

NANCEY CUMMINGS



SHADOW MARK

SHATTERED



GALAXIES

SHADOW MARK

SHATTERED GALAXIES

BOOK TWO

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Cover illustration Phantom Dame 2023

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ABOUT SHADOW MARK



A king without an heir must be in want of a queen.

Baris has sacrificed his health to bring peace to the kingdom. He has always put the needs of the crown above his own, even entering a loveless marriage for a political alliance. He bore it all with stoic dignity.

Now the queen is dead, and he must select a new queen. Someone who brings wealth or influence. Someone with the approval of the council.

So why can't he stop thinking of the human doctor with the fine eyes?

He rescued her when a portal dumped her on a wild moon, and he may have made some unflattering remarks about her person.

He must correct this mistake. He offers her a position at the palace as a medic, fully intending to win her affections.

The council won't approve. Lenore barely tolerates him, but his heart is most ardent and will not be denied.

First impressions matter.

And King Baris? The worst.

He's beautiful and powerful, sure, and he also has an enormous... ego.

Lenore overhears what he really thinks of her— not flattering, by the way— and isn't going to stick around to be insulted.

So why then does she accept his job offer? Must be the alien gravity playing tricks on her.

You don't get a second chance at a first impression.

Shadow Mark is a **slow burn, royal romance** with Pride and Prejudice vibes between an alien king and a stubborn human doctor, and a **Happily Ever After**. No cheating. While Shadow Mark can be read on its own, it is the sequel to Splintered Shadow, so why not read both?

INTRODUCTION TO SHATTERED GALAXIES

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

It was a mistake.

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

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

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

Until, a year later, it all went wrong.

CHAPTER ONE



LENORE

TWO YEARS Ago

“JUST LOOK.” Brad waved the phone in her face.

Lenore stepped back, holding out her hands to fend off the phone. Being cornered by her ex-husband was not how she wanted to spend one of her precious few breaks. Fifteen minutes was barely enough time to gobble down something resembling nutrition and chug a coffee, but there was Brad, blathering on about wanting to bury the hatchet.

She desperately wanted to tell him where to bury his hatchet, but they were drawing an audience. She couldn't afford word to get back to the Chief of Medicine that she caused a scene outside the hospital cafeteria, not if she wanted to finish her residency and become an attending. Working at the same hospital as her ex was a bad idea, but the divorce had been two years ago, and they were adults.

Mostly.

“Fine, but you're buying me a sandwich. And *not* turkey.” Lenore grabbed the phone. The happy faces of a pair of golden Labradors filled the screen. “What am I looking at?”

“Lenny and Nevermore. Our puppies. We named Lenny after you.” Brad beamed with satisfaction.

Lenore glitched. That was the only way to describe it because this trifling man did not just tell her that he named his puppies Lenore and Nevermore.

“I'm sorry—Nevermore? For a golden lab?” she asked, because this was a professional setting, even if Brad was testing her.

“Cute, right?” He crowded next to her, reaching over to flick through the endless puppy photos. A notification popped up about a system update. He swiped the message away.

He was fucking with her. Had to be. She could think of a few names better than what he'd picked. Peanut Butter and Jelly. Frick and Frack. Gumbo and Jambalaya. Zeppole and Beignet.

She was hungry, and this fool was wasting her break, just like he wasted her twenties.

“What happened to being too busy for the responsibility of a pet?” She had lobbied for years for them to adopt a cat, but he wouldn't budge on his no-pet stance. They were too busy between school and his residency. It wouldn't be fair on the animal, especially two labor-intensive puppies.

“Marie is a big dog lover, and this pair won me over.”

Marie. The second wife who apparently had a regular schedule, and now puppies.

It was too much. The universe asked too much of Lenore.

“I'm sorry. Do you think I'm an idiot?” she asked, clutching his phone. “I suppose you must, but then again, I don't think you care about anyone other than yourself enough to notice when you're being insensitive. Lenore and Nevermore? Who names their dog after their ex? That's weird and mean, Brad, even for you.”

His eyes narrowed and he opened his mouth to add what would be, no doubt, an incredibly biting retort, but Lenore never got to hear it. That was the moment the phone buzzed and the lights in the corridor flickered off.

A portal opened in front of her, rainbow colors swirling around a void. The wind picked up, sweeping loose paper toward the portal like a black hole. Flyers on the bulletin board flapped. Empty plastic bags got caught in the whirlpool. Her hair whipped around her face. The lanyard holding her staff badge lifted from her chest, drawn to the portal.

This was totally not covered in the hospital handbook. She felt like her brain wasn't processing events correctly because nothing about this scenario was plausible. Was she having a stroke? Sleep-deprived delusions?

Lenore released the phone. It flew into the void.

There was no light, only the swirling rainbow of the void, splashing light haphazardly like a bad trip to the chocolate factory.

The wind grew stronger, increasing from a what-in-tarnation breeze to a what-the-fuck gale. She stumbled forward, pulled against her will.

Brad grabbed her hand, halting her progress. Lenore reached for him with her free hand, but the corridor currently felt like standing in a hurricane. Her hand flailed wildly, fighting the wind. Finally, just as she snagged the white coat sleeve, the wind picked her up off her feet.

“Hang on!” Brad’s eyes went wide in panic even as his grip held tight. He had both hands on her now. Green, yellow, and blue light flickered over his face. Lenore was completely off her feet at this point, nearly horizontal. The void was a vortex at this point, pulling everything into it that it could, including Brad.

His feet skidded across the floor, pulled forward by the void.

Green, yellow, and blue flashed again.

Brad appeared sad, like he had reached a difficult decision.

“Don’t you do it,” Lenore warned, knowing what conclusion he reached.

“I’m sorry,” he said, and let her go.

“You dick!” Lenore shouted, even as the wind ripped the words out of her mouth. She flew backward into the void, into darkness.

SHE HATED THE OUTDOORS. It was so itchy. And hot. And humid. Bugs kept biting her, and there was mud everywhere. Washing seemed pointless. Why bother cleaning her feet when the rain would start again, never allowing this place to dry out? Wherever this place was. Not Earth. She knew that much.

How did she know that? Good question. So glad you asked.

The big ass giant red planet hanging over her head clued her in.

Yeah. It was a lot. She'd need a minute to unpack the how and why of how she got lost in a jungle on an alien planet, but survival took up all her energy.

At least the giant red planet hanging overhead was pretty. Breathtaking even, but it was not home, and she desperately wanted to go home. Seeing as how she didn't know where she was, hadn't seen another living soul in two days, and was hungry, she'd settle for being dry and fed. Not that home was so great. Home was a mountain of student loans, a crummy apartment, and an ex who enjoyed flaunting his new younger wife and their puppies.

"You're never here, Lenore. What was I supposed to do?"

Sticking his dick in a nurse was his only option, clearly.

Wow. Lenore didn't think her mood could get any worse, and Brad somehow managed to do that on an entirely different planet.

She took a break in the middle of medical school to work while Brad did his residency with the understanding that he would do the same for her once he finished. That was the plan: to delay her education to support him because they were a team. She never questioned it or Brad. Only the support went one way. Once Brad set up his practice and Lenore started her residency, the plan wasn't good enough. He was *lonely*.

He didn't want to wash his underwear, more like.

Yeah, well, fuck Brad for screwing around on her, fuck him for being shocked that Lenore wasn't going to work more than sixty hours a week and come home to do the cooking and cleaning, and fuck this hot, humid planet that was always raining. Mostly fuck Brad for shoving his phone in her face, which is how she got sucked into a portal.

That wasn't entirely true. Brad grabbed her and tried to pull her in. When it became apparent the portal was strong enough to take them both, he let her go to save himself. That wasn't a

surprise. She already knew that about him. Still, fuck him for being a selfish jerk.

Thankfully, she didn't remember the trip through the portal. She woke up with a killer headache, bruises in interesting places, and bug bites that she kept scratching, so that was an infection waiting to happen. Amazingly, all the contents in the pockets of her lab pocket made the trip: her phone with an empty battery, one pen, half a tube of lip balm, and her stethoscope. So useful.

Thunder clapped overhead, jerking Lenore's hand away from stretching her neck and her thoughts away from her misery. The sky through the canopy of leaves was unusually dark.

Rain poured down, soaking her instantly. Hair plastered against her forehead, and water ran into her eyes. The rain was warm enough, but the air felt chilly compared to the sweltering heat of earlier.

Wonderful.

She had a lot of complicated feelings about home and her ex, but at least home had a roof, and she could order sushi.

Lenore pressed against a tree trunk, using the branches to shield herself from rain. Her work clothes were far from ideal for tromping through the rainforest. Staying comfortable in a cold hospital required layers. Those layers were now a source of sweaty misery.

She needed to find shelter, a proper shelter, or she wasn't going to last long. On her first night on the planet, she tried to sleep in a tree. Being off the ground seemed sensible. Who knew what kind of bugs or critters were on the prowl and would consider her a tasty snack?

Well, two words: tree snakes.

Lenore had a massive bruise on her backside from falling out of the tree.

Oh, and the vines she used to climb up the tree? Gave her a rash.

She had no idea where she was going to sleep that night. Maybe she could curl up at the base of a tree? No. No. Tree snakes would slither down in the night and strangle her.

Lenore glanced warily up at the branches overhead.

About the only positive thing she could say about this planet was nothing was trying to eat her, other than alien mosquitoes.

Lenore closed her eyes and took a moment to focus. This couldn't go on, not if she wanted to live. She needed food. Water was ridiculously easy to find. Thirsty? Open mouth, tilt head back, and wait for the rain. Earlier that day, she noticed a deer-like creature nibbling on a berry bush. She tried a berry. While the taste left a lot to be desired, it didn't kill her. So the berries were safe to eat, but she'd need something more substantial than berries.

All of this was Brad's fault.

That was two days ago. Forces she didn't understand yanked her through a portal—yoink being the technical term—and put her on an alien planet with a massive red planet hanging in the sky. She suspected this was a moon. At least it had a breathable atmosphere.

Things could be worse. Brad could have been yoinked through the portal with her.

The deluge eased up and the heat returned.

With a groan, Lenore pushed off the tree and carried on trudging through the mud. Shelter was her top priority. A cave sounded good. She'd settle for a rocky outcrop. She could drag some branches over it and make a lean-to, in theory.

