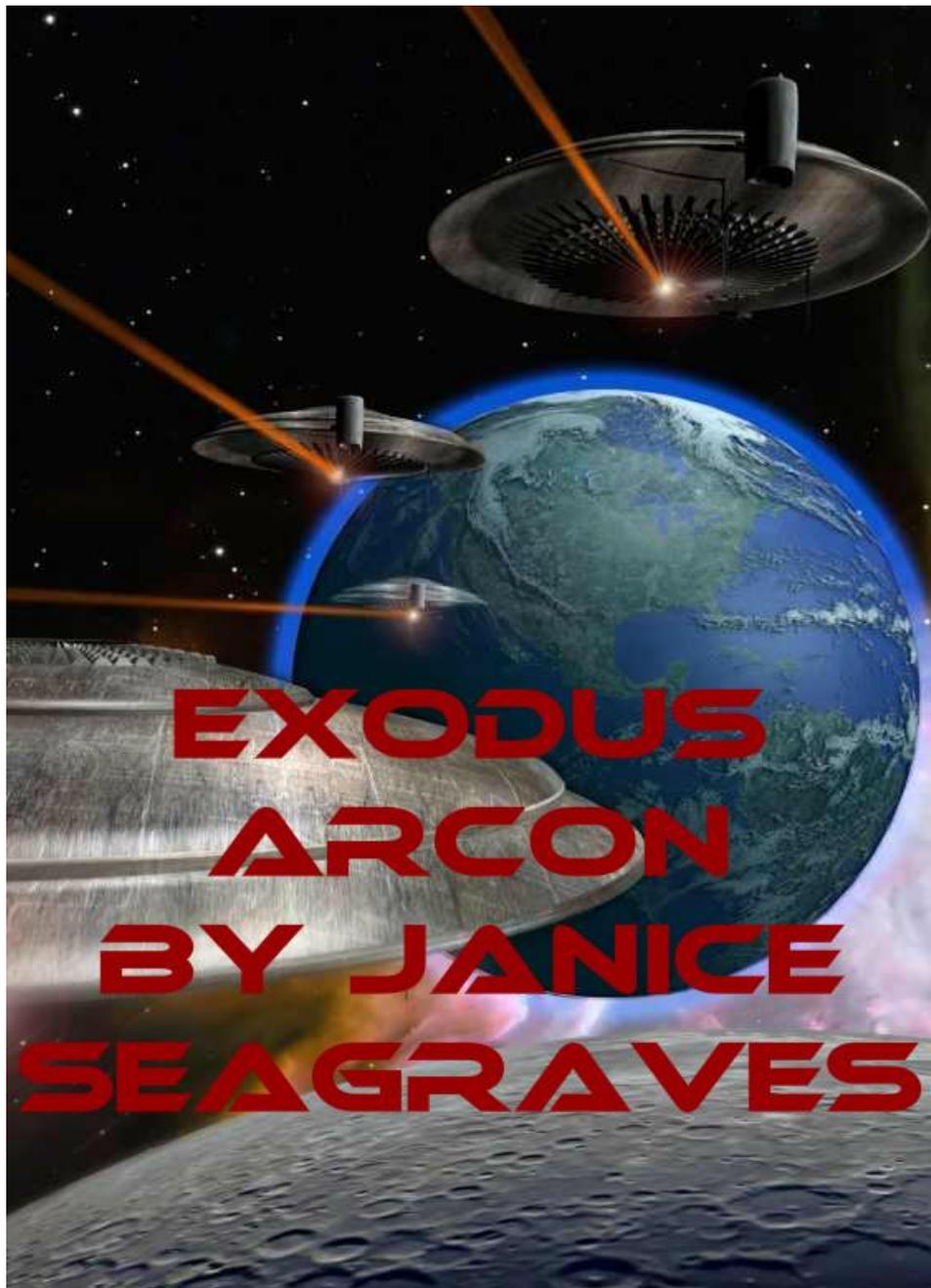


Exodus Arcon

Part Two

by Janice Seagraves



The start of a new SF series

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This story is a free read, and as such has gone straight from my head to the computer. Please be kind and overlook any typos or issues that might otherwise be caught during editing.

Cast of Characters:

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

Blade: A military male from Arcon, and twin brother to Keefe. Podling to Keefe and Lug (all males are born in a set of triplets called a pod, but sometimes two will be identical twins). Older brother to Paz, Dar and Dab.

Keefe Starstrider: Male from planet Arcon. Mated to Aziza. Keefe is an identical twin to Blade and podling or pod-brother to both Blade and Lug.

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 bodyguard.

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 take three males as mates.

Maternal-unit: Mother

Paternal-unit: Father. Since Arcon females need three males to sire young, so there are three fathers in each family unit.

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.

Youngling: child

One

Blade jerked out of the nightmare gasping and stared up at the warning lights, flashing just like his mother's angry eyes did so long ago. Cold sweat broke out all over his body, leaving him sick with loss.

I'm not that sad, wretched offspring anymore. I am Blade, a warrior and survivor. Those awful memories have no control over me anymore.

The emergency klaxon intruded on his gloomy thoughts.

A jolt of adrenalin shot through his body and drove the melatonin from his system. He felt for the manual awakening button just under his hand and pushed it. The I.V. slipped out of his arm, and a moment later the clear glass overhead automatically retracted. He sat up and almost fell out but steadied himself on the edge of the capsule. Blade felt around for his weapons but didn't find them.

What's going on? Where is my blaster and battle armor? Is the cavern being invaded? He tried to remember which cavern he had been assigned to this time, but couldn't get his mind to work. Am I still at Yelena?

"Where's the medics?" Blade croaked. His voice dry and rough. *Damn medics, we're in an emergency situation. I need a stimulant so I can go into action.*

His gaze took the long, narrow room with the brushed silver walls, and rows of hibernation units. *This isn't a cavern on Arcon, this is a spaceship.*

A couple of others units opened and the silver dressed, groggy inhabitants were slowly getting out.

Blade frowned. *Civilians? Why am I in with the civilians?*

He rolled out, landed on hands and knees which stung, and broke off three of his overgrown claw like nails. "Goddess."

Standing proved to be a challenge as he pulled up and leaned on a neighbor's unit. *Move legs, move.* It was hard to walk especially since his toenails had grown out and around his space booties.

Blade shoved his long white hair out of the way. His warrior topknot, which had started out on top of his head now tapped him on the butt with every movement. Looking down into the interior of the capsule he leaned on, he stared at the face of his podling, Keefe.

His memory returned in a flash. *Keefe was put in capsule beside me, because we're pretending to be co-mates.* Blade hit the awakening cycle. His podling frowned, and then his crimson eyes blinked. A few minutes later the lid slid back.

“Why did you wake me up, and not the medics?” Keefe started to rub his eyes, and then stopped to stare at his overgrown nails. “What’s that awful noise?”

“I woke first, and that’s a warning klaxon,” Blade told him.

Keefe’s eyes widened, and he took in a deep breathe. “Has our hull been breached?”

