us.”

“We’re not being held prisoner?” Laski glanced at the door then Blade.

“No, but if we tried to go anywhere, then they might try to dissuade us. The human guard reacted remarkably fast.” Blade walked over to him.

Laski’s stomach muscles tightened. “Is that why there’s a guard out there?”

“Maybe, or it could be to protect us from other humans.” Blade nodded toward the TV. “I’ve watched their television and seen what they think would happen if aliens from another star came here. It wasn’t pleasant.”

“Humans are so violent.” Laski shook his head.

“This site is secure. Did you want to have a shower first?”

“No,” Laski said, turning back to his computer. “I have some work to do, and I need to contact our Prime.”

“Right.” Blade grabbed the duffel bag and headed into one of the bedrooms.

Laski was glad that there were two in this suite, so he wouldn’t be sharing a room with his bodyguard.

Blade strolled out a couple of minutes later. “I have your things, doctor. Should I leave them on your bed or do you want me to put them away for you?”

“Hmm?” Laski looked up at him from his computer, and waved a hand. “Whatever you want to do. I’m busy.”

“Have you contacted the ship yet?”

“Uh, no.”

“You should. There are fingers on the triggers of the big particle guns are probably getting tired by now.” He made a movement with his hand like he was holding a weapon.

“Oh yes, you’re right.” Laski’s eyes widened. He pulled out a small communication device and opened it.

Blade gave him a nod and headed into the bathroom.

Pushing a button on the communications unit, he said, "Hello. Arcon Ship One. This is Laski. Do you read?"

"Arcon One to Laski. We read you. Go ahead."

"Is the Prime there?"

"He just retired. However, I will record your report, and he will receive it when he is awake."

"Very well. After an extremely long flight in the human's primitive air-transport, we arrived in what the human's call New York City, and were taken to the diplomats. I've examined them, and they have burns on their faces and hands. They suffered from the effect of too much sunlight and are recovering."

"Too much sunlight?"

"The humans call it sunstroke. Apparently it is a common occurrence on this planet, and something we should be careful about when we're allowed to make this planet our home."

"Are the humans treating them well?"

"Yes. They have their own wing in the hospital, and they are in the care of a female doctor, named Hope."

"Female?" Captain Tug asked.

"Yes. Females can be doctors on this planet too." Laski's mind flashed to the lovely Dr. Hope, and couldn't wait to see her again.

"When will they be able to go back to work?"

Laski thought a moment before answering. "Hopefully, they'll be back to work within a few days."

"Do you recommend that we power down our big guns?"

"That would be prudent." Laski nodded, even though the Captain couldn't see. "The humans seem to be innocent of any wrong doing, but we have another problem."

"That is?"

"We can't digest the food on this planet." He glanced to his mini computer and started formulating some ideas on how to work on this new crisis. "I and one of the diplomats tried what they call a dinner, and became violently ill."

“That is a problem. We are running low on provisions, if we can’t eat the food on the planet we’ll starve.”

## Chapter Five

Blade scrubbed every part of his body at least twice, washed his hair more times than he normally did and wasted more water than was strictly necessary in the process. Stepping out, he looked around, and the only blower was high in the ceiling. It wouldn't dry him from up there. He grabbed a towel and used it on his skin. Then he pulled on his one piece space outfit and sealed it. Walking out of the bathroom, he retrieved his hair brush. Blade checked the rooms again, before taking a seat near Laski. He pulled his hair over his shoulder and brushed it.

Laski glared. "You're getting water all over everything."

"My apologies. Human bathrooms don't possess a blower."

"They don't?" Laski's gaze went to the bathroom. "How are we supposed to get dry?"

"The old fashioned way," he shrugged one shoulder rolling out, "with bath cloths."

"By the Mother. You're getting me wet." Laski marched into the bathroom and came back. Draping a towel on Blade's head, he briskly dried his long hair going from top to bottom. "You aren't used to your hair being this long, are you?"

"No." Blade tensed at being touched. "I used to wear it in a warrior's knot until we left Arcon. I smeared gel in it and then pulled it into a knot."

"You were mated just before boarding the ship?"

"Yes, I was." Blade's heart gave a painful lurch. He didn't want to talk about this with Laski. The male could find out the truth, and then it would be all over for him and Paz. He didn't fear death. But his youngest podling had a future, if he could keep their secret safe.

"You need to take better care of your hair."

"Why?" Blade glanced at the irate medic.

"It shows respect for your deceased mate."

"My podling told me that too." He stared at the floor. Had he said too much?

"I remember after the funeral you sat by Keefe's side, while he was in the infirmary."

"Yes." Blade thought of how hard his podling mourned his mate. *If Aziza had really been my mate too, would I mourn her as Keefe did?*

“You went to get the little one, Paz, his Mother pillow so he would calm down. That was kind. But the way you treated your podling Keefe, after he came to, wasn’t nice.” Laski tossed the towel onto a spare chair. “Give me the brush.”

Blade stiffened. *He’s right, but if I had given Keefe any sympathy he’d have gone all to pieces and we couldn’t afford that.* “I can manage without your help.”

“No, you can’t. I’m doing this to save my equipment, not due to any affection for you,” Laski snapped and thrust out his hand.

Blade passed the brush to him. Laski took it and started sectioning off his hair. He came to a snag and carefully worked it loose. The medic was surprisingly gentle for someone who didn’t like him.

Glancing at the table, Blade noticed an array of what smelled like food, lying around the computer. Some were dissected with thin slices lying on slides. He eyed a scalpel. *If I need a weapon to protect Laski, at least I know where to find one.*

“What are you doing with the food, Doctor?”

“There’s human foodstuff in that small refrigeration unit over there. I’m trying to find out what’s wrong with their food and why we can’t digest it.”

“Isn’t the ship going to send down supplies?” Blade’s stomach growled. He had been hungry for ages, but could work long hours without rations.

“They’re low on provisions, and can’t send anything.”

“We’re on our own?” Blade tensed, as his stomach applied an additional pinch to its demands.

“I mixed us a nutritional shake.” Laski pointed to a glass. “That one’s yours.”

“Thank you. I’m famished.” Blade reached over and picked it up. He took a sip, and the bland flavor filled his mouth, but did little to fill the empty hollow in his stomach. “What about our diplomats?”

“I left packages of this drink with Dr. Hope, and instructions on how to mix it. She said she’ll give it to them.”

“We need to get some rest.” Blade yawned. “We’ve been awake twenty-four hours straight.”

“I still have the food issue to sort out.” Laski started on another section of hair.

“You can’t, Doctor. You’re too tired to think.”

“You're right.” Laski drew in a deep breath. “I know the solution is here in front of me, but I just can't see it.”

“Another reason to rest. Your eyes are tired.”