She had zero practical wilderness skills. Being a scout never appealed to her as a kid, and the last thing adult Lenore wanted to do was go camping. Now, she wished she had watched some nature documentaries. Anything. In her limited free time, she liked to read thrillers. Occasionally, the characters had to dig their way out of an avalanche or trek through the forest in a desperate bid to outrace the killer but to be honest, she skimmed those passages.

The trees began to thin. Shadows grew long and the forest grew dark as the sun sank lower. The terrain grew rockier as she headed uphill. Maybe there'd be a clearing and she could get an idea of the landscape. So far, her experience had been trees, trees, and snakes.

She stepped out of the trees. Silhouetted against the setting sun, she spied a building.

Civilization.

Walls and a roof meant people. Purple people or green people with tentacles, she didn't care as long as they had plumbing and she got out of the rain.

Lenore stumbled up the steep incline. The building remained dark. The front of the building had a covered porch with wooden steps. The closer she got, the more it became apparent that no one was home. No one had been home for a long time. Windows were broken and the door hung open. The metal roof was a deep, rusted red.

Totally not sinister. Now, this was exactly the type of situation her thriller novels had prepared her for. A desolate, isolated cabin. An exhausted, desperate traveler at dusk. Either she had accidentally stumbled across a serial killer's murder shack, or a kindly old granny was going to stuff her with a hot meal and wisdom. She picked up a fallen stick as she approached, holding it over her shoulder like a club.

"Hello?" she called out, just in case someone was lurking. "Anyone home? I'm lost."

Please be a granny and not a serial killer.

The steps and porch look solid enough. Lenore tested the bottom step with one foot before she put her full weight on it. The wood groaned, but it held.

"Hello? Anyone here?"

She pushed open the door. The air inside had a dusty, abandoned smell. Leaves and dirt were scattered across the floor. There was just enough light to make out chairs pushed against a wall. A lantern hung on a peg on the wall near the door. Lenore grabbed it and discovered what appeared to be a

solar panel. She used the corner of her filthy shirt to clean away the dust.

The lantern emitted a weak light, but it was enough. She could sleep here tonight and figure out what to do in the morning.

Sleep proved elusive that night. She jumped at every noise, from leaves rustling in the wind to the sound of something substantial landing on the metal roof in the night. Lenore clutched her stick, ready to defend herself if need be.

Things improved the next morning. The cabin had definitely been abandoned. Judging by the dust and inch-thick layer of leaves and debris on the floor, the last occupants left some time ago. Fortunately, the cabin was in decent enough shape, and the prior inhabitants had left their stuff.

Lenore wasn't going to die of exposure. Hooray! She had basic gear, like an ax and a knife.

Could she use them? Not really, but she'd figure it out.

CHAPTER TWO



BARIS

ONE YEAR and Nine Months Ago

EVERYONE HERE HATED HIM.

Baris scanned the gathering of mourners. The majority ignored him, their expressions carefully blank but their heads tilted just so to watch him. A few wore outright loathing on their faces. None seemed overly concerned about the female they interred, which spoke volumes about the quality of the Starshade family.

Joie did not deserve this. It would have been better for both of them if Baris had called off the marriage when her family's treachery came to light. No one would have blamed him. Several of his councilors had advised him to sever his ties with the Starshade family as surely as they had severed his thumb from his hand.

Baris had not listened. He wanted peace and knew the cost of peace was high. He willingly paid, even when it physically harmed his person. Now, standing before the grave of the female who had been his queen, he realized he had been naive to think that he alone would pay the cost.

Joie had paid with her life.

The priest finished reciting the ritual words, sliced his thumb, and smeared a symbol onto Joie's urn. The crowd made no noise of surprise. Baris kept his expression neutral despite being appalled internally. His family was traditional, but they were not *that* traditional. They used paint to mark the deceased, like civilized people. Standards really were different on the outer planets.

At that moment, the clouds parted and allowed the sun to penetrate the depths of the gorge, illuminating the cliff face. Crescent-shaped, the stone cliff had been carved with niches to hold the remains of the Starshade family. Scarlet shone vividly

against the dull gray stone. Older symbols on urns in neighboring niches had faded to a rusty brown or washed away entirely with rain.

Black mourning stones filled the niches, each placed to represent the despair felt for the departed. Intricately carved birds—karu—decorated the cliff face, some in mid-flight and others roosted above the grave niches. Black gemstones embedded as the karu's eyes, opal, onyx, and tourmaline sparkled in the sunlight. Freestanding sculptures gilded in gold along with stone benches gave the area the feel of a formal garden, one designed more for the appearance of mourning rather than actually memorializing lost family.

The crowd parted, allowing Baris to approach. As king and as Joie's mate, it was his right to place the first mourning stone. The captain of the royal guards tensed, prepared to protest that Baris should not follow the priest wielding the ritual knife.

“Stand down,” he murmured.

The guard spoke not a word, but her entire posture shouted that she disagreed. He could only imagine what his brother, Prince Vekele, would say, watching from the ship in orbit. Something colorful and sharp, cursing Baris and all the stars that failed to gift the king a sense of self-preservation.

Baris approached the cliff face, feeling the gaze of the crowd on him. It was a blistering animosity, the kind born from generations of betrayal and schemes. Despite this, he remained confident that the Starshades would refrain from foolishness that day. The media was there, broadcasting the event. The royal guards were on the ground and the military surrounded the planet. If events were to take an unfortunate turn while Baris was on the planet's surface, they would not survive the retaliation. It was brutal and inelegant but effective.

Baris placed a stone next to Joie's urn, his hand covering the stone as he lingered. He had not known Joie well and had only spoken to her a handful of times before exchanging vows. It was a political match. She understood that. Love was not part of the equation. He wished he could list her virtues, praise her intelligence, but he knew very little of her. Initially, he had

hoped to fix that with time and even believed that they could grow fond of each other.

The treasonous actions of her family and her silence, despite knowing the plot to abduct Baris, ruined any hope of building a relationship. He could never trust her, and how could he ever hope to grow fond—let alone love—someone he could not trust? He wanted so little, and yet even that had been too much to ask. His brother, Prince Vekele, loved his mate. Baris knew that was not his fate.

With a sigh, Baris mentally scolded himself for allowing his thoughts to be centered on his unrest rather than the tragedy of Joie Starshade's life. He had not known her well, but he knew she was compassionate. She begged for his mercy for herself and her family, for as much as good that did her. Her exile along with her family while he quelled the rebellion and rooted out the traitors had been an act of mercy.

No more compassion.

Baris removed his hand, revealing a common diamond with perfect clarity. Colorless. Lifeless. A gem fit for a traitorous queen. The sun caught the gemstone, shining in the light.

A gasp went through the crowd at the insult. Baris was beyond caring. They were hypocrites, clutching their onyx and jet stones, symbolizing the deepest of mourning and loss. No doubt each stone cost a fortune, enough to refurbish one of the kingdom's aging starships. Instead of using their fortune to elevate their house and return to the stars, the Starshades waste it on an ostentatious show of grief over a female they murdered.

Murdered. He was sure of it. The family claimed it was a sudden illness that struck without warning.

He had initially attempted to bring Joie's body back to Farhaven, the capital, under the guise of a lavish memorial, but he wanted the opportunity to have his medics examine her. The family refused. They were exiled to their home planet, unable to leave to observe the proper memorial rites. Joie's body would remain with the rest of her kin in the family plot.

Conveniently, she was cremated to reduce possible “contagion” before Baris could arrive or any outside medic could determine the cause of death.

Anger steadily grew inside his chest. Truthfully, anger had been brewing for a long time. Months. He had tried to be reasonable. Had tried to be benevolent and rise above the endless hostility between their houses. They were family, after all. Two branches of the same royal blood. Baris’ union with Joie was meant to forge peace and bind the warring houses together, a union they readily agreed to.

Did the Starshades share his vision? No.

Baris reached for the carved karu to the right of the niche, its wings spread in flight, and pressed his hand to the body of the karu. The gesture was a sign of respect to the sacred creature, but it also allowed the crowd to take in his injury. As a wedding gift, Baris was given a conspiracy, the murder of his bonded karu, and had his right thumb removed.

Every day, he felt the pain of the loss of his karu. His bonded companion since he was ten years old, they had over three decades together. They knew each other’s thoughts and moods through the bond. As isolating as the crown was, Baris had never truly been alone. There was not another being he trusted more, and that had been taken from him.

He was done appeasing. The Starshades would learn the consequences of their choices. They deserved everything they had coming.

“Prepare the ship. We leave immediately,” Baris ordered, his guards following him as he marched through the sculpture garden, away from the funeral. A narrow path led up the steep sides, out of the gorge, where the ship waited.

A younger male intercepted Baris, barring his path. Kasim Starshade, Joie’s brother. “Your Majesty will not stay for dinner? We’ve prepared an impressive feast to honor the queen,” he said, bowing to give the proper deference. Despite the show of politeness, there was a sharpness to his bearing. Ambition.

“My presence is honor enough.”

“Of course, Your Majesty, but I had hoped to speak with you about a delicate matter.” Kasim’s voice lowered, keeping the conversation as private as possible. “Forgive my boldness, but there is the matter of the queen.”

“The queen is dead.”

“And I am bereft at the loss of my sister, but Joie was practical. She would understand the need for a new queen.”

Baris blinked, first his front eyes and then the side. The audacity...

“Your sister’s ashes are not even cold.”

“As I said, a delicate matter,” Kasim said.

“Typically, one requests an audience through my aide,” Baris said, his voice growing cold. He tired of these games, but he was so good at them. “Considering the *delicate matter*, one should observe a respectable period of mourning. A year would do, but I don’t have to remind you of etiquette. Anything less, and people will gossip at how ghoulishly you used the queen’s tragic passing for your political ambition.”

“No, Your Majesty.” A nervous edge appeared in Kasim’s tone.

“However, I recognize that you are not at liberty to travel to the palace for an audience, either now or in a year’s time. One might admire the desperate gamble, seizing this opportunity and hoping that the crown will forgive in our time of grief rather than be offended.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Which is it?”

“Pardon, Your Majesty?”

“Are you ghoulish or desperate?”

“I couldn’t...” Kasim glanced behind him as if seeking guidance from another more skilled person.

Baris sighed. As a political rival, Kasim lacked many necessary qualifications. Intelligence, for one.

“Forgive my cousin, Your Majesty.” A female approached, soft-spoken, with her hands clasped before her, cupping a stone with bands of black and deep gray.

“Agate? An unusual choice,” Baris said.