“No, podling.” Feeling steadier, Blade helped his podling to sit. “If that happened we’d be ordered to the life pods.” The hibernation drugs were leaving his system, and his thoughts became clearer. It might take months to get his full strength back.

A door swooshed back, and a wild eyed male looked in at them. “It’s the females,” he shouted. “Something has happened to the females.”

The male left. Several males staggered out the door after the retreating figure.

Keefe stared at Blade for a moment. The color drained out of his face. “Help me out.”

“You’re not fully recovered,” Blade said.

“I’ve got to check on my mate, if something happened to Aziza...”

Blade helped him out.

Keefe attempted a step, only to stumble. He clutched at another unit for support. “I’ll go see about my mate, and you get Paz out of hibernation.”

Blade steadied Keefe with a hand on his arm. “All right, if you’re sure you can manage on your own.”

Keefe nodded and worked his way down the long line of capsules to the door.

The next unit over proved to be the one with another familiar face. Blade palmed the manual awakening button.

Paz’s eyes opened. He screamed and clawed at the glass lid.

“Relax, youngling,” Blade shouted. “The cycle will end in a moment.”

When the lid retracted, Paz lurched up and clung to him, panting and shivering. “By the Mother that was horrible.” He sobbed into Blade’s chest. “I had a nightmare that wouldn’t end.”

“It’s over now.” Blade rubbed his youngest podling’s back.

“I-I saw our maternal-unit with my little podlings in her arms. Lug was at her feet with his arms wrapped around her legs. Our paternal-units were embracing them all and shielding them

with their bodies. A quake hit, and the ceiling fell in, and-and then I saw the solar event that burnt our planet to a cinder.”

“Calm yourself, youngling, that all happened many years ago.”

Paz stared up at the red light, flashing just above them. “Are we in danger?”

“It’s a warning, but they haven’t told us what’s wrong yet.”

“Blessed Goddess. After those endless nightmares, I don’t know if I can take much more.”

“We’re going to be fine.”

“Blade, we’re not fine. Our family is dead.” He rubbed his eyes with a knuckle. “My podlings are gone. I’m all alone.”

“No, you’re not.” Blade hugged his little podling to him. “Keefe and I are with you. We’re still a family.” He chuckled. “We’ll never leave you alone, not even if you wanted us to.”

Paz looked up at him with large, wet, red eyes. “Oh, are you going to stay with us?”

“Of course I am. I wouldn’t miss watching you grow up for anything.” Blade smiled while his mind drifted back to the time he had first been allowed leave from military school. He had come home and saw the new podlings, he had been terribly hurt. *Was my maternal-unit trying to replace me—the throwaway offspring?*

But of the three it was Paz who had crawled over to him, pulled up on his leg and wanted attention. He had that idiot grin all babies seem to have. Blade picked up his new baby podling, even though his paternal-units tensed ready to take him away. However, Paz seemed totally oblivious to the tension he caused by going to Blade. He stuck his thumb in his mouth leaned his head on Blade’s chest, sighed and went to sleep.

Paz trusted me when no one else did. I guess he did want me for a sibling, and he’s the only reason I came on this trip.

When Paz settled down to hiccups, Blade scooped him out of the capsule and set him down. Paz being nine years younger, only came up to his shoulders. “You’re taller. You must have grown a foot. Good thing you wore that oversized garment while you were hibernating.”

“You’re right.” Paz grinned, and then studied Blade’s face. “You’re thinner.”

“It’s being in hibernation for so long, it takes much out of us.”

“Are we there yet?”

“Don’t know.” Blade shrugged one shoulder rolling out in a shrug.

Paz gazed around with wide-eyed. “Where’s Keefe?”

“He went to check on Aziza.”

The sound abruptly shut off, which was a relief but left a dull ringing in Blade’s ears.

A shrill whistle sounded, and a male’s voice rang out over the intercom; “All hands, all hands, and passengers this is the acting Captain speaking. All those out of hibernation must assemble in the mess hall, where an announcement will be given at eighteen hundred hours. That is all.”

“Acting Captain?” Paz glanced at Blade. “What happened to the Captain?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe she isn’t fully recovered from hibernation yet. Some females don’t take hibernation well.” With an arm around him, Blade helped his younger podling walk to the entrance. “Let’s go see what going on.” Several males in silver jumpsuits with large red bands on their upper arms hurried past them, heading toward the hibernation units.

One stopped in front of Blade and Paz and held out a hypo spray. Blade moved his head to the side so the medic could administer the stimulant. Paz did the same and flinched when it hit his skin. “Get down to the mess hall and have a liquid meal. No solid food today, but tomorrow you can have something solid.” the medic said.

“What’s happened, are we there yet?” Paz asked.

“No not yet, and the acting Captain will make his statement later. Go on, you’re in the way here.” The medic hurried over to one of the capsules and started the awakening cycle.

Blade and Paz stepped out into the passageway, just as high pitched keening filled the air.

Paz clutched his podling’s arm and promptly punched holes through the thin material with his overgrown nails. “Something bad has happened.”

Keefe stumbled toward them, sliding his shoulder against the dull gray bulkhead. His head was down and his long hair hid his face.

“Podling, what happened?” Blade asked.

Keefe raised his head to stare at him a moment, as tears streamed down his face then his knees slowly buckled. He folded down on the gray carpeted deck his head and hands out, and his long white and green hair pooled around him.

Paz and Blade ran over and knelt beside Keefe.

Blade pulled his podling up. “What is it, can you tell us?”

“Dead, all dead.” Keefe’s sobs shook his body.

“What is he saying?” Paz’s face went ashen.

“Paz, go get one of the medics. Keefe needs a stimulant.”

“I’ll get him right now.” Paz pushed off from against the wall and ran back into the hibernation room.

Blade waited until the door slid closed before facing his twin. “What happened?”

Keefe rubbed his eyes. “They-they wouldn’t let me see her. I-I was told it was better if I didn’t.”

Blade shook him. “What-why?”

“Aziza’s d-dead.” He sobbed. “All the females and offspring are dead.”

Blade’s throat burned with bile, and his insides turned cold. *It was unthinkable that we’ve could come all this way only to lose the females. It wasn’t fair. We got away from the planet in time.*

Didn’t we?

A door swooshed opened. A medic followed Paz out and hurried over to them. He gave Keefe the stimulant and placed a device on the inside of his wrist. After a quick study of the digital display, he announced, “He’s in shock. Did he see his mate?”

“No, he wasn’t allowed to.” Blade shook his head.

“Good. If he’d seen her, he’d been in worse shape.” The medic took a deep breath and sobbed. “It’s so awful.” He rubbed his face and seemed to get a hold of his emotions. “Take him to the mess and get some nutrition into him. Stay close to him and by the Mother, watch him or he might do himself an injury.” He studied Blade a moment. “Are you mated?”

“Yes. Keefe and I are co-mates.”

“Liar. If you were, you’d be in bad shape too.” He stared at the white, green and lavender band on Blade’s sleeve. “Military,” he spat the word. “I might have known. No wonder you woke up first. This says you’re *not* on active duty, so you can attend your co-mate until the captain has need of your services.” He took the device from Keefe’s wrist and tossed nail clipper on the deck, then left.