“Probably so.” Laski got the last section of hair done. “Do you want it braided for bed?”

Blade glanced back at him over his shoulder. “I'm not a female.”

“I didn't say you were, but it might keep you from getting tangled in your own hair while you slumber.”

“I don't toss and turn. I sleep like a stone.”

“I'm done.” Laski handed the brush back to him.

Blade downed the rest of his drink and stood. Laski sat at his workstation, his chin on his hand, frowning at the computer.

“Aren't you going to bed?”

“Not just yet. I'm close to the answer. I can feel it.”

“All right.” Blade leaned against the wall with his arms folded over his chest.

Laski looked over at him, frowning. “You should go to bed, and not wait up for me.”

“Can't.”

“Why not?” Laski snapped.

“My job is to guard you. I can't do that from in there.” Blade nodded to the bedroom.

Laski straightened. “I'm not making your job easier by sitting up, am I?”

“No, you're not.”

The doctor looked over at the computer and slides. “This problem will still be here when I wake up.”

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Sunlight spilled across his face, and Laski rolled to get away from it. *That felt unusually warm.* He blinked up at the gap in the window coverings where the light shone through. *No wonder the sun burns our people. Our diplomats were right out in the middle of the day.*

He checked the clock. *I've been asleep for six hours.* Getting up, he headed to the bathroom to take a shower. Once dressed, he returned to the computer. *The answer is here. I just know it.*

Blade walked out of his bedroom, yawned and stretched. “By the Mother, the bed was soft.”

“Did you sleep well?”

“Indeed I did, and you?”

“Not really,” Laski said, glancing at him. “I kept thinking I’m overlooking something.”

“You’ll figure it out.” Blade went to the side of the large window and pulled the curtain to slightly open to peer out.

“What are you looking for?”

“Snipers. If they’re out there, their scopes will reflect in the sunlight.”

Laski tensed. “See anything out there?”

“Just far viewing lenses. These humans are very curious.”

“No snipers?”

“Not that I can tell.” Blade let the curtain fall back. “Any nutritional shake left?”

“You’re hungry already?”

“Yes, it wasn’t much nourishment for yesterday.”

“No, I suppose it wasn’t.” Laski pulled out a couple of packages, and got two glasses from near the sink that he filled with a bottle of water from the small cooling unit. Then he dumped in the packages, mixing them carefully. He handed one to Blade.

“Thanks, at least we can drink the water here.” Blade took a sip.

Laski picked up his glass. “Don’t be too sure about that.”

“What do you mean?” Blade frowned into his drink.

“I tested the faucet water, and it’s full of potentially harmful bacteria. I also tested the bottled water that I used to mix the drinks. It is safe.” Laski down half his protein drink.

“Good.” Blade walked over to the TV and turned it on. He flipped through the channels. Screams, cries, yelling or loud popping noises echoed in the living room.

Laski flinched at the loud noise and glared at his bodyguard. “Can you turn that down? I can’t hear myself think.”

The volume lowered. “Sorry, Doctor, I was trying to find the Miz Fixit show.”

“What is that?”

“A lovely young redheaded human who demonstrates how to fix or make things. She’s working on a backyard garden this week, and I wanted to view it.”

“I never did ask how you view human broadcasts on-board the ship?” Laski frowned.

“My youngest podling, Paz, has adapted one of the viewers to pick up Earth signals. There are several fascinating programs. Miz Fixit has become a favorite of mine, my podlings, and several others who watch with us.”

“You’re picking up odd habits from the humans, and you just got here yesterday.” Laski turned back to his computer. “I need to go back to the hospital, and speak with Dr. Hope again.”

“You like her, don’t you?” Blade smirked, then finished his drink and tossed the glass into the garbage.

“Only in a purely academic way. She’s a fellow professional and deserves respect for her position.”

“She’s attractive for a human.”

“That doesn’t affect me one bit,” Laski lied. He stood, finished his drink and started putting things away, but the thought of seeing Dr. Hope again made his heart race.

“You’re blushing.” Blade snorted and opened the front door.

The human guard stepped in front of the doorway. “Sir, is there anything I can help you with?”

“Dr. Laski needs to go back to the hospital, check on his patients, and confer with Dr. Hope.”

“Sir, allow me a few minutes to tell Mr. Jones. He’ll have the car pulled around to the back of the hotel for you.”

Blade arched an eyebrow ridge. “Why not use the front door?”

“Are you familiar with reporters, sir?” At Blade’s nod the guard continued. “They found out you and Dr. Laski are here. There will be no going in or out from the front door without being crowded by their cameras and microphones.”

“I’m not surprised. I saw an array of lenses when I looked out the window. All right, we will comply with your wishes.” Blade closed the door and glanced at Laski. “They’re getting the car.”

“What are reporters and why did the guard seem scared of them?” Laski packed everything away in its proper pockets inside the Med kit.

Blade leaned against the wall. “Humans that report the news.”

“I still don’t understand.” Laski closed his kit.

“They can be a pest, following people around where ever they go, so they can take vids. I believe they are called paparazzi.”

“These humans are so odd.” Laski shook his head.

## Chapter Six

“You’re back,” Dr. Hope smiled. She sat at her desk going over some paperwork.

Laski peered in the open door of her office. “I just checked on the patients and they’re doing better, but I have a problem that I need your help with.”

“What is it?”

“I need the use of a lab.”

“Sure, Doctor. I’ll show you one you can use.” She got up and walked out of the office.

Laski followed her, with Blade, and the human guard who’d guided them following behind. They walked a little way, and she took out her key to open a door. Dr. Hope flipped a switch, and rows of lights flicked on. Laski and Dr. Hope entered, but Blade and the human guard took a position to either side of the door.

“This was my lab before they took me off the project. As luck would have it, that left me free to take care of your people.” When Laski glanced at her, Dr. Hope added, “I had been working on new advancement in vitro techniques.”

“In vitro?”

“It’s the process of fertilization by manually combining an egg and sperm in a laboratory dish. I was fertilization pre-embryo transfer for a woman who couldn’t conceive, and mixed DNA strands if there were genetic problems.”

“Why were you taken off the project? That sounds like a wonderful way to help females to conceive.” Laski stared at her.

Dr. Hope looked down. “I had been informed that what I’d been doing was too close to cloning, which is against the law in our country, so I was shut down.” She nodded toward the equipment. “What do you need my lab for?”

“I need to find out why my people can’t digest your food.”

“On the back wall are some chemicals, and compounds which should help you. And here are some tubes and beakers. Over here is my computer with internet access, and the microscopes.” She took out the folded case and set it down on the long counter. When she opened it, he realized it was a computer.

*Their computers are small as some of ours are.* Laski picked the jars of chemical up and started reading them.