“Yes. Joie admired agate.” Her posture and voice were meek, almost timid. She glanced up, and he noticed her sharp, calculating eyes.

Ah. The mastermind.

“Allow me to present my cousin, Lisandra,” Kasim said, his confidence returned. “We can discuss the future of our families over a meal.”

“I’m sure His Majesty is far too busy to spend an evening with us,” Lisandra said, sounding perfectly shy and embarrassed by her cousin’s rough manners. She caught him watching her and blushed. It was a rather good performance.

“It is a long journey back to the core planets. Let us give you a good meal before you are reduced to eating the ship’s food.” Kasim delivered his lines with all the grace and fineness of being hit with a wooden rod. Then in a softer voice, “I am also unmated, if Your Majesty’s tastes lay in that direction. The Starshades are eager to solidify the union of our two houses.”

It did not matter what direction his tastes lay. The thought of a union with another member of the Starshade house was abhorrent.

Baris kept his expression blank, letting the male wait for a response. Lisandra was far too cool as her face remained placid.

“You presume that I still desire a union with your house,” Baris said at length. “You are incorrect.”

“Your Majesty, I must insist that you take a new mate. As soon as possible,” Kasim said, the pretense of politeness now vanished.

The clouds parted again, and the sun gleamed on metal. Baris was aware of how many guards the Starshades had present. Too many for a family-only funeral. His brother had been correct. The funeral was a trap. Vekele would gloat at his prediction, but truthfully, Baris had wanted the Starshades to attempt some foolery.

Anticipate the best, be prepared for the worst. That could very well be the family motto, and he had months to devise the best way to strike back.

“You must insist,” Baris said, his tone low with warning. The symbiote under his skin stirred, itching to be unleashed.

“Do not force me into making this situation unpleasant. Joie’s death is already a tragedy. Take Lisandra as your queen and keep the peace.”

Months ago, Baris elected to spare the Starshade house and let them live, albeit confined to their planet with no way off the planet. If he had slaughtered them as they deserved, he would have turned the family into martyrs, ensuring that there would be no way to hold the peace with the other noble houses in the outer realm.

Baris sighed and rolled his shoulders, still unused to the absent weight of his karu. He was so very tired of this game. His three guards were outnumbered, and his ship was too far a distance to make a quick exit. Not that he would flee from this viper.

Shadows gathered despite the sun. The symbiote swirled on the surface of his skin like a dark stain. Baris felt the strain as his wings wanted to burst free, but they lacked the strength to do so.

“I spared *you*, Kasim Starshade. You repay my kindness with a clumsy threat? No. There will be no negotiating. The fact that you still breathe is because—”

“Because I have more soldiers,” the male interrupted. A cruel smile spread across his face. “And all my digits.”

Baris gestured with the barest flick of his fingers and Kasim was on the ground, clutching his face in agony. The fallen

male's hands hid the injury, but as the scarlet blood seeped out between his fingers, it was apparent what had happened.

Royal guards materialized, having thrown off their invisibility veils. They shimmered in the light, the unique properties of the veils bending the light. His guards surrounded him, weapons primed and pointed at the Starshade forces. They would not hesitate to use them.

Lisandra gasped, her hands over her mouth in shock. "I'm sorry, Your Majesty. We thought...he claimed..."

He ignored the female, having no interest in what Kasim *claimed*. He had borne witness to the male's crimes.

Baris knocked away Kasim's hand, revealing the smallest sliver of wood and fletching. He plucked out the dart, not caring to be gentle. "Clever thing. It delivers a remarkably powerful poison in such a small package. But I don't have to tell you. Starshade assassins have used these darts for generations."

Kasim thrashed, arms flailing to cover his injured eye. Baris kneeled at his side, pinning down one wrist with his knee. In a calm voice, he said, "Calm yourself. An agitated state will make the poison work faster, but it matters not. You're a dead male, Kasim Starshade. I have not forgotten that you were the one to pluck the eye from my karu."

"Mercy," Kasim groaned.

"Mercy? What an idea."

"There is an antidote," Lisandra said. "He may still live."

Baris shook his head. "There is no time. The only way to stop the poison from spreading is to remove his eye."

Kasim begged him not to. Lisandra ignored his protests. "Do it," she said.

Baris drew a dagger with a thin, tapered blade from the sheath inside his sleeve. "You'll forgive me if this is clumsy. I'm not as skilled with my left hand, you see." He made a tutting noise at his unintended pun. "Hold still—unless you want to lose more than your eye."

Kasim did not remain still. Baris worked as efficiently as he could, considering the poor conditions and the screaming. He was not a cruel male, but he had to admit that he enjoyed the retribution.

His work finished, Baris gave the plucked eye to Lisandra. The female paled, clutching her prize in one bloody hand and looking as if she were moments from emptying the contents of her stomach on the ground.

“I’m insulted that you believed I would walk into such a poorly constructed and obvious trap,” Baris said, wiping the blade clean with a cloth. “I made the marriage offer to House Starshade in good faith. At every turn, your house has failed to honor that faith and broken the treaty that would have given peace to the kingdom. Until now, I have shown you mercy.” Baris used his most imperious voice, speaking loud enough for all to hear. After a pause, he added, “You should thank me.”

Kasim made several sounds, none of them thanks.

“That is not the proper amount of gratitude I’d expect. How incredibly rude.”

“*Peace*. You are weak,” Kasim spat, his voice slurring. “You’ll pay for this.”

Baris considered the man on the ground, flat on his back and blood spilling down the front of his finery. Kasim glared up at him with such loathing that might have shocked a gentler heart. Baris had already witnessed how cold-blooded the male could be. It was no surprise, but it did make Baris wonder what Kasim hoped to gain from this endless fighting.

The crown? What good was a crown when the kingdom teetered on the brink of ruin? There was more to being a monarch than living in a palace and wearing jewels. Arcosians across the kingdom and all its star systems needed stability, reliable trade, communication networks, education, and the ability to travel without risk of bandits. He honestly did not think Kasim understood this.

“It is not wise to insult your sovereign, but I do not expect wisdom from you. Only treason.” Baris crouched down and

stuffed the bloody cloth into Kasim's mouth. The male glared at him with burning hatred. Or attempted to. Half his face had gone slack from the paralytic. "I sentence you to death for your part in the plot against the crown. I witnessed you, Kasim Starshade, take the eye and the life of a karu, a creature sacred to our people, a crime also worthy of death."

He spoke in a quiet voice, just for Kasim's ears alone, "The cost of peace is high. Some must pay more than others."

Then drew the blade across the male's throat.

Kasim's life spilled down his chest with gurgling noises and minimal thrashing. Soon, he stilled.

Baris waited until the last signs of life left the male. He felt ill. This was necessary. The Starshades forced his hand. All the justifications ran through his mind. No one could fault him. Yet he knew that he had spent many sleepless nights imagining this scenario, delivering justice to a traitor and a murderer.

It felt better than he expected.

Baris stood to address the crowd. "Traitors will meet the same fate. My mercy is at an end."

With that pronouncement, he tossed the blade to the ground.

His brother, Prince Vekele, waited for him at the ship's ramp, head tilted and wearing a grave expression.

"Do not say it," Baris warned. The day had been exhausting, and it was not over yet. "Allow me to wash before you lecture me about risks."

"Very well." Vekele dipped his head in acquiescence. "I will see to our departure."

In his cabin, Baris stripped off the funeral garb. The coat fell to the floor. He tugged at the needlessly complicated collar. Automatically using his right hand, the remains of his absent thumb smarted as he fumbled with the buttons on the sleeves. He never appreciated how vital thumbs were until one of his was taken. Growling in frustration, he tugged at the delicate fabric with his left hand, tearing it. Pearl buttons clattered to the floor.

It didn't matter. The shirt was already ruined by a fine mist of blood covering the front. Good riddance. Court fashion served little purpose other than being expensive and uncomfortable.

As he washed, the ship's floor vibrated with the signs of departure. He was clean and dressed by the time his brother returned, carrying a mug of steaming tea.

Baris accepted the mug with thanks. "Go ahead and say it. The Starshades were as bad as you expected."

"You did not even consider their gracious offer of marriage," Vekele said, which earned a laugh from Baris. The brothers smiled for a moment before a serious expression returned to Vekele's face. He tilted his head to one side, leveling a flat stare with his side eyes as his front eyes had been blinded. He said, "They behaved exactly as we expected."

"Sadly." Baris had hoped for better. He always hoped for better and, thus far, had always been disappointed.

"You take unacceptable risks."

"There was no risk. We have advanced weapons, sophisticated monitoring, cloaks, and three times as many forces. They had *pointy sticks*."

Vekele's expression remained the same.

Baris waved his hand in acknowledgment that his brother was correct. "Were there any difficulties with the crowd?"

"None. Your Majesty delivered a very effective message."

"Enough of that." He received plenty of flattery and outright sycophancy from some councilors and courtiers. He needed Vekele to be honest.

A knock sounded on the door moments before Sarah, Vekele's human mate, entered. With her eyes fixed on a tablet screen, she stumbled into the pile of discarded clothing. She paled at the bloody mess. "How are you? That couldn't have been fun."

No. It had not been enjoyable. If he ever found execution enjoyable, he deserved to have a knife planted in his back.

“Did you have a message?” Baris asked.

“Oh. Yes. The sensors picked up an anomaly not far from here,” Sarah said.

“The same anomalies that brought you here?” Baris asked.

Two months ago, some force generated portals on Sarah’s home planet of Earth, seemingly at random, and transported several—potentially thousands—of humans. Sarah had been one such person, depositing her at a sacred temple. Fearing an enemy incursion, Baris had sent his brother to investigate. What he found was a confused and injured female with two eyes and bearing the royal mark. Her arrival caused quite a stir in the kingdom.

Much happened since then. Vekele bound himself to Sarah in what Baris had intended to be a political marriage of convenience, but genuine affection bloomed between them. His political marriage began with a kidnapping and ended that day at a funeral. For Sarah’s efforts to help restore peace, Baris gave her the resources to locate other transported humans and build a portal home.

Vekele took the tablet from Sarah and read the findings. “It would add no extra time to our journey to investigate.”

“Proceed.” Another human. The last one sent a ripple through the kingdom. What would a second do?

LENORE

Winter was coming.

Probably.

A chill hung in the air in the mornings. This place didn't offer a lot in the way of seasonal markers. The days were still just as hot and humid, but it rained less. Maybe that only meant the rainy season finally ended. If winter was coming, Lenore didn't want to be caught unprepared.