“What’s happening?” Paz asked. “I don’t understand what’s happening?”

“Let’s get Keefe to the mess, and then we’ll find out.” Blade grabbed the nail clippers and stood, pulling his podling up with him.

Two

On one side of the cafeteria was an enormous porthole made of a special alloyed ply-glass, showing a view of the stars and large planet just to the side. “Is that Earth?” asked Blade.

“No. Do you see the rings there?” Paz pointed. “According to my studies on the information from the space probe, that’s one of the gas giants in this solar system. We’re heading to the third planet from the Sun.” He sighed with a helpless gesture. “We’re not there yet.”

Blade and his siblings stood in line and got a nutrition shake from the dispenser, then sat on a bench at one of the long dining tables.

Keefe shoved his drink away and laid his head on the table. Tears still trickled down his face, but he seemed calmer. “What am I going to do without her?”

“Survive.” Blade sipped his drink. “That’s all you can do.”

Keefe raked his long white hair out of his face and glared at him. “You’ve never been mated, so what do you know about it?”

“Shh,” hushed Paz, looking around at the few males sitting at the tables nearby. “Not so loud.”

“No.” Blade set down his glass with a thunk. “But I’ve had to survive without my family for seventeen long years. You have no idea what I went through.” *And it was all because of you.*

“What was the military like?” Paz asked.

“Very hard, youngling.” Blade looked at his youngest podling. “Very hard and lonely.”

Paz fiddled with his straw. “Is that why you never show any emotion?”

“He never feels anything.” Keefe stared off into the distance with the corners of his mouth pulled down.

“You’re in pain, mourning your mate and wanting to strike out at someone in your misery.” Blade spaced out his words. “So I’ll let that slide, for now.” *And if you don’t shut it, I’ll give you the beating you deserve.*

Keefe’s expression turned bleak, and he looked away.

“To answer your question, youngling, I had to learn to hide my emotions in order to survive in the military.” Blade folded his arms on the table.

“Or what?” asked Paz his eyes wide.

“Or I was cruelly beaten.” Blade stared at the table top. “I had to endure. I developed a mean look when I fought and a blank face when I stood at attention. Only on leave could I be myself and sometimes not even then.”

“We’re the last of our race. We all have to survive, although how we will without our mates is beyond me.” Keefe reach out with hands that shook, grabbed his drink and drank it down in several gulps.

The cafeteria was crowded by eighteen hundred hours. The appointed time for the announcement came and went, and then the earlier message was heard again over the intercom, but with a later time attached to it.

“Are they going to keep moving the time back?” Blade said.

Keefe sipped from his water bottle the cafeteria staff had passed out. “Are they stalling for time?”

“Don’t know, but it does make you wonder.” Blade took out the nail clippers and took a hold of Keefe’s hand. When he clipped a nail shot out into someone’s drink.

Paz laughed.

Blade smiled at Paz. “Two points if the next one goes into the glass of the grumpy fellow’s at the end of the table.”

“Blade, don’t,” Keefe warned as he tried unsuccessfully to take his hand back.

“Don’t ruin the game.” Blade tightened his grip on his podling’s finger, and then clipped the next nail, and it hit a male on the nose.

“Hey, who did that?” The male wiped his face and looked around.

Blade hid the clippers in his fist, and Keefe turned away. Paz ducked his head and hid a snicker behind his hand.

In a few minutes, Blade grabbed his podling’s hand again. Before long he had his sibling’s overgrown nails clipped down to a normal length, but those around them learned to keep a hand over their glasses.

The door swooshed opened, a one star space cadet by the gold on his sleeve came in and blew a whistle. A hush fell over the crowded room.

A male walked in, dressed all in white with his hair pulled up into a neat, high ponytail. The green ends just brushed his shoulders.

Blade rested his chin on his fist. *So that's why they kept everyone waiting so long. The acting Captain must have taken the time to tidy up.*

The male was flanked by two others similarly dressed. The band of stars on their sleeves went entirely around their upper arms, which indicated they were at the highest position for any male in the space program. He marched over to a small stage set before a screen and looked over the assembled group. "Greetings citizens, I am acting Captain Tug. These are my co-mates Arn acting number one and Ture acting number two." Each nodded in turn.

"Sorry for the delay, but we're been going over the computer's data for the last few hours." Tug looked down for a moment as the murmuring of the room died away. "I have some sad tidings to tell." He lifted his gaze and to study everyone. "When our sun's super event burnt our planet to a cinder, it shot a solar flare after us." His gaze lit briefly on Blade, Keefe and Paz before moving on. "It ate away at the exterior hull, just enough to leaked radiation into our ship." He stopped and took several deep breathes. "The hibernation units did what they were designed to do and injected us with the anti-radiation drug. It worked on us males. However, it didn't save the females."

A gasp went over the assembled males.

"This included my mate, Captain Unna." His chin wiggled for a moment. The two beside him set a hand on his shoulders and bowed their heads. Taking a deep breath, he continued, "We have lost all our females."

Someone stood. "What do you mean all?"

"All. Every. Last. Female."

"What about our offspring? My co-mates and I have-have a daughter, and a set of podlings."

The acting Captain shook his head. "Gone. All gone. Even the younglings weren't spared."

The male slumped down, his face in his hands. Two males beside him put their arms around him. Blade decided they were all co-mates sharing their grief.

Another male waved an arm. "What about the other ships?"

"I've been in contact with ships two and three. They informed me their females and offspring suffered the same fate as ours."

Several questions were yelled out, but sobbing and keening broke out behind and to the side of Blade and his podlings. Keefe ducked his head, wiping at his eyes.

Paz patted Blade's arm. "What are we going to do without females to lead us?"

"Survive."

“They wouldn’t let me in to see my Aziza,” Keefe told someone sitting next to him, and several more leaned in to hear. “I was told earlier that all the females had passed on, but they didn’t know then what had happened. One of the medics had speculated that something faulty in the hibernation capsules was to blame.”

One of the males jerked his head toward the acting Captain. “But they know its radiation now that somehow affected the females but left the rest of us unharmed.”

Someone stood up. “Excuse me acting Captain, but has anyone checked on the Mother?”

“Yes, there is good news at least.” The acting Captain signaled the space cadet by the hatch. “Tell Laski he can come in now.”

He opened the door and the head medic entered followed by a large lavender minx cat.

“The Mother.” The relieved words flowed through the room. The feline jumped up on the table and allowed Herself to be touched and petted.

Three males walked into the room behind the medic and their living Goddess. Blade recognized the trio as the Shadow Warriors. They wore one piece gray suits with the hoods down. Their hair was neatly done like the acting Captain’s. The three kept their gazes moving as they scrutinized everyone in the room with narrowed red-eyed glares. Two kept pace with the Mother as they acted as bodyguards. Even though not an Arcon alive would ever hurt their Goddess.

One warrior glided over and stopped behind the three siblings.