“You can read English?”

“Yes, and several other Earth languages as well.” He picked up another container.

“Good, some of this is in Latin. And being multilingual will come in handy eating out, especially if you are being adventurous.” Dr. Hope giggled.

“Hmm?” Laski glanced at her, and she wrinkled her nose. A memory of his mate Tanya doing the same when she teased him flashed through his mind. Could two females from two entirely different parts of the galaxy have the same sense of humor?

“Oh stop, I wasn’t being serious.” She slapped his arm in a playful manner.

“Uh, sorry?”

“Okay, you have my help in-between checking on your people. I guess you can accompany me when I do that?”

“Yes, of course.” Laski nodded.

“Then we can start.” She gestured toward the equipment. “What direction do you want to go in?”

“I was experimenting with some Earth food last night, but the rations were from a small refrigeration unit in the hotel room.”

Dr. Hope smiled. “Let me guess, junk food, high in sugar, salt, and starches, and probably stale too?”

“Exactly.” He blinked at how fast she supplied that information. *She’s a bright one.* “I need some regular Earth food to check against a small sample of ours, but all I have with me is a nutritional shake.”

“I can get a tray of hospital food you can experiment with, which will be no problem at all.” She walked out the door.

While she was gone, Laski set up the equipment from his Med kit, the minicomputer, and some of her lab apparatus that was similar to the medical bay on board the ship.

“Here you go.” Dr. Hope set a tray on the counter. “Provisions, such as they are.”

“It doesn’t smell bad, but digesting it is another thing all together.” Laski took a tool and smeared a bit on a slide, then placed it under a microscope.

“Is that all you’re going to do with it?” She crossed her arms and leaned against the counter. “You don’t know who I had to bribe to get this food for you.”

He didn't even glance up. "You didn't bribe anyone. You just asked for it."

"Okay, you got me." She poked him in the arm with a stiff forefinger. "What do I have to do to get you to smile? You are the glummiest Arcon I have met so far. Even Blade smiles, and he's your bodyguard."

Laski glanced over at her. *Is she flirting? Does she want me to woo her?* "Uh, there is too much at stake here. I'm deeply apologetic that I can't smile for you."

"Me too, but I always joke when things get too serious. Okay, what else do you need?" She glanced at the microscope.

As they got to work, Laski was extremely aware of the attractive female doctor by his side and stole little glances of her out of the corner of his eye. He shook himself mentally and tried to focus on the problem at hand.

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Laski stared up at the ceiling of their hotel suite, as he envisioned their ship in orbit. "Laski to Arcon ship One. Come in Arcon One."

"Arcon One responding. This is Captain Tug. We hear you. Please proceed with your report."

"The diplomats are a little better today. I predict they will be back to work in at least three days."

"That is good news. How about the food problem?"

"I have made some headway in that area. Dr. Hope has allowed me access to her lab, and I'm doing some experiments with her assistance."

"What have you discovered?"

Laski let out a breath. *What to tell them?* "Our amino acids cannot break down their food proteins, sugar or starches."

"That's just about everything from food, isn't it?"

"Nearly." Laski nodded, even though the only one who could see him was Blade.

"Prime said to tell you that if you can't figure it out, then don't bother coming back."

Laski got a nasty lump in his throat. "Why not?"

"Because there will be nothing to return to."

Blade arched an eyebrow ridge in Laski's direction. "No pressure."

## Chapter Six

It was late. Laski and Dr. Hope worked side by side in the lab, viewing slides in the microscopes.

“By the Mother, this is getting us nowhere.” Laski rubbed his eyes.

Dr. Hope lifted her head from the microscope and looked at him. “Maybe we are going at this from the wrong end?”

“What do you mean?” Laski glanced over at her. Even tired she was beautiful.

“We’re looking at the food, but where does digestion start?”

“With Arcons it’s in the mouth, when we chew our food, saliva is mixed in.”

Dr. Hope gave a nod. “Humans start the digestion process exactly the same way.” She grabbed a small beaker and stuck it under his mouth. “Spit.”

“What?” He took it from her.

“Spit.” She took another one and spat several times into it. “We are going to compare saliva.”

“All right.” He was repulsed by the act of spitting. It was something only the sick or elderly did on Arcon. Laski spat into the tube.

Dr. Hope placed a dot of saliva side-by-side on two separate slides, set a small glass top over each, removed the old ones, and then slipped in the new ones. They viewed the specimens, changing the magnification several times.

“Do you see what I see?” Dr. Hope asked.

“Yes, our saliva is different.”

“Ours has something yours doesn’t have.”

“But what?”

“Okay, what’s in saliva?” Picking up her coffee cup, she took a sip.

“That’s pretty basic. Saliva is produced in the salivary glands. These cells secrete a fluid that contains water, electrolytes, and enzymes—”

“Enzymes.” She jerked her hand, and coffee slopped out to hit Laski on the chest.

“Ouch! By the Mother, that’s hot.” He jumped up then blotted his chest with a tissue.

“Go into the bathroom, quickly, before it burns you.” Dr. Hope pointed and gave him a shove.

“It probably has already.” Laski hurried into the bathroom. He unsealed his one piece garment, then pulled it down to his hips. Running water over a paper towel, he pressed it against the burn. He peered out the door at her. “Enzymes?”

“Yes, it starts in the mouth.” She pulled something out of a cupboard. “We chew our food, breaking it down further, and enzymes mix into the food as we eat. More enzymes are added when it goes into the small intestine too.” Dr. Hope passed him something folded. “Here are some scrubs and a white coat to wear. You might find them more comfortable than that outfit you’re wearing.” Her gaze traveled down his lean body, and he turned toward her letting her get a better view. “You’re quite good looking partly undressed, but what is that on your chest? A birth mark?”

He glanced down. “The Mother placed her favor on me, when I released her from her confinement.”

“It looks like a paw print.” She stepped closer. “Your mother gave this to you? What an odd thing to do.”

“She’s not actually my maternal-unit, no. The Mother gave birth to our species. She’s our living Goddess, and we brought her to the stars with us.”

“Does she look different than you?” She touched his chest, and a tingle shot through him.

Laski smiled. *I knew we were compatible.* “Yes, but then the Mother has two forms. One is similar to my people, and the other is smaller when she walks on four feet.”

“Wait a minute. No, that can’t be. Can it?” She removed her penlight from her pocket and checked his eyes. “Vertical slits. I wasn’t seeing things.” Then she ran her finger over the tops of his ear. “Pointed ears. Open your mouth, please.”

He opened, and she touched a sharp canine.

She stepped away from him to stare at a calendar on the wall. It had a basket full of kittens. Underneath was written ‘a bundle of love.’ Dr. Hope complexion turned ashen. “No. It’s not possible.”