The cabin was solid enough, she decided. The roof didn't leak when it rained, not even when the winds picked up. There wasn't a fireplace, so hopefully, that meant it didn't get cold enough to bother. Or that this was a summer cabin and no one in their right mind would spend a winter in a cabin with no fireplace. The wood-burning stove would have to do.

Lenore disliked being unprepared. She always had a plan, as far back as her first day of school. She remembered doing practice walks to the elementary with her mom in preparation for the big day. Practice walks continued as a tradition up to the first day of her residency when Lenore drove to the hospital at various times during the day to get an idea of how long the commute would take. Twenty-three minutes during the morning rush, fifteen in the afternoon. So, not knowing what to expect from the weather had her on edge.

Food remained a top concern. She found some fishing hooks and lines in a storage locker and fashioned a pole. She could keep herself fed, but what if it snowed and the stream froze over? She should be storing fish somehow. Smoking or salting the fish, but she only had a vague idea of what that entailed.

She needed shoes. The clogs she wore the day the portal grabbed her were already worn. Now, they were deceased and held together by wishful thinking. Searching through the storage lockers in the cabin, which in the past had been generous enough to provide blankets and a blue jumpsuit, failed to produce a spare pair of shoes.

She'd have to get creative. She could wrap her feet in fabric if it got cold, but that did nothing to protect her from rocks and thorns. Weave together grass to form a sandal? The trees had a spongy bark, leaving her to think she could utilize that.

One of the things the storage lockers produced was, hand to her heart, a scout's guide, or something very close to it. A beginner's guide to not dying in the wilderness. It was filled with pages of text she couldn't read, obviously, but had helpful diagrams like using the fire starter and how to build a campfire.

Were the diagrams filled with four-eyed people-shaped aliens? Yes. Were wordless picture-based instructions universal? Also yes.

Lenore eyed a tree, judging the bark to be thick enough. She glanced up, on the lookout for tree snakes. The fuckers were a deep green and blended into the shadows. Only their amber eyes gave them away.

All four eyes.

So that was a cute little quirk. Critters and the environment were remarkably similar to Earth but with four eyes. Grazing animals had four legs. There were smaller fluffy things that looked like bunnies, but she hadn't managed to see one up close. Four cute little bunny eyes. There was something that liked to sniff around the cabin at night that sounded like it had a lot of teeth. One evening, Lenore caught a glimpse of something skulking in the tree line. It moved low to the ground and radiated menace. It had four eyes, all full of woe and despair.

She did her best to cover up the busted windows the next day, but she suspected that the barricades wouldn't keep anything out that wanted to get in.

If she didn't freeze to death, she'd wind up as alien kitty kibble. Hooray. For now, at least, the animal that skulked about in the night was content to watch and wait.

Stop being a sourpuss and focus on the shoes.

Lenore rammed the knife into the tree bark and pushed down, cutting a piece large enough to cover her foot. The air grew warm, and sweat collected in the small of her back. She unfastened the jumpsuit, letting the top hang down, and tied the arms around her hips. Total fashion plate in her worn old tank top.

Cooler now, she repeated the cutting process in a different patch of bark.

A twig snapped.

Lenore paused, still gripping the knife. The air went still. Unease pricked along the back of her neck. It had to be her little friend.

“I know you’re there,” she said, speaking to the animal that had been skulking around the cabin. “Thanks for not eating me during the night. Maybe also consider not eating me now? Thanks.”

A breeze stirred, drying her sweaty skin.

Something large moved in the undergrowth. Lenore turned, trying to pinpoint the origin.

There. The shadows weren’t right.

A creature emerged, crouched low to the ground. It was a mountain cat or a panther but also not. The neck was too long. Leathery black skin blended perfectly with the shadows in the forest. Green scales covered the throat and chest, presumably running down to protect the creature’s belly.

“Hey. Hey there,” Lenore said, holding out the knife like it would do any damn good. “You’re probably more afraid of me than I am of you, right?”

Its ears flicked forward.

It didn’t move like it was afraid.

Well, shit.

Lenore froze, completely unsure what to do. Conflicting urges ran through her. Make a lot of noise and try to appear scary. Run. Also, don’t run because things with lots of teeth and

claws like to chase. Cower down and make herself small, but maybe don't just roll over and offer herself up on a plate?

It didn't matter. The result was that Lenore stood rooted in place, too afraid to shout, run, or cower.

The shadows darkened, like the sun went behind the clouds, or maybe she was about to faint. She hoped so. Lenore in no way wanted to be conscious when the creature attacked.

Growling came from behind her.

Awesome. They hunted in packs like that dinosaur movie. She was dead. Absolutely dead, and it was Brad's fault because he was a petty bitch who had to rub his cute puppies and their rude-ass names in her face. She should have grabbed him when she went through the portal. Spending three months with him would have been terrible, but she could outrun him and let the pack of lizard-cat murder machines eat him.

The lizard-cat hissed and growled a warning, belly hugging the ground. The noise behind her was not comforting. Lenore got the impression that rather than work together, they were about to fight over who got dibs on her corpse.

Faster than she could process, a large shadowy creature burst from the undergrowth, knocking her down. Claws dug into her shoulder as it launched itself toward the lizard-cat. Now that she saw it, it was the size of a small pony and all wolf, if a wolf were made of darkness. They tumbled in an angry heap of yowls and claws.

The fall knocked off her sorry excuse for shoes and made her drop the knife. She eyed both, knowing she'd only be able to grab one.

Lenore grabbed the knife from where it'd fallen and scrambled to her bare feet.

She turned to run, not wanting to stick around for the outcome of the fight, and saw her first human face in months. She stumbled, partially from surprise but mainly from a sharp pain in the sole of her foot, and fell to the ground.

And that was how the princess found her, on her ass in the mud.

CHAPTER THREE



LENORE

“Hi. So this is going to be a lot, but let me get it out of the way.” A woman emerged from the trees and offered a hand to help her stand. She had pale skin, obviously dyed red hair, and an open smile. Behind her stood an alien, half hidden in shadows.

An alien. All four eyes and pointy ears, just like in the guidebook’s diagrams. The gray skin was a surprise as the pictures had been in black and white. The gray complexion was perfect for blending into the shadows under the canopy. He—assuming gender was binary and the alien was male based on stature and a gut feeling—wore a serious expression, but that could have been his happy face for all Lenore knew. This was an alien.

Lenore wondered why she wasn’t more freaked out. Maybe she was just so glad to see someone, *anyone*, for the first time in months that it didn’t matter who they were. Maybe studying the guidebook diagrams prepared her for seeing her first nonhuman being. The cabin had obviously been built by someone, so discovering that someone really wasn’t a shock.

What was a shock was how human-shaped they appeared. Two arms. Two legs. No obvious tail or extra appendages. High cheekbones and thick eyebrows—four of them, one over each eye, and long dark hair. It was a compelling face.

He wore a silken shirt with flowing sleeves, tucked into tight-fitting pants that left little to the imagination. Judging by the way the fabric clung and the bulge at the front, he was definitely male. The outfit seemed a little fussy for traipsing through a jungle, but Lenore wasn’t going to complain. He was...handsome didn’t do him justice. Stunning. Exquisite, despite being in the steaming hot jungle with humidity thick enough to scoop into buckets. Mostly, he was pretty. Really, really pretty. Like kick your feet and giggle pretty.

Aware that she was staring like a lovesick tween, embarrassment flushed her cheeks, and she tore her gaze away

to focus on the woman whose outfit, by comparison, was far more practical. She wore thick boots, a long-sleeved knit shirt, and stretchy pants.

Yes. Lenore, the fashion critic. That was super helpful at the moment. At least it was marginally less creepy than drooling over the wildly attractive alien.

“I’m Sarah Krasinski from Philadelphia,” the woman said, completely ignoring the alien behind her.

“Lenore Kelley. Chicago,” she replied.

Sarah gave a cheerful smile. “I got portaled, just like you. In fact, lots of people got portaled. You’re on another planet.”

“I figured out that much.” Lenore grimaced. She didn’t mean to sound bitchy, but her social skills were never what anyone would call charming, and she was way out of practice. Also, her foot fucking hurt. It felt like she stepped on a thorn or a sharp rock. She shifted her weight, taking the pressure off her injured foot. “Sorry. This is a lot. Is that guy real, or am I hallucinating?”

Sarah glanced behind her. “Baris? He’s real.” She turned her attention back to Lenore. “And aliens are real. Surprise! By the way, I’m glad you speak English. That helps a lot. The last person spoke Mandarin, and it took forever to get the portable translator going. It was a whole thing. Never mind. That’s not important. What is important is that I’m glad Ghost found you.” Sarah gave another smile, completely unbothered and full of sunshine.

Lenore nearly laughed in relief. She had no idea who or what a Ghost was, other than the strict definition, but she got the impression it was a name and not, you know, a specter, and it was so absurd. The tension inside her chest eased. She wasn’t alone. There was another human who, judging from the clean clothes and healthy appearance, was doing well for herself. Was that mascara? Very well for herself.

Sarah’s gaze swept over Lenore, taking in the mud, the unflattering jumpsuit, and the red welts all over her skin. “Are you hurt?”

“I’ll live.”

Behind them, the two monsters snarled at each other. Lenore twisted around to witness the shadowy wolf and lizard-cat slowly circle each other, backs arched and tails whipping wildly. Lenore didn’t have to be an expert at animal body language to know a fight was coming.

Good. At least if they were fighting each other, they’d be too busy to eat her. No way she was risking going back in to get her shoes, though. Those were a lost cause.

Baris said something in a smooth voice. Whatever he said caused Sarah to nod her head as if in agreement. She said, “Let’s get out of here, and I’ll explain.”

“You don’t have to ask me twice,” Lenore said.

They booked it through the trees and headed toward the cabin. Lenore went as carefully as she could, mindful of where she set her feet. Cleaning the wound was going to be a pain. “You’ve got medical supplies?” she asked once they were a reasonable distance away.

“Plenty. What’s wrong?” Sarah finally noticed Lenore’s limp. “You’re hurt. Why didn’t you say anything? And where are your shoes?”

“Between the shadow wolf and the lizard-cat, I imagine.”

Baris spoke again. His voice was deep and just so pleasing. His face, however, was full of judgment.

“You’d better not be saying anything mean,” Lenore said. “I’m doing the best I can.”

He turned to face her and it was a lot of eyes. A lot. He offered out his empty arms like he wanted her to hand him something. Lenore had zero idea what that was about.