Blade’s shoulder twitched. He stood and turned toward the male, who leaked danger like last week’s garbage leaked stink.

I’m taller. He smirked. “Dirt.”

“That’s Dirk, Blade.” He sized Blade up with a sneer, but kept his arms loose by his sides. “Who did you kill to get on this tug boat to nirvana?”

Blade snorted. “Some nirvana, all our females are dead.”

“Never mind that.” He pierced Blade with a red glare. “Answer the question. How did you end up here? Did you stowaway in the cargo hold? For that alone, I can jettison you out the airlock.”

Blade suppressed a shudder. With a deep calming breath, he lifted of his chin. “I’m mated.”

“Liar,” Dirk snarled, lifting his lip in scorn.

“It’s true,” Blade answered the most dangerous Arcon onboard the ship.

Dirk stepped closer. “Who would be so bold or so foolish to take you as mate?”

“Aziza.”

Dirk’s glance went to Keefe. “Surely not, Prime Pro tem Aziza?”

Keefe stared at the male a moment. Blade had to give his domestic podling credit, he didn’t show any fear of the dangerous male. “My mate bore the love bites from both my podlings before we boarded. The assembled councilmembers who waited to greet my mate were witnesses, and the Captain recorded it just after we were underway. If you don’t believe me, you can inspect the ship’s logs to satisfy your curiosity.”

Dirk gave Keefe a head bow. “It isn’t necessary. I believe you, first mate Keefe, to Prime Pro tem Aziza. I’m sorry for your loss. Aziza was a highly respected councilmember, though still youthful she would have proved to be an outstanding leader. It had been a privilege to guard her on several occasions and observe her leadership in action.”

“Thank you for your condolences.” Keefe nodded, but his gaze slid to Blade.

Dirk drifted away.

Blade sat down, and Keefe leaned past Paz to whisper, “What was that all about? I thought we passed the inquiry, before we boarded the ship.”

“Dirk has had it in for me, for quite some time. Ever since military school, he has always made trouble for me. He just can’t forgive me for besting him on the practice field.”

“Oh?” Paz looked over his shoulder at the retreating figure.

“I was almost one of them, until Ynyr stopped it. To him, it shows weakness that my maternal-unit kept me from a dangerous occupation.” *I would have relished being one of the Shadow Warriors.* Blade took the clippers out and spun them on the table top.

“Why would Ynyr stop you from becoming one of the Shadow Warriors?”

Blade shrugged one shoulder. “They’re an elite team and the highest you can go in the military. They take on the most dangerous assignments and go behind enemy lines. If I had become a Shadow Warrior, I would have been given to a female,” he looked at Keefe, “as mate.”

“That would’ve been better than Aziza lying for you,” Keefe spat back.

Blade spun the clippers so hard they almost flew off the table. He slapped his hand down before they got to the edge. “Maybe Ynyr couldn’t stand the possibility of me, guarding her one day, or maybe she didn’t want me to mate?”

“Keefe, you and Blade need to keep your voices down,” Paz whispered. “We have to keep up the pretense or the acting Captain might do what that male suggested, and jettison Blade out the airlock.”

Keefe slid an arm over his youngest podling and sat his chin in his fist. “I know.” He hugged him one-armed. “Don’t worry. I’m not distraught enough to endanger my family. We’re all that is left.”

The Mother jumped up on the table and stared at Keefe with her slanted red orbs. “My child, it saddens me to see you like this.”

“I lost Aziza, Mother. She was everything to me; my heart, my love, my mate.” He covered his face with one hand.

“I know, my son.” She leaned down and bumped heads with him. “Just don’t give into your grief to the point where it’ll eat you alive.”

“Is that your big announcement today, Mother?” Blade smirked at her. “Don’t mope?”

She stalked over to Blade on stiff legs, until Paz ran his hand down her back. She arched and touched noses with him and then rubbed her cheek against the youngling. “You’re a sweetheart, Paz. I was going to tear into your older podling, but your touch makes me less angry.”

Blade placed his hand over his heart. “You’ve saved me, youngling, from a scratching and a scolding.”

“You may still get the scratching.” The Mother narrowed her eyes.

Paz tickled her under the chin. “I’ll give up meat for you.”

“You don’t have to, sweetie. I’m given enough nourishment to sustain me, but I’ll cherish that you asked all the same. If you were female, then I would request you for my Handmaiden.”

“Take him.” Blade grinned. “It wouldn’t be the first time Paz wore female clothing.”

“Blade,” Paz whined as his face blushed a deep lavender. “I was little when our maternal-unit dressed me that way.”

“It’s all right, sweetie,” the Mother whispered. “It’ll be our little secret.”

“Thank you,” Paz whispered back and ducked his head, his color deepening to purple.

“As for you Blade,” she walked in front of him, staring him in the eye, “lighten up.” She lifted her chin to smile. “We’ll be at a whole new world soon, filled with billions of people you can insult.”

When she walked past him, Blade gave her heart shaped butt a couple of pats.

She looked back at him, and winked with the tip of her tongue sticking out. “Just try that when I’m in my other form.”

“Blade,” Paz scolded, “you must show the Mother more respect than that. She is the mother of our species.”

“She likes that I’m irreverent toward her.” Blade chuckled. “I think she tires of being worshiped.”

“Attention, citizens,” said Ture, the number two. “We’re assigning cabins. Come up when your name is called. You can retire to your rooms and get cleaned up. Time limits on the showers are five minutes.”

“Five minutes?” A male, sitting beside Blade complained. “I can’t wash my hair in five minutes.” He grabbed his white hair in both hands. “Look at this mess. After I’ve slept on it for thirty years, it’ll take hours to fix.”

“Do the best you can,” Blade suggested.

“Oh, look whom I’m complaining to,” He snorted, “A military male. You can wash in five minutes. You don’t care what you look like. You’re not a domestic.”

Blade leaned back and wondered if the male would have the courage to say that if he were in full battle gear. “Neither are you...anymore.”

“Keefe, Paz and Blade Starstrider,” called out number two.

“Got to go,” Blade told the male whose hands appeared to be stuck in his hair from his overgrown hooked nails. “Time to take my five minute shower.”

Ture handed Keefe the cabin door cards. “I gave you three the cabin your mate would have shared with you. I am sorry for your loss.” He set his hand on Keefe’s shoulder. “Aziza would have been an excellent successor to your maternal-unit.”

“Thank you,” Keefe murmured, before he headed out the door with Blade and Paz following behind.

Three

Blade emerged from the shower cleaner than he thought he could do with the time limit. The dryer hummed and blew warm air, evaporating the water from his skin and hair. Before his shower, he had taken out his warrior's topknot. He turned to stare at his reflection in the full length mirror. His hair was down to his knees. "By the mother."

Thank the Goddess for the hibernation drugs or it would have been longer. As it was he had only aged one year for ten, and his nails and hair only had three years growth instead of thirty.

He picked up a folded coveralls, then put them on. Blade pulled his long hair out and entered the main cabin.