## Chapter Seven

Back at the hotel room, Laski called to make another report to the Prime. “Arcon One, this is Laski.”

“This is Prime Styr. We read you, go ahead.”

“Our diplomats are nearly recovered, and want to return to work. However, we’re almost out of the nutrients packages.” Laski tapped the last empty package setting on the table,

“We are too. Some hoarding is going on, and we are searching the ships for more.”

Laski frowned. “Then you can’t send more down?”

“No, and we may have to place some of our people into the hibernation capsules to preserve their lives. We’re in a desperate situation up here. We need you and the diplomats to finish the jobs they were given.” The Prime’s voice whipped out. “What is your report on the provisions problem?”

“The human doctor, and I have discovered the reason we cannot digest the Earth food.”

“Why is that?” the Primes asked his vice hard.

Laski swallowed hard. “We don’t have the enzymes to break the foodstuff down in our digestive systems, so we get sick.”

“Can the enzymes be duplicated in the lab?”

Laski gave a nod. “That’s the project I am currently working on.”

“What is your time estimate on finding a solution?”

He had to be honest. “Indeterminate, it could be days or weeks.”

“We don’t have weeks, we need a solution, and we need it now,” Prime snapped.

Laski cringed. “I’m working on it.”

“Put more effort into it, medic. Prime out.” A sharp click indicated the end of the conversation.

*I can’t find the solution any faster than I am, but I need Dr. Hope’s help.* Laski folded up the transmitter and looked over at Blade, as he thought about the last time he saw the lovely Dr. Hope. “Can I tell you something, and you not say something cocky in response?”

“I’ll try,” Blade promised with a smirk.

“Dr. Hope is afraid of me,” he told him, and his shoulders dropped forward.

Blade’s jaw dropped open. “Of you? Why? When did this happen?”

Laski played with a notepad near the phone, opening and closing it. “In the lab, just before we came back to our rooms.”

Moving in a blur, Blade roughly seized him by his shoulders and slammed him to the wall. “What did you do? Did you hurt her?” He shook him. “You know that’s an act of aggression, and a punishable offense even if she is a different species? A female is a female and they are protected by our oldest laws.”

“No-no, nothing like that. I have never hurt a female in my life. Let go of me.” His stomach filled with ice. His bodyguard had moved very fast. *He could kill me so easily.*

Blade dropped him, and his feet thumped on the floor. “What then?”

Laski gulped. “I happened to mention the Mother, and...”

“And what?” Blade raised his arms from his sides.

Laski ran a hand over his hair. “They have different deities than we do.”

“I’ve seen the Sunday morning transmissions.” Blade nodded. “They worship a male deity, a ghost and the sun.”

“I told her about the Mother giving birth to our species. Dr. Hope then examined my eyes, ears and teeth. Then she looked terribly confused, and then frightened.”

“Then what happened?” Blade growled.

“She left the lab and didn’t come back.” Laski took a deep breath and let it out. “I need her to help me. I don’t know if I can find a solution for our current food crisis without her.”

The doorknob rattled, and the door opened. A human guard took a quick glance around the room, and then looked back at them. “Sirs, is everything all right in here?”

“Yes, we’re fine,” Blade told him.

“There was a thump against the wall.”

“It was nothing.” Laski glanced at Blade. “I tripped, that’s all.”

The guard looked unconvinced. “There were raised voices?”

“The TV was on, I just turned it off,” Blade said with a gesture toward the living room.

“Okay, gentlemen, I’ll be right out here, but no more tripping or loud whatever it was.”

“Sorry we disturbed you, private.” Blade stepped away from Laski.

“Sirs.” The private gave a sharp nod and closed the door.

Laski shot Blade a sharp look. “I thought they couldn’t open the door once it was shut.”

Blade met his gaze. “He said ‘not without a card key.’”

“Then he has one?” Laski’s eyes widened. “All the guards have one?”

“They probably just hand over the same card key when they change shifts, and the card key code is changed daily, so even if it was copied it wouldn’t do anyone any good.”

“How do you know that?”

Blade lifted his chin. “My job is to protect you, so I asked.”

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Laski went into the lab alone. Conrad had asked a nurse to get the key, and opened the door for him. He was getting used to the sideways glances, widening of eyes and even the intakes of breath when he walked past the humans in the halls. But it still disturbed him. Briefly, he had entertained the thought of making up some reason to stay on the planet instead of going back to the ship. However, now that Dr. Hope had fled his presence, he found no reason to stay longer than necessary. Even if he found an answer to their current crisis.

Like Blade had said, “No pressure.”

He slipped on the lab coat that Dr. Hope had given him when she spilled coffee on him. He sniffed it. It still carried some of her sweet scent. Then he turned on her computer. She had already given him the password, and showed him how to use it. Then he waited for it to warm up and logged in. He connected to the Internet and typed enzymes into the search engine. Surely he could find the solution to their crisis. The fate of his whole race was resting on his shoulders.

No pressure.

He heard the Prime’s words again. “If you don’t succeed we’re dead, don’t bother coming back because there won’t be anything to come back to.”

Even if he did find a solution, how can we keep going without our females? One crisis at a time, doctor.

Laski read until his eyes ached. Rubbing them, he envisioned thousands of emaciated Arcons forever trapped in hibernation tanks, all gazing at him in mute appeal. One raised a boney finger and pointed at him. "This is your fault. You could have saved us, but you didn't."

Something touched his arm, and he jumped. "Goddess."

"Sorry, it's just me," Dr. Hope told him. "I spoke to you, but you seemed too deep in thought to hear."

He turned to look at her, and swept his gaze swept over her from light brown hair to white smock. "Y-you're back."

"Don't sound so disappointed."

"I'm not." His chest filled at the sight of her. "I'm exceedingly glad to see you. Where have you been, if I may be so bold as to ask?"

"Yes, you may ask." She grinned at him, and nudged him with the box she held.

He glanced into the container. "What's this?"

"I've been running around to every pharmaceutical supply company, and pharmacy I could find, for this."

"What did you get?"

"Enzymes." Her grin got bigger.

"Enzymes, in here?" He took the box and peered inside. It was filled to the top with jars in various colors, shapes, and sizes.

"Yes, a variety of them. If we try them out, one at a time, we may find one that works. Or we can tweak one that almost works to make it work better." She seemed pleased with herself.

"You did this for my people?" His heart leaped, this could be the salvation that his people so desperately needed.

Her eyes shimmered with unshed tears. "The thought of all those poor people up there, who came with the hope that we were their salvation, only to be stopped by not being able to eat our food, is weighing heavily on my conscience."

Laski cocked his head to the side. "Doctor, I didn't think you wanted to work with me anymore?"