He tilted his face as if exasperated and pleading to the heavens, then jiggled his empty arms. Without speaking a word, Lenore understood that he offered to carry her.

“Sure. Carry me,” she said, feeling a little strange because she didn’t speak alien and he probably didn’t speak English.

He must have understood because he scooped her up into his arms like an adult picking up a misbehaving cat. He held her awkwardly, like he didn't want to get mud on himself. Speaking again, he took on a chiding tone. Yeah, totally talking down to a naughty kitty.

"He says this is faster," Sarah explained. "We'll get your foot taken care of when we get back to the ship."

Ship. They had a ship.

They made their way through the trees. Baris carried her as if she weighed nothing. It was...surprisingly nice. Contact with another living being was comforting. An introvert at heart, four months alone was simply too long to be by herself. Apparently, she needed a bare minimum of human contact. Well, people contact. The physical touch was nice.

Up close, it was easy to see their differences. If she closed her eyes, those vanished. His arms were strong, and his shoulders comfortable to rest her head against. She resisted the urge to press her ear to his chest to listen to his heart. One heart or two?

She stroked his sleeve, marveling at the silky-smooth fabric. It was definitely expensive.

He glanced down at her, his regal nose wrinkled, and then his eyes narrowed, like she had offended him. Or ruined his favorite shirt.

Lenore blushed. She knew she was filthy and smelled. She did the best she could washing herself without soap. She was going through some things, all right, and didn't need his attitude.

"You've probably got questions," Sarah said. "You're in the Arcosian kingdom. My husband and I are searching the kingdom for other humans who've been portaled."

"I've been here for months," Lenore said. Alone, exhausted, and just a little bit jealous that Sarah got portaled with her husband. It made sense, if they were in proximity to each other.

“The kingdom is big. Like several-planets-and-a-couple-of-star-systems big. You have no idea how relieved I am to find you.”

They entered the clearing with the cabin. A spaceship, sleek and white like it came directly out of a big-budget movie, dwarfed the cabin. Lenore’s mind just accepted the reality that a spaceship was parked next to her hovel like it was no big thing.

People in black uniforms milled about. Even from a distance, it was easy to tell these people weren’t exactly human. The gray skin was a big giveaway. One such person walked up to the cabin, eyes fixed on a tablet-like device in his hand—assuming from the tall, muscular build they were male—and went inside her cabin.

Lenore’s back went up instantly. That was her cabin.

Sarah continued to talk about something. Probably important stuff about the rescue, but Lenore tuned her out.

“Hey. Hey!” she shouted, pushing out to Baris’ hold. “Don’t just walk into people’s homes uninvited!”

Baris barked an order. The alien man jolted in surprise, nearly dropping his tablet. He said something in the same smooth, rolling language Baris spoke.

Reaching the cabin, Lenore limped her way up the steps. The alien man appeared young with a round face and big eyes. Of course, aliens in this kingdom—Arcos or whatever—could just have that sort of face, but it struck her as particularly youthful.

“Are you a baby? He’s a baby,” she said, turning to Sarah.

“Oh, Luca’s the baby,” Sarah said in an amused tone. “Let’s head inside the ship and take a look at your foot.”

“The cabin is fine,” Lenore said, declining the offer. No doubt the ship would be more hygienic, but her gut told her she’d be more comfortable on her turf. Besides, she wouldn’t want to muddy up the shiny spaceship.

“Sure. Let’s get out of the rain. Luca, bring us a medical kit and something to drink? Food?” Sarah paused for Lenore’s reaction, who nodded. “Food. And shoes. Actually, can you bring us a welcome kit?”

Who was embarrassed that her stomach rumbled at the mention of food? Not Lenore.

Baris remained outside the cabin, looking exquisite in the rain, even with the front of his shirt muddy, the wet fabric clinging to him, which was just unfair. Fine, she meant. His staying outside was just fine. She didn’t need him criticizing the decor.

“Austere, but not too bad.” Sarah looked around the cabin.

Lenore saw the cabin with fresh eyes, as it must appear to Sarah. The furniture was minimal: a cot with a thin foam mattress, one table that wobbled, and a wooden chair. The cabin had no interior lights, just a single lantern that barely provided enough illumination to qualify as a night light. The interior was gloomy and dingy. Lenore had swept the floor clean of debris but lacked the soap and scrub brushes to really scour the place. Keeping herself clean was a struggle.

Did the cabin have a funk? She sniffed. Maybe? Probably. Most likely.

“I’m sorry. Hiring an interior decorator wasn’t in my budget,” Lenore grumbled, covering her embarrassment at the stale stank of the place. She hobbled over to the cot. It groaned as she settled on it. She wasn’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth. The cabin appeared like a miracle when she needed one. Who cared if it was pretty?

Sarah laughed. “Fair enough.”

“Can you fill that pail with water? There’s a hand pump outside.”

“Is that safe? There might be bacteria.”

“I’ve been drinking and washing with that water for months. It’s safe.” Lenore peered at her foot. Until she washed away the mud, she couldn’t tell if the thorn was still embedded in her sole. It felt like it was.

Sarah returned with the water, followed by another alien who carried in supplies. He did not look thrilled to be there but crouched down next to the cot and reached for her injured foot.

Lenore batted his hand away. “Excuse me? I can do it myself.”

He ignored her and grabbed her foot, tilting his head as he inspected. Up close, there was no way to escape the fact that this man was not human. The four eyes were difficult to ignore. The front eyes were a cloudy gray, and the side eyes were a vivid blue. His ears were elongated and pointed. The shape of his face shared similarities with Baris, like the nose profile and the judgy look on his face. Were they related, or did all aliens look the same to her?

He said something that sounded fairly rude.

“Well, no one asked you,” Lenore grumbled.

Sarah set the pail down next to him, along with a clean rag. “Lenore, this is my husband, Prince Vekele. He’s trying to be helpful.”

Lenore’s brows went up in surprise, but she said nothing. When Sarah mentioned her husband, she assumed he was human. Well, that’ll teach her about assumptions.

Because Lenore’s people skills were rusty beyond belief, she asked, “Is he a real prince, or is that a made-up title like the Emperor of Ice Cream?”

A sharp pain in her foot interrupted her. Prince Vekele held up a thorn, speaking in a manner that suggested he gave instructions.

“He says that’s...not poisonous, but it will cause an allergic reaction. You’ll need an injection,” Sarah said while the prince opened the med kit. He held up a lethal-looking syringe.

“No needles.” Lenore shook her head. She wasn’t squeamish about needles, but she was wary of strangers wanting to poke her. She didn’t know these people and only had their word that they had good intentions. “That’s safe for humans, right? Also, you two aren’t planning to harvest my kidneys, kidnap me, or sell me to a collector? I am not cut out for life in a menagerie.”

Sarah laid a hand on the prince's shoulder. "Okay, let's slow down. I'm Sarah. This is Vekele. We're rescuing other people who got stranded by the portals."

"You said that. And are you going to take me to a farm upstate with all the candy I'd ever want to eat, no bedtime, and everyone gets a puppy?" Sarcasm and doubt laced every word.

"It's not a farm. It's an old palace."

Oh, now that was just preposterous. *A palace?*

"Get out. Right now. I'm doing fine on my own." Lenore lurched to her feet. The injured foot was numb, but she expected it. This wasn't her first encounter with the thorns. After a brief wobble, she folded her arms over her chest.

"You don't look like you're doing fine. You look hungry," Sarah said, opening another box to display what looked for all the world like a turkey sandwich, apple slices, and a drink carton with a foil lid.

She hated turkey sandwiches, having choked down too many dry and bland abominations in the hospital cafeteria, and yet her stomach still rumbled. The traitor.

"There's fish in the river," Lenore said.

"How are you getting to the river with no shoes?"

"I'll figure it out."

"Just take the sandwich." When Lenore didn't comply, Sarah rolled her eyes and muttered, "For fuck's sake."

She dragged a chair over to the cot, grabbed half the sandwich, and took a large bite. With her mouth full, she asked, "Happy?"

"And the fruit. You might have poisoned it." Lenore looked pointedly at the lunch box until Sarah took an apple slice.

When the woman didn't choke or start foaming at the mouth, Lenore accepted the remaining half of the sandwich. Before taking a bite, she eyed the so-called prince. She didn't entirely trust Sarah, and this guy just loomed.

"He can leave," Lenore said, jerking her chin in his direction.

Sarah translated. The prince said something in reply that did not sound flattering and closed the med kit with more force than necessary.

Untroubled by the little temper tantrum, Lenore ate her sandwich. It was the best damn thing she'd ever eaten. Thank heaven it wasn't a bland turkey sandwich. Honestly, Lenore wouldn't have cared. All she had for the last two months was fish and whatever fruit she found in the forest. Choices were slim.

Lenore peeled the foil top off the bottle. The contents were murky brown but smelled chocolatey. She took a cautious sip and then gulped down half the bottle when she realized it tasted like a peanut butter chocolate smoothie.

"This is so good," Lenore said, practically moaning in pleasure. The smoothie was rich, almost too rich, but she didn't care. She missed bread. And apples. Just food. Food she didn't have to catch and skin and filet.

While she ate, Sarah explained how the portal dumped her in the middle of a sacred site and Vekele found her. Vekele had never seen a human before, and he thought she was a spy. There were politics. Apparently, this was a high-tech society but with medieval politics, complete with two branches of the royal family warring over control of the crown. Lenore focused on her meal, half-listening.

"It's a lot like that show with the dragon and people who are always killing each other," Sarah said.

"Sounds more like the War of the Roses to me," Lenore said.

Sarah perked immediately. "Oh, that's good. Yes, like that. Anyway, things happened, and the king owes me a favor. So now we're doing search and rescue missions for other people who've been portaled. We're also working on finding a way to get back to Earth."

"That's a spaceship outside, right? The way back to Earth seems obvious to me."

"Earth's a really long way away, and they don't have any ships capable of the journey, so I've been told. Apparently, making a

portal is easier.”

Sure. That sounded plausible. Lenore fought the urge to roll her eyes. Everything Sarah said sounded very pie-in-the-sky with a heavy pair of rose-colored glasses. She had doubts.

“And you’re just doing this out of the kindness of your heart?” Lenore asked. She finished off the last fruit slice. It was nice. While it had the texture of an apple, it had a subtle, barely sweet flavor. She could eat a dozen more. “How do I know you’re not a sicko intent on selling me at auction to other sickos? Or do you plan to stuff me full of alien baby eggs?”