Keefe and Paz sat cross legged on the larger bed, which Keefe had claimed as first mate. Both his siblings were dressed in their silver jumpsuits of the mated civilian class. Keefe worked carefully brushing out Paz's hair, and sectioning it off. A pair of scissors lay nearby with a pile of clipped hair. This luxury cabin had everything that they needed, including a full grooming set.

As the metal in Paz's hair was exposed to the air from the freshly cut ends, green color ran up the white tresses and then stopped half way along the length. The youngling sat very still with his back straight, which made Blade wonder if he had been scolded for fidgeting.

"Keefe, can you cut my hair next?"

"No." Keefe hardly glanced his way as he brushed out another section of Paz's hair.

"What do you mean, no?" Blade grabbed a handful of hair and realized that the air dryer had made it frizzy. "Look at it. I'm not a youngling to run around with it this long, and it too lengthy for a warrior's topknot."

"I'll trim it, but I won't cut it. You have to wear it long."

Blade folded his arms over his chest. "Oh, why is that?"

"All the mated males wear their hair in a long ponytail. And you, Paz and I are of the highest ranking males here, so our hair must be worn high." Keefe's locks had already been carefully attended to; his bangs were cut to flow down either side of his face, the green tipped ends down to his waist.

"Why, there are no females to care?" Blade sat down on the bottom bunk.

"This is for Aziza, your pretend mate. Remember her?" A look of pain washed over Keefe's features. "The other males will notice, and question why you're not respecting your mate's passing."

“All right, but no bangs.” Blade threw his hands in the air. “I haven’t worn it this long since I was a youngling.”

“Get used to it,” Keefe growled, but his eyes shimmered with unshed tears.

Blade pulled his hair over his shoulder, reached for a brush and tore it through his hair.

“Not like that,” Keefe snapped. “You’re going to make it tangled. Let me finish with Paz and I’ll do yours.”

“I’m not a youngling that can’t brush out his own hair,” Blade snarled back.

“No, but you are acting like one.”

“Fine, go ahead and disparage me.” Blade flopped back on the bunk.

“Don’t fight,” Paz pleaded. “I hate it when you two fight.”

A shrill whistle sounded over the intercom system. “Attention all hands and passengers, this is acting Captain Tug. Memorial services will be held tomorrow at sixteen hundred hours in cargo bay three. That is all.”

“That was short,” Blade commented with his hands tucked behind his head.

“Too short for an entire life time,” muttered Keefe looking glum.

Nearly the entire population of Spaceship Arcon One stood in two honor columns, going from one end of the cargo bay to the airlock. All the males wore the silver ship’s jumpsuit with a band to indicate their caste and mated status. Their hair was worn in a ponytail, and they stood with their hands clasped before them to show respect. The Shadow Warriors and the other less elite bodyguards escorted each coffin down the long walkway, two beside and one in the rear.

Blade and Paz stood to either side of Keefe. Their position at the end of the line was one of respect for their deceased mate Aziza.

“Captain Unna, from the Firestorm clan,” acting Captain Tug read with a sob that echoed around the huge chamber. “She was maternal-unit to Kim, an unweaned youngling resting forever by her side.” He stopped and shook his head. Arn took the reader from him. Tug turned his back to the assembly, and number three put his arms around him.

“They’re mourned by Unna’s three mates; acting Captain Tug, Arn acting number one, and Ture acting number two.” The three males watched the coffin, which contained their beloved and only child, exit through the force field then drift off into space.

“Councilmember Vega, clan Mooncutter,” Arn continued. “She is mourned by her mates Art, Ziv and Bink.” The named mates wept openly and held on to each other as their mate’s coffin made its last voyage out the air lock.

On it continued, and when Ture’s voice broke, the Captain switched places with his co-mate.

Blade’s mind drifted from the mind numbing listing of names until he noticed that Paz was looking around Keefe, trying to get his attention. “What is it, youngling?”

“Who is that old male staring at us over there?”

Blade glanced across to the other row, and the glowering older male. “That’s the number three mate to Councilmember Laysa who was in Shadowpacer clan I believe.”

“Why is he glaring at us?”

“He wooed Ynyr,” Keefe told him. “But our maternal-unit said he only wanted her power, and told him so.”

“Told him off more likely,” Blade added, knowing their maternal-unit’s bluntness. “He probably hasn’t forgotten the insult.”

“When are they going to get to...” Paz trailed off with a look toward their somber podling.

“She will come last,” Keefe whispered. “My mate was the best of them.”

With close to a thousand females, most with offspring, it took a while to reach the end, and the place of honor. The Shadow Warriors walked silently by the last coffin and stopped. All heads turned in Keefe, Blade and Paz’s direction.

Keefe’s head came up, and he swallowed so hard it must have hurt.

Dirk gaze locked with Blade, and he jerked his eyes toward Keefe.

Blade answered the silent order by taking his podling’s upper arm. Paz imitated him, slipping his hand around Keefe’s other forearm. The strength started to go out of Keefe’s shaking legs. Blade tightened his grip to support his weight.

“It is with great regret and sadness that I announce this final name; Prime Pro Tem, Aziza from the Starstrider clan,” Captain Tug announced. “She would have been sworn in as our new leader when we made orbit around the planet Earth, our new home. She was our Prime Ynyr’s choice of successor.”

“Aziza, my Aziza.” Keefe sobbed.

“She is mourned by her mate Keefe, and by her two new mates Paz and Blade. All three are offspring from Prime Ynyr of the Catchclaw clan. Aziza will be greatly missed.”

The captain turned off his electronic reader, and then nodded for the last coffin to exit the ship.

Keefe lunged after his mate’s capsule. “No, no, let me go with her.”

“No, Keefe, stop it,” Paz wailed. “I don’t want you to die.”

“It’s my place to be with her always, even in death.” Keefe pulled Paz around, but Blade grimly dug in his heels and leaned back on his arm. *I’ll have to knock him out. Maybe a nerve pinch will do the trick?*

The captain signaled the head medic. “Laski, we’re of need of your assistance.”

Laski ran over with an injection spray. “Hold him still.”

“No, let me die with her.” Keefe struggled between them, but Laski pressed the spray against his neck and he went limp.

Blade held his podling until two more medics hurried over with a gurney, and gently took Keefe’s unresisting body.

“Come along, we’re going to the infirmary,” Laski told Blade and Paz. “He’ll need to see family when he wakes up. Even you.” He glared at Blade’s dark green arm band.

Four

“Aziza, Aziza.” Keefe jerked awake. He tried to move his hands and couldn’t. They seemed to be bound to the bed.

“Relax, podling.” Blade sat beside him in a chair. “You’re in the infirmary.”

Keefe yanked on the wrist cuffs. “Why am I tied down?”

“So you won’t hurt yourself.”

“I would not.” He stiffened.

Blade sat straighter. “You almost threw yourself out the airlock.”

“I did?” The horrible memory came swimming back. *Aziza’s gone, gone*. The empty feeling of loss threatened to pull him down again. “Blessed Goddess, I did.” Feeling as if he had been punched in the gut, Keefe found it difficult to breath. He stared up at the bulkhead and tears rolled from the corners of his eyes. “Where’s Paz?”