"I'm so sorry I ran out on you." Dr. Hope reached into the box and rearranged a couple of containers. "But then I realized you had been a perfect gentleman the whole time, and I'm the

one who acted foolishly.” She raised her gaze to his. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have gotten upset because your species are not descended from apes, like mine.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for.” He felt a lump rise in his throat. “I’m just so glad you’re back.”

“You’re glad I’m back? After all my running around, getting this stuff, and then spilling my guts—that’s all I get?” Dr. Hope took her hand out of the box and set it on her hip with a frown. “A thank you would be nice, for all my hard work.”

Slipping the box onto the counter, Laski got up off the stool and gazed down at her a moment. He wasn’t fooled. His mate tried the same bluff on him when she wanted a little attention.

He bent down, took her in his arms and lifted her off her feet, spinning around. “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.” He set her back down when he realized he leaked out some pheromones. “You may have saved my entire race.”

Dr. Hope’s delighted laughter filled the room. “I haven’t been thanked quite so passionately before. You smell good. Are you wearing cologne?”

“Um, no.” He stared at the small attractive human female, with crow’s feet in the corners of her eyes, and threads of silver in her lovely hair which made her even more beautiful. “I haven’t thanked you passionately, yet.”

“Oh?” She arched an eyebrow. “Should I be worried?”

“No, you don’t have anything to fear from me. I would never hurt you, ever.”

## Chapter Eight

Laski closed the lid to the toilet and flushed it. Exhausted, he leaned back against the wall. Dr. Hope handed him a wet wash cloth, and he wiped his face with it.

"Here, drink this." She handed him a cup

"What is it?" He peered inside.

"Electrolytes. You've vomited so much you're low, and that can be dangerous."

He shook his head. "I can't. It might make me sick."

"It shouldn't. There isn't any flavoring in it, only electrolytes by themselves. I can't promise it'll taste good, but it should help you."

He took a small sip and made a face. "You're right. It tastes terrible."

"I'm sorry you got sick again, but I really thought we had it this time." She leaned against the doorjamb and gave him an apologetic smile.

"Not your fault." He set the cup down and pulled up his legs, leaning his forehead against his knees.

"I'm worried. You can't go on like this."

"I can manage."

"If you can keep something down then it would be okay, but you can't. This isn't healthy for you."

"Dr. Hope, I appreciate all the help you've given me, but if we can't mix the correct enzymes, then we can't eat. Then, I, along with the rest of my people, will perish." Laski lifted his head to stare at her.

"I know what is resting on this. Without a solution, it'll be genocide. Your whole race will become extinct." She rubbed her forehead and glanced out the door. "Can't we use one of the diplomats as a guinea pig?"

"Guinea pig?" he asked.

"Lab rat. It's what we use for experimenting on, in the lab."

"That's not their job, and anyway they went back to the U.N. today to start negotiations. They work better in sets of three, so I can't even ask one to help," he whispered.

"But you're alone?"

"I have two helpers who work under me, but they're back on board ship, taking care of the infirmary."

Dr. Hope glanced back at the door to the lab. "Well, then how about Blade?"

"Not his job either." He shook his head.

"You don't seem to like him."

Laski's head jerked up at her tone.

Her lips were pressed together into one thin line. "Yes, it is that obvious, but Blade is your people too."

Shaking his head, he had no clear thought how to explain that the weight of this responsibility rested on him and him alone. "It is my job to get this right."

"Until it kills you?" She glared. "Blade's job is to keep you safe. Maybe he has something to say about what you're doing to yourself?"

Dr. Hope stomped away. Laski had no energy to get off the floor, let alone stop her.

The lab door opened. "Blade, can you help me with something?"

"Certainly."

The footsteps got closer, and Blade peered in at him. "Laski, what happened to you?"

He glanced at his bodyguard. "Not feeling so good."

"He's been experimenting on himself with the enzymes," Dr. Hope informed him.

"It's not going well, I take it?" Blade asked.

Laski shook his head.

"He can't go on like this. It's going to kill him," Dr. Hope said.

"Experiment on me," Blade said.

"It's not your job," Laski whispered.

"Doctor, you can't do this anymore. You're done." He glared back at Dr. Hope. "I'll do a few rounds until he's better."

"Okay, come over here." She led him over to their work area.

Laski levered himself off the floor using the wall, and staggered into the lab. He dropped into a chair near them.

Dr. Hope mixed a drink, and glanced over at him. "Not going to stop me?"

"Don't have the energy." He leaned against the back on the back of the chair, inhaling deep breaths.

"Good." She gave the glass to Blade. "Bottoms up."

"What's in that one?" Laski asked.

"The mix with some electrolytes in it," she answered.

"That might help." Laski nodded.

Blade drank it down and handed back the cup. Dr. Hope clicked a stopwatch.

"What's that for?" Blade asked, nodding at the watch.

"To see how long you can keep it down."

"You mean until I toss my cookies?" Blade smirked.

"Using human slang?" Dr. Hope smiled at him. "Yeah, that's the idea."

Ten minutes later, Blade bolted into the bathroom.

"He could have at least shut the door." Laski frowned.

Dr. Hope closed it. "Oh, don't bother him. He lasted longer than you did."

"Yeah, but that's because I'd taken..." Laski stopped and counted.

"A lot?" Hope smiled at him.

"Yes," he whispered. "There's not much inside of me anymore."

The toilet flushed and Blade strolled back, rubbing his stomach. "I think that tasted worse going out than coming in."

Dr. Hope handed Blade a small glass. "Here, drink this and rest before we try the next one."

"How many are there?" Blade took a sip of the electrolyte laced water, then made a face but didn't say anything.

"In this batch, twelve."

His mouth fell open. "Twelve?"

"Don't worry." Dr. Hope chuckled. "This is the group Laski was working on."

He looked over at the medic, who slumped in his seat with his head back.

"How many before I end up looking like that?"

"Twenty."

Blade's eyes widened. "You were sick twenty times?"

Laski rolled a shoulder out. "Maybe. I lost count."

"It took you longer to get sick, so that's got to be an improvement." Dr. Hope patted Blade's arm. "If you can hold it down for twenty minutes, then you can try to eat something."

Blade stared at her. "Twenty minutes? How did you come up with that number?"

"According to Laski, the Arcon stomach empties out into the intestines every twenty minutes, so if you can keep it down that long the enzymes will get into your gut, and you can digest food."

"All right, I guess that makes sense." He downed the rest of the electrolytes.

"Ready for the next one?" Dr. Hope held a cup in front of him.

Blade looked at it a moment, took a deep breath and exhaled. "Yes, I'm ready doctor."

He took the drink and tossed it back.