Sarah wrinkled her nose. “Eww. Why would I do that?”

“Why would you help me? Nothing’s free.” Her gut told her there had to be a catch, and her gut had kept her alive on another planet.

“Honestly? I don’t want to go back to Earth. I worked retail. My old life was boring. I want adventure and to see the galaxy. This is an adventure with the bonus of helping people.”

Again, plausible, if a little too sunshine-and-rainbows twee for Lenore’s tastes. Maybe Sarah was just like that, all Pollyanna sunshine to Lenore’s skeptical grump.

Lenore packed up the trash from the meal into its box and reached for the medical kit. Inside were the standard first aid kit supplies: gauze, bandage, ointment in tubes, and little packets that she hoped were wipes. She ignored the pair of sinister-looking syringes. The contents looked familiar yet were dissimilar enough to be frustrating. The scout guidebook’s diagrams didn’t cover this. What she assumed to be a tube of antibiotic ointment could very well be sunscreen.

“Can you read any of this?” Lenore asked, giving up on trying to figure it out on her own.

“Vekele can do that. He’s trained in first aid.” Sarah waved to the man lurking at the door.

“That’s swell, but I’m a doctor. I’d rather do it myself.”

“A doctor? Really?”

“Yup, and I’ve got the student loans for med school to prove it. Which one is the disinfectant?”

“Those.” Sarah pointed to a stack of small white packets.

Lenore tore open the packet to remove a swab and cautiously sniffed. It smelled like disinfectant. “This is safe for humans? It’s not corrosive acid that’ll eat my flesh?”

The prince, still lurking in the doorway, said something that sounded rather rude.

“Look, it’s an honest question,” Lenore said, tired and fed up. “Half the plants out there make me break out in hives.”

Sarah’s gaze bounced between Lenore and the prince. “He says it’s safe. All the products have been used on me. No one’s face melted.”

Lenore seriously doubted that’s what he said, but whatever, as long as her foot didn’t get infected. She slathered on an ointment before reaching for the gauze. While she worked on wrapping her foot, she reviewed everything Sarah had told her. The woman—princess, believe it or not—seemed genuine. And honestly, even if Sarah and her alleged prince were going to sell her at an auction, Lenore didn’t have a lot of choices. She could continue doing her best scout impersonation and hope she survived the winter, or she could take her chances with Sarah and company.

“How many people have you rescued?” Lenore asked.

“Two. No, three, technically,” Sarah answered slowly. “There was someone before you, but they didn’t...make it.”

That made perfect sense to Lenore. If that wolf creature hadn’t distracted the lizard-cat today, Lenore wouldn’t have made it, either.

Sarah offered her a pair of fresh socks. The material was thin and flexible like neoprene, but the sole felt tough enough to protect her from rocks and thorns.

“Not to be rude, but you need to practice your patter. You sound dodgy as fuck,” Lenore said, shoving her foot into the neoprene socks. “What if I don’t want to go with you?”

“We’ll leave you with supplies. I can’t guarantee we’ll be able to stop in and check on you, though.” Sarah glanced back to her prince, who spoke again. “Vekele says this is a hunter’s summer lodge. It’s not fit for winter habitation.”

“Yeah, I figured that out on my own,” Lenore muttered.

“Look, I get it that it sounds a little sketchy,” Sarah said, repeating Lenore’s words. “This is a new endeavor for me, for us all. I was lucky that Vekele found me. Others weren’t so lucky. I want to find them. Help them. I get that you don’t trust me. This sounds too good to be true.”

“Promising to send me to a palace was a little over-the-top.”

“Well, it’s only a small palace and in rough shape. Like Miss Havisham does Versailles,” Sarah said with an easy laugh. “Having a doctor, a human doctor, will go a long way toward building trust. Will you help me?”

Lenore shrugged a shoulder. She wasn’t the type of gal who’d be content to lounge around all day, even if it was a palace. She went into medicine because she wanted to help people.

“I’ll pay you a salary,” Sarah offered quickly. “A good one, though I still haven’t got the hang of how money works here. There’s like a universal credit but also local currency, and it’s not base ten, like one hundred cents to a dollar. It’s weird, like Victorian money. Anyway, you’d be a part of our crew as the ship’s doctor.”

The alleged prince entered the cabin carrying a small case. He held it out to Lenore, scowling like the task was beneath him. She opened it to find a device that looked like half of a buckle.

“That’s a translator. It goes over your ear,” Sarah said, motioning to her own ear. “I’ve got a chip implanted, but since you don’t want any needles, this will work. It’s yours as long as you like.”

Lenore removed the translator. It was delicate, constructed of silver wire that shone in the gloom of the cabin, and screamed expensive. Her fingers looked especially grubby. “You’re just giving this to me?”

“Yeah, well, like I said, I don’t have the best grasp on how money works here. The king is financing all this. I’ll keep spending his money as long as he lets me.”

“No one’s getting stuffed with alien eggs?”

“Only consensual stuffing.” Sarah laughed.

Lenore was not impressed.

Sarah’s smile fell. She coughed, blushing, and pulled a very serious expression. “I mean, that wasn’t appropriate.”

“Yeah, I’ll work for you, princess. Someone’s gotta be the responsible adult here.”

CHAPTER FOUR



BARIS

BARIS TOOK the opportunity to return to the ship and change out of his mud-covered clothes. The female was loud, crass, and smelled. Carrying her through the rainforest had been to hurry their mission along, nothing more, and he was rewarded for his consideration with mud.

Des, his aide, scurried behind Baris as he headed toward his cabin.

“Your Majesty, Councilor Raelle has been trying to contact you—”

“Not now,” Baris said.

“It’s urgent.”

Baris ignored the male and stepped through his cabin door. There were always messages and a hundred tasks to be done. It could wait. He needed a shower and a fresh change of clothes to remove the stink of mud and sweat from him.

Fussy.

He could almost hear his karu’s gentle teasing over his appearance, even as the karu would preen Baris’ hair, but there was nothing. Just an empty cabin waiting for him. The absence made his heart hurt.

Baris ignored the ache and stripped off the offensive garments. He wasn’t being fussy about his appearance. Under normal circumstances, he wouldn’t care. His advisers droned on about standards to be upheld, and Baris did understand the need for spectacle while at court, but in his private time, he couldn’t be bothered.

Clean and comfortable, he found it far more difficult to rid himself of the sensation of carrying the human—Lenore—through the rain forest. He had enjoyed it, and he didn’t understand why. She had been caked in mud and absolutely ruined his favorite shirt. She squirmed in his arms, making it

difficult to hold onto her. She petted him, which was beneath both their dignities.

Soon enough, his private aide informed him of the ship's immediate departure from the moon. The male clutched his tablet, looking as if he had more to say. Baris mentally sighed. Des was a good aide, highly organized and efficient, but he was unsure of himself.

"Speak," Baris said, lacking the patience for Des' normal dithering.

"Councilor Raelle has sent you a number of messages since the funeral, all flagged as urgent. I don't think we can ignore her for much longer."

Meaning word had already reached her about the incident at the funeral and she was not pleased.

Baris woke his tablet with a tap and scrolled through the log of incoming messages. The councilor had sent both audio and text messages steadily since the funeral. "The ship is out of network range. She should understand why she did not receive an immediate reply."

"We'll be in range soon. If she calls again, should I..." Des' voice trailed off, as if he were unwilling to ask for permission to ignore the councilor.

"I expect she has something more important to say than general pleasantries. It'll be better to speak with her directly. Contact her as soon as the network allows," Baris said. Generally, he liked Raelle. She was from a noble house almost as steeped in history as his own. She had been friends with his mother. More importantly, she was blunt. She wielded her experience and wisdom like a weapon, battering her advice into him until he relented. She would have opinions about the events that happened at the funeral.

It was done. Raelle and the other councilors could wring their hands and fret. The execution had been lawful.

Des nodded. "Connecting now."

Baris waited. This far out, only audio would be supported, and even that would have a delay.

There was a click and a moment of static. “Your majesty—” Distance and aging speakers distorting the councilor’s voice.

“Let us skip the formalities. You are burning up my comm with messages, and poor Des doesn’t know how to tell you to fuck off. What cannot wait until my return to the palace?”

“You executed Kasim Starshade. It is all over the media.” Even with distortion, Baris could hear the anger in her voice.

He clenched his fist. The funeral was not even six hours ago. “Only after he threatened me. I was well within my rights.”

“I’m sure he deserved it, but you’ve made our lives very difficult. We need to issue a statement to clarify the matter,” Raelle said.

“Do that. Speak with Kenth,” he told Des, deferring the issue to the head of the royal guards. “I believe she made a recording. Insisted on it, in fact.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll start drafting a statement immediately,” Des said, practically vibrating with the need to start on his tasks.

Baris waved him away. The male left, a whirlwind of energy that Baris did not understand but appreciated.

“There is the matter of your consort—”

“Absolutely not,” Baris said, cutting off the councilor.

“I would see the matter settled before I retire.”

The councilor had been making noises about retiring for ages now. He doubted she would ever remove herself entirely from public life, but the talk of retirement became more and more frequent. It would happen.

“Joie may not have been my queen for long, but I will observe the traditional period of mourning. No more talk of a replacement,” Baris said.

The communication was audio-only, but Baris did not need a video feed to know the older female pressed her lips together and wore a concerned expression. In the end, she said a very bland, “The way you treat her memory with dignity is admirable.”

This minor victory would buy him at least a year until the pressure to pick a mate returned. Baris wistfully thought it might be nice to be able to select his own mate, but that was out of the question. His crown was not secure enough to forgo the benefits of a political alliance. No doubt, in exactly a year, the council would present him with a list of suitable consorts with whom marriage would bring stability, wealth, trade agreements, or whatever the council determined that the crown needed. His feelings on the matter were irrelevant.

One served the crown, not the other way around. Vekele had understood. Baris ordered him to mate with the human Sarah to prevent her from becoming a political symbol to be used by their foes. As it happened, Vekele loved his mate and was very happy, but that was only luck. Baris would not hope for such good fortune himself.

“What of the human you recovered today?” Raelle asked.

“Your intelligence is suspiciously good, considering we’re only now in communication range,” Baris said, only moderately surprised that she had learned of the human. She had more eyes and ears than anyone else in the kingdom and had an informant in her grandson, Des. Likely he informed Raelle of the anomaly before they left the Starshades’ planet. “What of her?”