“He’s here.”

Keefe lifted his head. His youngest podling was curled in a second chair, his arms around a flat lavender feline shape. “When did he get his pillow?”

“Paz was almost as hysterical as you were, so I told him to watch you so I could get permission from the captain to get his pillow out of storage.”

“Smart thinking.” His gaze went to Blade. “Did you get—?”

“Yes, I got your things too.”

“How’s the patient?” The head medic looked in, the badge on his ship’s suit read Laski. He moving past the green and lavender striped curtains that made up the small room.

“I’m fine.” Keefe jerked out the cuffs. “Take these off, now.”

“In time.” The medic stuck a device on his forehead. “I just need to check your vitals first. Your blood pressure is up,” he told him. “Your temperature is fine. But your brainwaves tell me, you’re suffering from depression, which is perfectly normal under the circumstances. Also,” he peered at Keefe’s eyes, “you’ve been weeping again.”

“So, give me a hypo spray of something, and let me go back to my cabin.”

“I’d love to,” Laski folded his hands, “but with the deaths of the females and offspring, all the mated males are...not well, to put it mildly.”

“Then un-cuff me, and you can have my bed.”

“I need to ask you a few questions first.”

“Fine.” Keefe rolled his head toward the wall.

“What are you thinking about, right this minute?”

“Huh?” The absurdity of the question startled him.

“Just answer the question.”

“I’m thinking...I need to urinate.” Keefe heard his podling give a snort.

“Oh?” That seemed to surprise the medic. Laski reached over to the bedside table and pick-up a hospital urinal, the look on his face remained professionally neutral.

Keefe eyed the urinal as a flush of heat spread up from his neck. “Can’t I go to the bathroom?”

“No, you might not come back.” Laski pulled down the covers, reaching for the fasteners on Keefe’s one piece coverall.

“If I answer all your questions then can I go?” His podling was seriously laughing now. “Blade, shut-up.”

The medic replaced the covers. “If you answer my questions to my satisfaction then you can go anywhere you like, or out the airlock for all I care.”

“Fine.”

“What are you thinking of doing after you use the restrooms?” Laski set the urinal on the side table.

“Going through the box that I packed before boarding.” He realized that he wanted to hold something from when his mate was still alive, and he was happy.

“You have that already?”

“Yes, my co-mate got it for me.” He nodded toward Blade.

“What’s in it?”

Keefe blinked and had to think, it seemed ages ago that he packed. “My crystal recording collection.”

“What’s in it?”

“The usual, music, literature and images of my mate.” *I can see Aziza’s beautiful face again.* He took a breath and blew it out. “And images of my family.”

“Have you any thoughts of harming yourself or others?”

“No,” Keefe snapped. “Goddess, why would I want to do that?”

“It happens.” Laski eyelids lowered as if he found his own questions boring. “Last question. What language are we speaking?”

Keefe had to think, it wasn’t the Mother’s tongue as he spoke from childhood. *What was it?* Then he remembered the voice that whispered lessons and found a whole world of language patterns tucked away in his brain. It was from the learning devices from when they were in hibernation. There was also a cursing section. *By the Mother, I hope Blade doesn’t make a similar discovery.* “English, but with a slight British accent.”

“You’re telling the truth. And you’re thinking not reacting.” Laski pulled the device off his forehead. “You may go now.”

“You used that for lie detection?” Keefe frowned. He didn’t know if he should be appalled or glad.

“It worked didn’t it?” Laski unfastened the padded cuffs. “Go urinate. The head is by the front desk on the right.”

Keefe didn’t waste any time, but scrambled off the bed and headed in the direction the medic indicated.

When Keefe emerged immensely relieved, and a few ounces lighter, Blade stepped away from the wall where he had been waiting for him. Paz snuggled in his arms like a much younger youngling. *My world has narrowed down to just my siblings and me.*

“Ready to go?”

“Yes.” Keefe and his family headed down the hall without another word.

“Keefe?” Blade said.

“Hmm?” Keefe looked up from the romance he was reading on his viewer, as he rested on his side on the bigger bed.

“Paz says he’s hungry, and I’m taking him down to the cafeteria for a meal. Do you want to come with us?”

“No, I’m not hungry.” Keefe lightly touched the screen, causing the page to move to the next one.

“The voting is today in the cafeteria. You should come with us and get it over with.”

“No, I rather not.”

“Too bad,” Paz jumped off the top bunk. “It’s the first time in our recorded history that males have been allowed to vote. I wish I was old enough to participate.”

“Keefe,” Blade looked at his podling, “you’re the only one who can beat Styr. It’s not too late to change your mind on running for Prime.”

“Oh, I don’t think so.” Keefe face heated at the compliment. “There are more qualified males than I am.” He looked back at his viewer. “Anyway they wouldn’t have actually voted for me. I would have only been a substitute for my mate and our maternal-unit. After I was invited to run for prime, I told them, I wanted no part of it.”

“Still, I think you could win if you tried.”

Keefe rolled his shoulder in a half shrug. “It’s still just a popularity contest.”

When his podling left, Keefe inserted a crystal into his viewer, and a picture came on the screen. He stared a long moment at the pale skinned, red eyed and lavender haired female. “Aziza, my heart, my soul, if I didn’t have my podlings to worry about, I would join you.”

Keefe jerked awake when he door swooshed open, and his podlings entered. Paz set a plastic cup and spoon beside him. “I got an extra dessert and brought it back for you.”

“The voting is over,” Blade announced. “Get this, Styr’s two older co-mates committed suicide this morning, and then he got voted in as Prime.”

“Thanks Paz, I was just feeling hungry.” Keefe sat up with a smile at his youngest podling, before turning his attention to his oldest. “He got in on a sympathy vote?”

“Looks like” Blade pressed his lips together into one thin line.

“What a happy coincidence for him.” Keefe’s chest tightened at the thought of two more deaths. *We can’t afford to lose even one more person, and here this conniving male has thoughtlessly conned his two co-mates into taking their lives.* He stared at the desert container, his appetite gone. *If I had run for office, would they have lived?* “You think he did the deed?”

Blade crossed his arms over his chest. “No, but I wouldn’t put it past him to place the idea in their heads, and leave something handy lying around to do it with.”

A loud whistle sounded. “This is Captain Tug. For the first time in our people’s history, a male only election has taken place to appoint a male only government. We have a new governing body as of today. At oh-eight hundred hours tomorrow, we will have a swearing in ceremony. Please attend.

“Also it has come to my attention that the number of suicides by passive means and otherwise is on the increase. To take our own lives would be abhorrent to our females, especially when there are so few of us left. We must go on without them.

“E.T.A. on reaching our destination is twenty-six hours and counting. That is all.”

Five

The following morning while Blade and his siblings were getting ready go to the cafeteria, a whistle sounded. “This is the captain speaking. Blade Starstrider, you’re needed. Come to the lounge in area two.”

“What do they want you for?” Keefe looked at his twin from where he was brushing Paz’s hair.

“Don’t know, but I better go find out.” Blade finished pulling up his hair in a high ponytail.