## Chapter Nine

Laski lay stretched out on the floor of the bathroom, and not far from him Blade sat with his back against the wall. Both males had their eyes closed as they breathed deeply. After the break that Blade had given Laski, Blade had stayed on to help them get through the trials faster.

“Gentlemen, we’re getting closer,” Dr. Hope informed them as she mixed something orange in a beaker.

“How can you tell?” Blade asked.

“If my hypothesis is correct, and you both keep it down for nineteen minutes, then I think we might have it.” The stirring rod clanked against the glass.

“Can you give us a bit of time before we try again?” Laski gazed at Dr. Hope. Bile burned at the back of his throat at the thought of drinking more of the foul stuff. But what could they do? They had to find a solution fast, even if it killed him. “My stomach muscles are sore.”

“Of course, I need to go get something anyway.” She walked out the door and closed it behind her.

“She’s a slave driver,” Blade complained.

“There are no slaves on Arcon, and never have been.” Laski managed to lift his head to scowl. *How dare he complain about Dr. hope.* This wonderful female had been working non-stop and without rest, to help them find a formula to save their people.

“No, we never needed one. A female just released her pheromones into the ether, and we males would do anything for her. I was quoting a human saying. It means the same as a hard military matron who favors a whip to pheromones.”

Laski tightened his jaw. “Well, she’s not, and she didn’t force the mixes down us—we volunteered!”

“True.” Blade nodded.

Dr. Hope sailed in carrying a tray. The smell of food wafted in with her. When she set it down, she smiled at them.

Laski and Blade both sat up, sniffing loudly.

“I thought this might rouse you. The cafeteria makes the best chicken soup I’ve ever had, but this is just the broth. Don’t want to put too much strain on your tummies.”

“But we can’t eat it,” Laski complained as the scent made him salivate.

Dr. Hope held out the two new drinks. “I have a good feeling about number 103.”

The Arcons traded a glance.

“At least she’s nicer than the military matrons,” Blade ventured. “Unless she’s hiding a cat-o-nine-tails in the closet.”

“Oh, you don’t know what I keep in my closet.” Dr. Hope winked. “Come on boys, drink up. The soup is getting cold.”

They both reluctantly pushed off from the floor, staggered over to the doctor, and took the drink. With another glance at each other, they swallowed the orange stuff and shook making a face.

“Awful.” Laski shuddered.

“That was the worst of the lot,” Blade complained, peering into the cup.

“There isn’t any flavoring in it, or you wouldn’t be able to hold it down even if it did work.” Dr. Hope clicked the stopwatch.

They sat down and waited.

“Five minutes. How are you feeling? Any nausea?” she asked.

“Just sore stomach muscles.” Laski rubbed his tummy.

“The same.” Blade nodded.

“Good.” A few minutes later, Dr. Hope held the watch up. “Ten minutes.”

“No change,” Laski told her.

More time passed, with the only sound the ticking of the stop watch. Dr. Hope looked at them. “Fifteen minutes.”

“The same.” Laski felt a glimmer of hope. *Was this it? Had they found it?*

“Seventeen.” Dr. Hope looked at him.

Laski shifted position on his chair. “No change.”

“Eighteen.” Dr. Hope glanced up from her watch.

Blade looked at her. “I feel fine.”

“Nineteen. This is the time you both got sick with the last batch.”

Both males sat a little straighter and exchanged a glance.

“Actually, my stomach is feeling better.” Blade licked his lips, and his stomach growled.

Laski leaned forward. *Please, please let this one be the one.*

“Twenty minutes and counting.” Dr. Hope looked expectantly at both males.

“No sickness,” Laski said with a catch in his throat and glanced at Blade.

“I’m fine too.” Blade stared at the food. The rumble of his stomach loud.

“That’s great! And now, gentlemen, here’s your soup.” With her eyes sparkling, Dr. Hope held out the tray.

The Arcons each took a bowl, uncovered it, with a glance at each other took a tentative sip of the cooled broth.

“Oh, this is good.” Laski closed his eyes to savor the delicious meat broth and exotic spices.

They finished their soup and set the bowls back on the tray.

“I think that’s the best soup I’ve ever had.” Blade took a napkin, wiping his mouth.

“I’m so glad you liked it.” Dr. Hope grinned. “Now I have something else to tell you. You didn’t both have the same mix. Laski had 103, and Blade you had 104.”

“So they both work?” A bolt went through Laski’s body. *They found it. They could save their people.* “Please say we got the mix right.”

“Yes, we’ve got the right enzymes mix.” She took the clipboard and circled the last two. “Ready for breakfast?”

“Breakfast?” *Was she talking about food?* His stomach gurgled.

“That’s the first meal of the day. It’s morning. I told the kitchen staff when I got the soup that we were extremely close, and to start making breakfast. If you gentlemen can keep it down?” She glanced at both of them.

“I can eat more.” Laski smoothed his hands down his clothes, hoping he looked all right to leave the room. He had been awfully sick taking the medicine over the last week.

“Me too,” Blade agreed, and his tummy let out a whine. “I’m ready for some protein.”

“I think you both are.” She smiled, as she tapped something into the computer and hit save. “Don’t want to lose that formula.”

They went down the elevator, escorted by the human guards, and entered the cafeteria to the cheers of the staff. Several young women hurried to set out food on a table they’d covered with a table cloth that had a vase with three flowers in the center.

Laski stopped and stared down at the table with its careful arrangement, and wonderful smelling meal the staff had very kindly set out for them. He glanced up at the team’s expectant expressions. His throat closed for a moment and the pressure built behind his eyes. *Humans are compassionate than I thought they’d be.*

“Thank you all for your kindness. This food looks fantastic. I will enjoy consuming it.” Laski bowed deeply to the kitchen workers.

“As will I.” Blade also bowed.

They both sat down and Dr. Hope sat next to Laski.

They devoured the meal in fifteen minutes. Dr. Hope continued to keep them company as she sipped her drink called coffee, which she claimed she couldn’t live without. Laski wrinkled his nose at the bitter smell and couldn’t understand why she liked it. He and Blade stayed with water which seemed safer.

Blade worked on his third plate of sausages and bacon. Laski wondered how he could still be eating.

“That’s the most I’ve ever eaten at one time.” Laski pushed his plate away.

“No nausea?” Dr. Hope asked.

“None.” Laski rubbed his stomach. “Just a very full belly.”

“Your world’s food is wonderful.” Blade wiped his mouth with a napkin.

One of the female staff picked up their empty plates and glasses, placing them into a tub.

“Thank you.” Blade smiled at her.

“You’re very welcome.” The female returned his smile. “I’m so glad you can finally eat. The whole staff had been so worried and rooted for Dr. Laski and Dr. Hope to find a cure.”

“A cure?” Blade lifted an eyebrow ridge.