“Is she attractive?”

Baris was thankful that Raelle could not see the way he frowned. The female had been covered in red splotches and mud. Her eyes were the color of mud, as was her hair. A stagnant odor hung over her person, wet and pungent. Yet the offense to his nose was not the image his mind immediately recalled.

He carried her through the rainforest out of necessity. She was injured. Carrying the female was efficient, nothing else. Yet she hadn’t resisted him as he lifted her into his arms, despite likely being the first nonhuman she had ever encountered. She trusted him.

It was refreshing. No one trusted Baris, for good reason, and he trusted no one. Navigating the political skies of Arcos was

difficult under the best of circumstances. Betrayal was viewed more as a sport than a necessary tool, and his family excelled at it. No one with any sense would ever trust a member of House Shadowmark. Yet this human, with no common language between them, trusted him to carry her to safety. That had been oddly attractive.

Obviously, he could not share this sentimental reflection with anyone.

“I cannot say. Human beauty standards are not our own,” he said.

Raelle made an annoyed noise. “But by Arcosian standards? The princess is quite colorful and eye-catching.”

Baris recognized that tone. “Tolerable, I suppose. What are you scheming?”

“Me? Your Majesty, never.”

“False modesty does not become you.”

“Humans have a certain appeal at the moment,” Raelle said.

“You mean they are fashionable.”

“Exactly. All anyone wants to talk about is the humans. Their story is on all the media outlets. First the princess, and now her efforts to rescue her fellow humans has the kingdom enthralled. It has unified the people like nothing else.”

Raelle made an interesting point. Asking the noble houses to put aside their vendettas for peace had failed. Distracting the general populace with humans as entertainment seemed callous, but it had potential. The humans’ story transcended Arcosian politics. It was more than the core of the kingdom versus the outer districts or noble houses fighting for the crown.

“What are you suggesting?” he asked.

“As you rightly state, you are in mourning and cannot be matched to a mate. However, there are plenty of noble houses that would happily welcome a human mate if they believed it would curry favor with the crown. A generous dowry could buy a lot of goodwill.”

And make for a good story in the media. Baris understood what Raelle left unspoken, and it unsettled him. “The notion of treating the rescued humans as pawns in a game leaves a sour taste in my mouth. Lenore is not a commodity to be sold,” he said.

“Lenore?” Distance and a slight time delay did not obscure the titillation in her voice. “Is this Lenore the tolerably attractive female?”

“Some may find a foul-mouthed, mud-encrusted, unwashed, and stinking female to be attractive, but she is not enough to tempt me,” he said, his tone warning Raelle to drop the matter.

As he spoke, the door to his cabin opened. The human in question—Lenore—stood in the doorway, her hair wet and her skin scrubbed clean to a peachy beige. She wore a robe and clutched a towel to her chest. The wet hair plastered against her skull highlighted her round ears. It was indecent how exposed her ears were. More disturbingly, and perhaps the thing he should have noticed immediately, was the silver translator hooked over the shell of her ear.

They stared at each other for a long moment. How much did she hear?

“I’m sorry. Wrong room. I’m trying to find my cabin,” she said quickly, her cheeks burning red.

“This is obviously not your cabin. I’m in the middle of a conversation,” he said, gesturing to the communication unit on the table.

“My apologies, but I can’t read the numbers on the door,” she replied, embarrassment turning to annoyance. Then, she added, “Be thankful I’m not getting mud everywhere.”

She heard every word.

Baris said nothing as she left, the robe flouncing open to offer a brief glimpse of her thigh.

“Was that the female? Lenore?” Raelle said, her voice thin and filled with static.

Baris turned his attention to the councilor. “Let me make this perfectly clear, Councilor Raelle of the House of Frostwing. The humans, Lenore included, are my guests. They are to be treated as such, with all the rights and benefits that entails. They are not bargaining chips to be traded for political gain. Nor are they pets here for our entertainment. To disrespect one of my guests is to disrespect me. Understood?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Baris ended the call before settling onto the sofa, stretching his arm across the back. The emptiness of the cabin surrounded him. The ship’s engine provided a gentle hum as background noise, but otherwise, there was silence. He had nothing to distract himself from how badly that conversation had gone. This would be when his karu would hop onto his shoulder and pull him away from his pensive thoughts.

He was alone.

He handled the situation poorly. His gut told him he should apologize, but she came uninvited into his cabin, overheard a private conversation, and took offense at his frank assessment. He had nothing to apologize for. Besides, the king did not apologize.

LENORE

Foul-mouthed. Mud-encrusted. *Stinking*.

Lenore's face burned with embarrassment.

All those things were true, but they weren't nice to hear. It's been months since her legs or armpits saw a razor, let alone deodorant. It was called *roughing it* for a reason, not a luxury weekend at a five-star hotel.

Lenore didn't flatter herself by thinking they had a moment out in the rainforest, but she thought Baris had been valiant and charming. He carried her like she weighed nothing; it was so far from the truth but did all sorts of things for her lizard brain. But, yeah, now that she could understand his words...

I liked him much better before I knew what he was saying. She'd like to see how he'd fare being stranded in the wilderness on his own.

"You there. Halt. What were you doing in the king's cabin?" A voice rang down the corridor, followed by pounding footsteps.

Lenore jolted at the question and spun around. First, who said *halt* with a serious face? Second, *the king*? Third, that was a rather tall elven woman barreling her way with a grim expression on her face. She wore a steel gray uniform that screamed security.

"I got lost trying to find my cabin," Lenore said, holding up her hands and accidentally dropping her towel.

The woman gave Lenore a hard stare, like she could make Lenore confess her sins, and for good reason. Four eyes was a lot of eye power to focus on one hapless sucker.

She cocked her head to one side, eyebrows arched.

Lenore's fingers flexed, resisting the urge to clutch the front of the robe closed. She'd done nothing wrong. She had every right to be there, dripping wet and practically naked. "The doors all look the same—and Baris should lock his doors."

“It is the king’s ship. Why should he be expected to lock his door in his own ship?”

“Assassins?” Lenore replied, doing that thing where she spoke before she thought. The woman’s expression went from serious to dangerously serious. “Okay, that was a poor choice of words, but if he didn’t want to be disturbed, maybe don’t have the doors woosh open when someone walks by.”

“You did not enter a code?” the woman asked.

“I didn’t touch the door. It just opened, which is why I thought it was my cabin.” Sarah had told Lenore that the ship’s computer recognized the band on her wrist, and the cabin door would open for her alone. No need to worry about keys or locks.

The woman’s posture softened. “The princess coded your band?”

Lenore nodded. “Yes.”

She extended her hand. “She gave you the royal code. Let me input the correct permissions.”

“Oh, well, I’m glad we can all agree it was a big misunderstanding.” Lenore unlatched the band. Then, a nasty thought snuck up on her. “Did Baris call *security* on me?”

The woman’s lips twitched in what was almost a smile. “His Majesty had concerns.”

“That snitch.”

Baris owed her an apology. A big one.

CHAPTER FIVE



LENORE

ONE YEAR and Three Months Ago

“COME ON, YOU PIECE OF JUNK.” Lenore rebooted the auto-medic. The massive machine took up far too much space in her sickbay and failed to work far too often to justify its existence. Letting it run through a power on-power down cycle a few times usually worked out any gremlins in the computer, but the switch was on the underside of the table. The only way to access it was on her back, so here she was, on her back on the floor, under the very expensive garbage.

Life was weird.

One minute Lenore’s arguing with her ex in the hospital hallway; the next, she’s sucked through a portal onto an alien planet. She went from barely surviving to playing mechanic to a piece of medical equipment light-years more advanced than anything on Earth. How was this even her life?

Lenore had been in the princess’ employ for six months now. As skeptical as she had been about Sarah’s pie-in-the-sky plan of rescuing people and sending them to a modestly-sized palace—Summerhall—to live until they worked out a way to get home, it was real.

Every ludicrous word.

Summerhall was exactly as promised: a tumbledown palace, complete with cobwebs and ghosts, surrounded by a hundred-acre wood straight out of a fable. Dark Fairytale was a good way to describe the building, both haunting and whimsical.

Lenore had tagged along as the ship’s doctor while Sarah and her prince cruised the stars in their spaceship, collecting wayward people and dropping them off at Summerhall when the ship got crowded.

Seriously, how was this her life?

Work kept Lenore busy, which suited her. She was happiest when busy. The ship came equipped with a small sickbay that mostly ran automatically for less serious injuries and had enough supplies to stabilize the more serious.

When it worked. Maybe bashing the auto-medic with a wrench would get it to work? There had been a printer at the hospital that only worked when threatened with bodily harm.

The sickbay did not come stocked with reference books. The only book she found buried in a cabinet was more of an owner's manual than a first aid guide. Finding useful information about Arcosian anatomy and medicine proved difficult, but she was hired as a human doctor. Learning new medical techniques could wait. The humans they found ranged in condition from perfectly healthy to severely malnourished, with a smorgasbord of badly-healed broken bones, infections, and untreated chronic conditions. It sucked being a diabetic without access to medication for days, weeks, or even months.

No one really understood how the portal event happened. It just did. One minute, people are getting on with their day, and the next, their lives are upended. The lucky ended up in or near civilization. The unlucky had to make do like Lenore had been struggling to do.

Today was drop-off day, unloading Summerhall's newest residents, and Lenore did check-ups on the residents as needed. Mostly, she did a quick exam and refilled medications. If a resident had a medical emergency, there were Arcosian doctors familiar enough with humans not to kill them accidentally. Probably. It wasn't an ideal situation, but it worked until they could get home.

Home.

What was home even like now? Lenore had no illusion that her apartment and job were still waiting for her. She'd been gone for months now, and she wasn't the only person to have vanished that day. The people left behind had to figure out what to do with suddenly vacant houses filled with spoiled food, bills that weren't being paid, and empty jobs. Thank the heavens that Lenore didn't leave behind a cat or dog. All those

poor pets, abandoned through no one's fault. Lenore's chest ached at the thought.

Lenore counted to twenty while the auto-medic beeped and made waking-up noises. The high-tech toy was designed to handle routine problems from headaches to broken bones. Humans freaked it out, though. It would scan a person, and half the time, the readings would be accurate; the other half would be corrupted garbage, like an eldritch horror had infected the machine.

Why it couldn't throw an error code or a blue screen of death but went straight for the eldritch horror, Lenore didn't dare speculate.