“Meet us in the observation lounge in area three. Paz wants to watch our approach.”

“See you there.” Blade hurried out of their cabin, down the long hallway. Taking the elevator, he was soon in area two.

The door swooshed opened, Blade walked in and spotted Captain Tug talking to the new Prime Pro tem Styr.

Movement caught his gaze. The Shadow Warriors on either side of the door quickly seized Blade’s arms.

“Let go of me.” Blade tried to jerk out of their grip.

“The Prime has a few questions to ask you, Blade.” Dirk sneered, dragging him over to Styr.

“What is this?” Captain Tug looked from Blade to Styr. “I thought you had me summon Blade, because you wanted him for part of your honor guard when you took your oath of office?”

“I’m just helping you do your job, Captain,” Styr said with a superior smirk.

“How is that?” The Captain furrowed his brow.

“Blade here is a military male. He should have been left behind when we left. Now I wonder why he is here, hmm?”

“I’m mated,” Blade snarled at Styr, “to Aziza.” *Is Dirk going to get his way and send me out an airlock?* His stomach gave a quick painful twist.

Styr walked around Blade examining him like a piece of meat at the market, touching the Shadow Warriors so they’d move back.

Blade straightened, with his arms firmly by his side and his chin up during the inspection.

“Keefe had been Aziza’s mate on Arcon, and no one disputes that. He put on quite a show of devotion at the memorial service. Paz is young, brilliant and will be a scientist someday. Even if Aziza lied no one questions his being with us. But you, Blade, don’t belong here. The military were ordered to stay behind and keep the peace until the bitter end. It was the females’ brilliant idea to free us of the taint of violence from the military males. Yet,” he looked Blade up and down, “here you are.”

Blade fisted his hands, and his chin raised a fraction higher, as his blood ran cold. “Are you questioning Aziza’s honor?”

“That would be foolish. She can’t after all defend herself.” Styr stepped back.

“I’ll get the truth out of him.” Dirk drew a whip and slashed at Blade.

Blade leaped out of the way. He didn’t think he just ran, with Dirk giving chase. He snatched a chair that he passed, and then spun. The whip cracked across the seat, shattering plastic and shredding cloth. He swung the seat back like a weapon, but a kick from Dirk broke it in two.

Two pieces remained, which Blade held one high and one low. “Any time, Dirt.”

“That’s Dirk you imbecile.” Dirk cracked the whip.

Blade used what remained of the chair to block the whip, and it wound around the chair leg. He yanked the weapon out of Dirks grip. Then he knocked away the kick that aimed for his side. “Sloppy. How did you get into the Shadow Warriors?”

“Why you—” Dirk reached for a knife on his belt.

“Enough,” Captain Tug bellowed. “I’m captain here, and you will listen to me.”

“Yes, Captain.” Dirk came to immediate attention.

Blade dropped what he was holding, and did the same. “Yes, Captain.”

“Blade, you were defending yourself, which I can excuse.” The captain’s gaze went to Dirk. “As for you, you deliberately attacked an unarmed male without provocation. Dirk, I’m ordering you into the brig to cool down. If that’s not enough, the enforcer’s rod will gladly heat up your back.”

“Captain, a military male is never unarmed,” Styr corrected him. “His body *is* a lethal weapon.”

Tug jerked his head to Styr. “On my ship, Prime pro tem, anyone who doesn’t possess a weapon is unarmed.”

“Very well, Captain.” Styr gave a head bow. “But we still haven’t addressed Blade’s right to being here.”

“Why do we need to?” Captain Tug spread his hands out from his sides. “He is here, we need to accept that and move on.”

Blade silently blessed the male. He had the same level headedness of his deceased mate.

“Very well.” Styr paused for a moment with his hand on his chin. “Then if you are going to throw Dirk in the brig, I ask to use Blade for part of my honor guard for the swearing in ceremony.”

“I don’t know what you are playing at, Styr.” Tug narrowed his eyes. “And I do not like it one bit; however, I will give my permission.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Styr smirked. He acted as if he had won something, but Blade wasn’t sure what. “Blade, attend me.”

Blade followed him, wondering what game the male was up to.

Blade walked into the observation lounge, muttering under his breath. He spun and hit the wall with his fist, making the door open again.

“What’s wrong?” Keefe turned toward him. “Did you get questioned by Dirk again?”

“Not exactly, I got dragged in on guard duty, and had to stay there watching that smirking Styr take his oath of office.” Blade kicked a chair, knocking it over.

Keefe raised an eyebrow ridge, then got up and righted the chair. “As bad as that?”

“Yes.” Blade took deep breaths, trying to calm down.

“Do you think he did that for petty revenge, on Ynyr?”

Blade’s eyes widened. “By the Mother, you’re right.”

“He must be happy, Styr has always wanted to be near power, and now he has power of his own.”

“I have a bad feeling about this, podling.” Blade shook his head.

“Look, there.” Paz jumped up. “See, that blue ball? That’s it.” The small planet got bigger while they approached, and in minutes filled the view. “Oh, isn’t it beautiful?”

“Look at all that water,” Blade said in awe.

“Lots of blue,” Keefe agreed. “It’s a pretty little planet.”

“Home,” said a female’s voice.

Blade looked around. The Mother stood watching the view in her nude biped form. In this form, she resembled their females. She pulled over her lavender colored hair over body for modesty. “What did you say, Mother?”

Keefe made a sound in his throat as he stared at their living Goddess. Glancing at his podling, Blade realized he must be thinking of Aziza.

“That’s our new home.” She moved past Blade and Keefe, shimmered as she turned back to her cat form and jumped into Paz’s lap.

“I hope the people there are nice,” Paz said with his arms around the Mother.

A whistle sounded. “This is the Captain speaking. Today is a day of many firsts for all our people. We have a new governing body sworn in today. The first in Arcon society made up entirely of males. Also, we have arrived at our destination. For those of you on the left side of the ship in the viewing lounges, you will see a blue planet, the planet Earth. This will be our new home.

“Prime Styr will now say a few words on this historic occasion.”

“Thank you Captain Tug,” said a new voice, sounding clipped and superior. “I am your new Prime, Styr. After the voting in ceremony, I and the newly elected council have voted in three new articles.”

“Here it comes.” Blade threw up his hands.

“One,” Styr went on, “we will be mourning for our deceased mates for the next six months. Second, we will not be disembarking for Earth or communicating with its people during that time.”

“We came all this way, and all we’re going to do is look at it?” Paz’s chin wobbled.

“That Styr,” Mother said with disgust. “Power mad already and he just got voted in.”

“Third,” Styr continued, “we cannot afford anymore suicides. It has been my misfortune to lose my two dearly departed co-mates.”

“Funny, I didn’t think he cared,” Blade snarked.

“So,” the Prime continued, “as of today a verdict has been reached that anyone who can’t cope will be put back indefinitely in the hibernation tanks.”

“You have to admit,” Blade traded a meaningful look with Keefe, “it could be a useful way to get rid of anyone who disagrees with him.”