“Yes, for your illness, the reason you can’t eat.”

“Oh, yes.” Blade smiled. “My people will be very pleased also. I imagine you’ll hear the cheers all the way down here.”

“Laski, there you are,” said Conrad’s voice behind them, as he hurried over to their table. “We have a problem. All the delegates have fainted again...” He trailed off staring at the plates of food still on the table, and then at Blade contentedly chewing on sausage. His eyes widened and then he smiled. “You’ve found the cure?”

“Yes, just a little while ago.” As Laski stood with his back straight, hope zinged through him. *Thank the Mother, our people are saved.*

“That’s fantastic. Can you mix some more? I think the delegates need to eat something fast, they don’t look good.” Conrad wiped his forehead.

Laski’s throat constricted. *Are we too late to save the delegates?* “Yes, yes, of course.”

Dr. Hope patted Laski’s arm. “I’ll go get more of the formula ready. You go tend your patients.”

As they filed out of the room, Laski’s glanced back to the staff that stared with expressions of alarm. “Would you females mind preparing another three breakfasts, in about twenty of your Earth minutes? I would greatly appreciate it.”

A chorus of, “No problem doctor. We’ll take care of it,” eased some of the worry tightening his shoulders.

Dr. Hope headed in one direction, and the Arcons followed the presidential aide in the other.

## Chapter Ten

Laski hurried into the same room that the delegates had originally been housed. Treves lay curled on his side on one of the hospital beds, and the other two delegates stood near him.

“Laski,” Roth said. “Treves felt ill and fainted.”

“I was told you all fainted?” Laski glanced back at Conrad who shrugged at him.

“It’s true, we all don’t feel well, but only Treves passed out.” Roth glanced back to his companion, his color paler than normal.

Laski hurried to Treves’s side, pulled out the vital reader device, and set it on the inside of his arm. “Temp and blood pressure are low.” He took out a penlight and checked Treves eyes. His stomach clenched. “It’s my opinion that his system is shutting down.”

“He needs to eat something. Treves gave us his portion of the last nutritional shake we had.” Roth gripped his arm in a hard grip. “Any luck with the food problem? By the Mother, I wish you had a solution right now!” Desperation laced Roth’s voice.

“The Prime got angry at Laski for not getting it done last week,” Blade said.

Roth rubbed his face and turned away. “Please forget what I said, I’m not well.”

“I have good news. We found the right mix.” Laski couldn’t stop the grin that spread across his face.

“What?” The Arcons delegates stared at him.

“We had to have just the right blend of enzymes to electrolytes.” They still looked as if they didn’t understand, so he tried again, “It needed more...”

Blade stopped him with a hand on his arm. “Let me explain.”

“All right.”

“He found the cure.” Blade gestured. “You’re going to drink some nasty tasting stuff, and then twenty minutes later you can eat Earth food.”

“By the Mother, I’m so relieved.” Roth sat down in a nearby wheelchair and covered his face with his hands.

Neal rubbed his shoulder, and then glanced at Laski, his eyes a little too bright. “You’ve saved us all.”

“It wasn’t just me,” Laski said. “Dr. Hope has been a tremendous help. She went shopping and found the enzymes. We’ve both been working tirelessly to find the right mix.”

Treves, who had been curled up on the bed, looked up. “Did-did I hear right, did he say we can eat?”

“Yes,” Laski removed the VRD from his arm and pocketed it, “after you take your enzymes and wait a few minutes.”

“Thank the Mother. I didn’t think I could last much longer.” Treves took in a deep breath and his body relaxed on a slow exhale.

Dr. Hope walked in holding a tray with three cups on it. She glanced at Laski. “Did you tell them?”

Laski nodded. “Yes.”

She frowned at the three delegates. “I thought they would be happier than that?”

“They’re overcome with emotion, doctor.” Conrad moved aside for her.

“Ah.” She held the tray out to Treves. “You go first.”

Treves took a cup with a shaking hand.

Laski worked the buttons to lift Treves into a position so he could drink the medicine.

“Down the hatch,” she told him.

“Uh?” Treves looked over at Laski.

Blade lifted his hand and pretended to drink an invisible cup.

“Hold your breath and swallow it fast,” Laski said.

Treves drank it and made a face. “By the Mother, that’s an awful taste. Couldn’t you do better than that, Laski?”

“I’m afraid not. Any flavoring at all would have made you ill.” Dr. Laski lowered him back down and took the empty plastic cup to drop in the trash.

Dr. Hope went to Roth and Neal. “Your turn.”

They both took a cup.

Treves wiped his eyes. “Thank you, Dr. Hope and Laski, for all your help.”

“You’re welcome.” She hugged the now empty tray against her breasts. “Now drink up.”

Roth, and then Neal drank the drink. The corners of their mouths pulled down at the obvious distaste of the liquid.

“That is awful, but so is the blue stuff and it works.” Neal handed his cup back to Dr. Hope.

“That’s the spirit.” Dr. Hope dropped the plastic cup in the garbage and set her stopwatch.

“What’s the watch for, Dr. Hope,” Conrad asked.

“They have to wait twenty minutes after they take the enzymes before they can eat.”

“Or what?” Conrad asked.

She glanced at him. “Or they get sick.”

“Oh, I see. I need to make a phone call.” Conrad strode out of the room.

A few minutes later, one of the kitchen workers peered into the room and waved to Dr. Hope to get her attention. “Can they eat yet?”

“Not yet,” she showed her the stopwatch. “They have ten more minutes.”

“Okay. The staff is waiting outside with covered food trays.” She reached for the tray Dr. Hope still held.

Dr. Hope handed it over and nodded. “I’ll signal you when it’s time.”

“Great, I’m sure they’ll be so glad to eat.” The female walked back out.

“How are you feeling?” Laski asked Treves.

“I’m about the same, real shaky.” He rolled onto his back, but wasn’t holding his stomach anymore.

Dr. Hope looked over at Laski. “He’ll probably feel that way until he eats something.”

“What’s the time?” Laski asked, nodding toward the stopwatch. He wished the time had already passed, so the delegates could eat.

“They have five more minutes.”

“Not much longer,” Laski told Treves and patted his shoulder.

“Good.” Treves closed his eyes and sighed.

“Dr. Laski?” Dr. Hope signaled him, and then walked to the nurse’s station where he joined her. “Treves looks really bad, maybe we should set him up with a drip feed?”

Laski shook his head. "With our kind it would be better if he ate real food."

Her gaze filled with concern. "So there isn't much we can do for him?"

"Regrettably, no, but our bodies do repair themselves rather quickly. Once he eats, he will probably go into a healing slumber." With all his heart, Laski wished he could help him, but the enzyme was their only hope.

"How long will he be out?"

"It depends on the impairment. It could be anywhere from six to twenty-four hours. With real damage, maybe even longer."

"All right, then I hope he gets that sleep soon." Dr. Hope looked down at the watch. "Almost time. I better go tell the staff." She hurried away.

Laski returned to the hospital room with a little more energy in his step. *Finally, they'll be able to eat.* "It won't be much longer."

A couple of minutes later, Dr. Hope entered with a huge grin on her face. The females pushing carts followed her in.

"Here you go, gentlemen." One of the ladies set Treves's meal on the bed table, complete with a flower in a small vase.

"Oh, it smells wonderful," Treves told the heavy set blond who served him.

"Have a good meal." She smiled shyly at him and gave him a hesitant pat on the shoulder. "You look as if you can use a few good meals."

"May the Mother bless you, for your kindness." Treves took a forkful of the scrambled eggs and ate it, closing his eyes. "Hmm."

"He's enjoying it." The blond smiled at Dr. Hope and Laski, and then hurried out wiping her eyes.

Two other ladies were serving Neal and Roth.

"It looks and smells wonderful, but what is it?" Neal asked.

"Scrambled eggs, bacon and sausage," one of the ladies said, and set a napkin on his lap.

Roth, they decided would remain in a wheelchair, as they moved a table over to him.

"You look as if you need to sit down anyway," the brunette told him.

"I probably do," Roth admitted. "I feel weak."

The ladies left with choruses of thank you from the Arcons, and then the males dug in.

“Laski, did you want a meal too?” Neal asked him.

“No, I’m fine. I already ate,” Laski said, glad that the delegates were able to finally eat.

“You did?” Neal frowned and glanced at the other two dignitaries. “Were you holding out on us?”

“No. Blade and I were... what did you call it?” Laski looked at Dr. Hope.

“Guinea pigs,” she replied.

“Yes, we were the guinea pigs to make sure it worked, and then we ate to make sure we could keep the food down.”

“Oh, you experimented on yourself first? How long did it take you to find a solution?” Neal ate a bit of sausage.

“A week, and we drank about two hundred enzyme combinations,” Laski replied with a grimace.

“What happened when the mix wasn’t right?” Roth asked, picking up a slice of bacon.

“We got sick.” Laski rubbed his stomach still remembering how ill he had felt.

“Dr. Hope asked me to take over for a bit because the good doctor was nearly killing himself, trying the various combinations on himself,” Blade added, from where he was leaning on the walling and watching the comings and goings of the staff.

“Goddess, two hundred times and you got sick?” Roth furrowed his brow.

“Dr. Laski more than me,” said Blade. “I only helped a little at the end.”

“Laski, you will get an honor for this.” Roth gave a head bow. “We will make sure of it.”

“Thank you, but it is unnecessary.” Laski waved the offer away as his face heated. He entered his profession to heal, and not to collect accolades.

Dr. Hope walked over and poked him in the arm. “How about, I take you out to dinner to celebrate.”

A quiet dinner alone with his favorite human sounded wonderful. Laski grinned. “I would enjoy that very much.”

Conrad hurried in. “I was just speaking with the president. After witnessing the dignitaries fainting, and hearing about Laski’s medicine that seems to be working, he wants to send up

provisions to the Arcons' ships right away. Dr. Hope can you get a list of all the ingredients you need to mix the—um, what are we calling it?"

“We have been calling the mix enzymes for a lack of anything better.” She looked at Laski.  
“So much for our celebratory dinner.”

## Chapter Eleven

Laski stood on the tarmac with the setting sun just starting to set. His hands were shoved in the lab coat pockets while he stood gazing down at the small human female he was starting to care about. “I hate to say goodbye.”

She smiled up at him, and he thought he saw tears forming in her eyes. It made him hopeful that she cared a little about him too.

“It’s not goodbye, if you’re coming back.”

He smiled back. “When I come back, I’d like to see you again.”

“Yes, I did promise you a meal out, didn’t I?”

“Well... yes.” Laski glanced down to his lab coat. “Oh, I need to return this to you.”

“Don’t bother.” She smoothed a hand down his chest. “It makes you look like a proper doctor. You can keep it to remember me by.”

“I’d like to give you something in return.” Laski felt around in his pockets and pulled out the little VRD. “Here take this.”

She took the device and glanced down at it. “But I can’t read it.”

He grinned. “Then, I’ll have an excuse to return and explain what it says.”

“Laski,” he heard a shout.

He looked over to where Blade stood near the ramp to Their shuttle. The president of the United States had given executive permission, allowing the Arcon shuttle to land at La Guardia Airport.

“Time to go.” Blade pointed to the new watch he wore on his arm, a parting gift from the president.

“In a minute.” Laski glanced down at Dr. Hope. “I’m sorry, but I need to leave you now.”

“One thing before you go?”

“Yes?”

“My full name is Faith Charity Hope. My father was a minister, so I got all the hopeful names.” She grinned. “So what’s yours?”

“Laski Peacemaker, my mother-unit’s clan have all ways been ambassadors, but when I mated it was changed to Endwell. With the death of my mate, I still have her name. I’m the first family medic in either clan.”

“No,” she said, straightening out his collar. “You’re the Arcon’s first male doctor, Dr. Laski Peacemaker Endwell.”

At her touch a tingled filled his body. “If you say so.”

“I say so.” She cocked her head. “Why does every Arcon have one syllable names and yet you have two?”

“I was named after two of my paternal-units Lask and Ski.”

She frowned. “How many fathers do you have?”

“Three. Every Arcon has three, that’s because it takes three males to get one female pregnant.”

She tapped his chest with a forefinger. “When you get back, we’re going to have a long chat about genetics. That’s something you’re going to have to explain to me in considerable detail.”

“Laski,” Blade shouted again.

“I think they’re getting impatient with me.” Laski hesitated a moment, and then did something impulsively. He bent down and kissed Dr. Hope soundly on the lips, and then ran for the shuttle. He glanced back once at the ramp.

Dr. Hope had her fingers pressed against her lips, and then she waved to him. He waved back and entered the shuttle.

He sat down and fastened the seat belt. Blade did the same next to him.

“When I return, and I will return because we’ll all be down on this planet one day,” Dr. Laski said, “I’m going to woo Dr. Faith Charity Hope.”

“I had no doubt of that.” Blade waved out the window to Dr. Hope, Conrad and the president of the United States of America. The president very kindly filled their hold with provisions, including the ingredients to make the enzymes.

Laski smiled. He had done his job. Now their future was in the hands of their delegates. It was up to them to negotiate with the United Nations for a place on this lovely blue and green world.

The end

Or is it?

Read the continuing adventures of the Arcons in Alien Heart, which will be released in 2013 through Keith Publications.