Keefe and Blade walked into the cafeteria, stopped to stare at the ten foot screen above the raised platform, showing humans screaming in terror. The room was almost empty except for Paz, and someone hammering the huge ply-glass porthole with a chair.

“Don’t tell me the humans are terrified of us,” Blade asked.

“No,” Paz said without a glance in their direction, “their running away from a giant lizard.”

“What giant lizard?” Keefe looked at the youngling.

Paz finally glanced their way. “From what I can discern it’s a creature that comes out of the sea and destroys Tokyo every twenty years.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, but it looks pissed.” Paz turned toward the screen.

“What about the Earthers?” Keefe asked, watching the male who was still slamming the chair into the window. “Blade, can he break the glass with that chair?”

“No,” Blade answered with a quick glance at the male, “it’s made to withstand small meteors. I doubt he could damage it with a plastic chair.”

Paz clicked on the controls, and the scenes changed. “This is called the News; it plays every hour around the world in many different countries and in different languages.”

They watched the humans gape at what they were seeing in the sky, and turn to each other to say something. Next a serious looking human male commanded the view, “And that is the scene carried out all over the world today, as we gaze heavenward looking at these strange aircrafts that have invaded our solar system and set up a parking orbit around our planet.” The screen flickered, and they saw their space ship viewed from Earth; three large round, flat disks with a flashing light underneath, just visible in the lower atmosphere.

“According to the pentagon, ‘armed forces have been put on high alert, while radio communications on all frequencies have been tried without success.’ And the president has this to say.”

The scene changed to a dark skinned male with short black hair, wearing some sort of dark gray uniform with something tied around his neck. Blade wondered if the thing around his neck interfered with his breathing. “My fellow American’s do not be afraid. We still do not know what these ‘so called’ aliens want. We need to be patient and wait for them to communicate with

us. Please don't do anything rash, and try to live your lives like they are not there. I promise to keep you all informed of any changes."

The scene changed back to the first human, "As America and the rest of the world waits, most of the larger cities have had an increase in violence; murder, looting and suicides. Back to today's weather—"

A crash sounded, and the male banging the window threw down the broken chair. He picked up another one and started hitting the window again.

Paz changed the channel back to the monster flaming a build with its fiery breath and got absorbed in the vid again.

"Blade, can you stop him?" Keefe gestured at the male and the window.

"Sure." Blade walked over to the male still working on destroying either the window, or another chair.

"Don't hurt him."

"All right, but you take all the fun out of it." Blade waited till the male had the chair all the way back for another swing, and plucked it out of his hands.

The male turned around with a look of rage in his fevered gaze, violet color crept up from his neck.

Blade calmly sat down in the chair, crossed his arms and stared back. *Now what are you going to do?*

The male bent to pick up another one, and Blade swung his long legs into it. The male went further away and took hold of another chair. Blade moved and sat in that one too.

The male walked five feet over and then carefully set his hands on a different one.

Blade wagged a finger. "Un-huh."

The male seem to focus on Blade's green armband, and slowly sank down in a seat, his gaze didn't leave Blade's. He swallowed hard.

He's afraid I'll hurt him because I'm military. Normally I don't like civilians being afraid of me, but today that's a good thing. "Good boy."

The door swooshed open, Dirk and his fellow Shadow Warriors hurried into the room. "Where's the male that was hitting the window?"

Keefe and Paz shrugged at him.

“Blade?” Dirk asked, his gaze going to where he sat by the window.

“I just got here.”

“How about you,” Dirk demanded of the male sitting near Blade. “Did you see him?”

He shook his head.

“My new friend and I were just taking in the view.” Blade gestured out the big porthole.

“Great, he’s gone,” Dirk complained and stalked out with the rest of his squad.

“You could have turned me in,” the male told Blade.

“Yeah, I could have.” Blade put his feet in the floor, thinking about being manhandled the other day by Dirk and his Shadow Warriors. He didn’t want that for this male. The civilian had the soft look of a domestic.

“Why didn’t you?”

“I think everyone needs to let off steam, when they’re having a bad day and not have to be put into the hibernation tanks for it.”

The male shivered.

“By the way, that was pretty gutsy of you, hitting the window with a chair. What did you think would happen if you did manage to break the window?”

The male glanced at the window. “I don’t know. I wasn’t thinking that far ahead.” He rubbed his forehead. “I was feeling closed in and thought I needed some air.”

“There’s no air out there.” Blade nodded toward the window. “The only thing outside is the vacuum of space.”

The door swooshed open and two males came in. “Dill,” said one of the males sounding relieved. “We’re been looking all over for you.” The two males hurried over fussed over their now calm co-mate, while Blade smiled at the reunion.

“Hi everyone and welcome to my brand new show,” said a cheerful female “I’m your host Miz Fixit, Audrey Westberry.” The female had her lavender hair pulled up in a high ponytail. She wore some sort of outfit that might have made someone else look boxy, except with her generous figure it didn’t.

Her voice drew Blade from across the room like a siren’s call. “She looks like our females.”
Except she’s prettier.

“No, the color’s off,” Paz corrected him as he worked on a box. “I fiddled with the transceiver and managed to grab a show on a narrow bandwidth.”

Blade frowned at the youngling. “How are you getting these vids?”

“They’re beamed out on a satellite. I managed to snag it, but I’m having trouble with the color.” Paz turned something, and the female’s hair turned pink and then went back to lavender. “It’s centered in a small urban area called Fresno California.”

“Don’t adjust it anymore, just leave it that way.” Keefe leaned forward with his elbows on his knees.

The female gestured to the area where equipment was setup. “This is my workshop, where I will be showing you in the months to come how to make everything from benches to gazebos.”

“She looks wonderful,” Keefe said with his chin on his hand.

Blade sat down next to him and couldn’t take his eyes off her. “She does.”

“All our plans will be available on our website [www dot Miz Fixit dot com](http://www.MizFixit.com).”

The other males sat down behind them.

The door opened, and more males came in. “Who is that?”

“She said her name was Audrey,” said Dill.

“Audrey.” Blade rolled the name around in his mind. *Exotic just like she is.*

They sat down, too. “She’s beautiful.”

“Are there more females like that down on Earth?”

“They have females with every skin and hair color you can imagine,” Paz said.

“They sound so exotic,” the male said behind them. “Then why are we still up here? I want to meet these exotic Earth females.”

“You’ll have to take that up with Styr.” Blade glanced over his shoulder at the thin faced male.

“And get thrown into a hibernation tank just for asking a question?” The male shook his head. “No thanks.”

The female dropped something and quickly picked it up. She looked to someone off camera a moment and shrugged with a grin. Her face took on a deeper color. Audrey’s gaze returned to the camera. “Sorry about that, first day jitters.”

Blade ran a hand over the green color of his arm band. *Would she be interested in a military male?* “I wish I could tell her that she’s doing a fine job.”

“By the Mother,” breathed Keefe. “I’d love to meet her.”

Blade smiled at how his podling was fixated on the female on the screen. It was good to see him dwell on something other than his grief over losing Aziza. “If we ever get down there, we’ll do just that.”