This place was strange like that. At times, it was bleeding-edge, amazingly futuristic tech. Spaceships, space stations, flying cars, and language chips that implanted directly into the brain. Yet, that technology was extremely fragile and prone to malfunctions. How many times had the artificial gravity failed on the ship? Often enough that Lenore never left odds and ends out in her cabin. Everything had to be secured.

Assuming technology was present at all. The complete lack of modern comfort on some planets was startling. Like, no electricity, and people living in huts like some feudal time warp. The technology levels varied so drastically from planet to planet that it made her uneasy.

The temperamental auto-medic was just a symptom of the larger problems.

A throat cleared behind her. "What are you doing?"

"Questioning my life choices." Lenore wiggled her way out from underneath the machine and sat up.

The king stood in the doorway, looking exactly as regal and handsome as a fairytale hero. The disapproving frown did nothing to detract from the handsome, which was, frankly, rude. She wondered briefly if he remembered her.

His dispassionate gaze swept over the room, taking in the tool kit and Lenore's ruffled appearance.

“I trust that reading is no longer a barrier and you have consulted the manual,” he said, his voice cold enough that Lenore shivered from the rush of arctic wind as he spoke.

Yeah, he remembered her.

“For your information, I have,” she said, rising to her feet. She had the damn thing memorized. “I contacted the manufacturer about the warranty, but Prince Vekele is not the original owner, and we’re never in one place long enough to schedule a service visit. Basically, we’re out of luck.”

Baris inspected the equipment in sickbay while Lenore washed her hands.

“How can I help you, Your Majesty?” she asked.

“I came to see how you are spending my credits. Is this the expensive machine that dispenses pills?” He pointed to the compounding pharmacy instrument on the counter, his grubby finger dangerously close to her precious baby.

“It doesn’t dispense medication. It makes medication.” Lenore squeezed herself between Baris and the machine, blocking it with her body. The counter’s edge dug into her back. Fantastic. She protected the instrument from being poked and prodded by a looky-loo, but now she was about three inches away from the devastatingly good-looking jerk.

Baris did not step back. His lips twitched slightly, as if he enjoyed standing inappropriately close to her. He said, “The ship is well stocked with medication. Explain to me why that machine was necessary.”

Donors. They always wanted to know where their money went.

“We do stock a lot of supplies,” she said, plastering a fake smile on her face and speaking slowly, as if to a child. “But that’s medication designed for Arcosians. Humans need different medicines. This machine can make them.”

It was far more complicated than that. Lenore wasn’t a pharmacist or a chemist. She didn’t know the chemical formulas for medication. A lot of Arcosian drugs worked on humans, but not all. Finding out what worked involved a

distressing amount of trial and error. The machine could compound any medication, even the obscure, in minutes. She never had to worry about not having the right thing in stock.

“I suppose storage is limited. This is a practical solution,” Baris said.

Now that she was up close, the allure of his good looks faded just enough for her to think rationally about the man. The counter jabbing her kidneys also helped keep her mind clear. Yes, he was still handsome. Strong jaw, striking eyes, tall physique, blah blah blah. Handsome people could be boring that way: attractive but otherwise unremarkable.

There were circles under Baris’ eyes, like he hadn’t slept properly in days. It was his only flaw.

“Did you want to see me for any other reason? I’ve got a few minutes until the next patient,” she said.

Baris stepped back, as if she offended him. He tugged on the lace-trimmed cuffs of his sleeves. “No. That is not necessary. A great deal of my personal wealth is in this room. I thought I should visit it.”

He turned on his heel and left in a huff.

“I have no idea what that was about,” she said to the empty room.

CHAPTER SIX



BARIS

THE PRESENT

“NO IMPROVEMENT.” Harol placed the vial in the tray.

“I wasn’t expecting any,” Baris said, inspecting the blood draw site in the crook of his elbow. The medic was skilled and had a gentle touch. The skin likely would not bruise. The ancestors knew that Baris did not need any more attention drawn to his health.

It was bad enough that he had to sneak in a medic to receive care. Harol was the preferred medic of Prince Vekele, who was notoriously prickly. No one would think twice about the medic updating the king on his brother’s condition. More importantly, the medic understood the need for discretion. “I should ask so we’re not complete liars. How is my brother?”

“Still blind,” the medic answered, his tone barely civil. “I cannot discuss another patient, not even with you, Your Majesty.”

Yes, Baris understood why Vekele trusted Harol. The male was all blunt angles. There was nothing deceptive in his manner.

Harol administered a serum. Warmth spread throughout Baris’ arm. “This will alleviate your symptoms for a time, but you know this is no solution. This can only end in two ways.”

Yes, Baris also understood that. Symbiote Death Syndrome results in either the death of the symbiote inside him or himself. It was a slow-moving catastrophe, two years in the making. Until recently, Baris had been able to ignore the symptoms.

Harol flashed a smile, a moment too late to be comforting. “Fortunately, you are on the younger side. Only the truly elderly are at risk of death.”

“I wouldn’t call forty-two on the younger side.”

“You’re not falling apart just yet,” Harol said. “How is your pain?”

“Tolerable.” The pain of the dying symbiote kept him awake at night. Just below his skin, he felt it writhing in its death throes. Cold sweats swept over him randomly. His missing thumb *still* hurt after two years. His head pounded more often than not, making it difficult to concentrate in tedious meetings and even more difficult to maintain a placid expression, as if he were not ill at all.

Somehow, the medic knew all that Baris would not admit. “Are you sleeping?”

Damn him for asking the correct question. “Eventually,” Baris admitted.

The medic made a thoughtful humming noise. “Muscle spasms?”

Baris fought the urge to slip his hand under his thigh to hide the tremor. Reluctantly, he admitted, “Infrequent, but they occur.”

“Fever?”

“Yes.”

“Headache?”

“Yes,” Baris said.

“It will get worse before it gets better.”

The medic had such a comforting way about him.

“I recommend moon root tea to aid with sleeping. It is common enough and will not draw unwanted attention.”

“Moon root is for the elderly,” Baris said. He had few memories of his grandmother, Queen Taras, and all involved the pungent odor of moon root.

“Welcome to middle age, Your Majesty.” Harol removed a bottle from the inner pocket of his coat and handed it to Baris.

“This will mask the muscle spasm for now. One tablet, once a day.”

“This will stop the tremors?” Baris accepted the bottle, aware of the tremble in his hand.

“For now,” Harol said, repeating his instructions.

“How long will this last?”

“It is difficult to say. My only experience has been with soldiers. As you might expect, they are young, and the bond with their karu is not as developed.” Harol’s posture changed as he spoke, his tone clearly excited. “I’m relying on historical accounts. In darker times, it was distressingly common for a karu to be killed as a means of assassination. The older the bond, the smaller the chance of survival as the symbiote dies.”

Baris frowned. “Karu are sacred. That is barbaric and a highly inefficient means of assassination.”

“Well, darker times. We are more civilized now,” the medic said. Then added, “Mostly.”

Mostly. Karu were sacred. Baris’ execution of Kasim Starshade had been reviewed by the courts—as it should be, no one was above the law—and found to be lawful for exactly that reason.

“Rest would be best. Your body needs time to heal and clear the toxins from your system,” the medic said.

“Impossible. We are in the midst of trade negotiations.”

Harol made a scoffing noise. “There is always some reason. You will forever be too busy to rest, and as a consequence, this process will take twice as long. Everyone deserves time to rest. Even kings.”

He agreed in principle, but his schedule did not allow it. As disastrous as his alliance with the Starshades had ended, it had brought stability between the core worlds of the kingdom and the outer planets. Peace, however, was a fragile thing. His position was already weak without a bonded karu, marking him different from other Arcosian monarchs. He’d need to bond with another, as much as the thought felt like a betrayal

to his old companion, but that could not occur until the symbiote within him died completely. Any hint that his health was less than optimal would spark ambition in others.

No, Baris needed to be seen at court as strong, both physically and politically. A holiday? Preposterous.

“Get me through the trade negotiations with the Khargals,” Baris said, “and I’ll take a rest.”

Harol gave him a sour look, clearly disbelieving him. “Let us hope for swift negotiations then.”

That was as good as Baris could hope for. Willing to accept this, he said, “I trust the medical facilities in the palace are satisfactory.”

“Exemplary.” Retired from military service, Harol had been lured into becoming the palace medic by cutting-edge technology and a generous budget. If the change in topic bothered him, Harol kept it to himself.

“When my symptoms grow worse, you will approach me to sponsor a project.” The pretense would explain their frequent contact and buy them more time to hide his condition.

“Understood. I’ll endeavor to empty the treasury.” Harol took the vial of blood from the counter and placed it in the inner pocket of his coat. Without saying a word, he bowed his head in acknowledgment that the examination was over. They had returned to their roles of monarch and subject.

Baris took a moment to gather his thoughts after the medic left. It was foolish to let such a secret rest on the shoulders of one person. Harol was discreet and had proven to be trustworthy, but one slip, one careless statement, could unravel all they had hidden.

Yes, Baris was right to be uneasy, but the most troubling fact remained that he was far more likely to betray himself. His symptoms would only grow worse. It was only a matter of time before his condition was discovered.

LENORE

Life was weird.

One minute Lenore's arguing with her ex in the hospital hallway; the next, she's sucked through a portal onto an alien planet. She went from barely surviving to living on a space station, waiting to go to the ball. *A ball*. How was this even her life?

Lenore plucked at the lapel of the frock coat. Lace dripped from the cuffs and stiffly decorated the collar. It was a statement piece, and the entire statement weighed about a hundred pounds. Also, it itched. Under the navy brocade coat, she wore a sleeveless white gown. The white satin melted into a cascade of colors: blush, magenta, violet, and finally navy. It was a bit much.

Fashion here veered toward the elaborate: excessive amounts of fabric, high collars, and just more of everything. The everyday stuff was all right and not terribly different from what she would have worn on Earth. People here had the same general build—two arms, two legs—even if they all stood a foot taller than her.

She found it easier to believe that this was a fever dream, but the last two years were definitely not a dream. It was so weird that she had been on another planet—several dozen at this point—and here she was grumpy about her outfit.

Get your priorities in order.

The rescue phase of the princess' plan was over. Now, it was time to go home. Bigger brains than hers had been working to build a portal. The head engineer, Luca with the baby face, explained to her once about old satellites in the kingdom that recorded the portal event and used that data to figure out the origin point. It sounded very plausible, but it was above her pay grade, so she nodded and smiled. She didn't care *how* it worked as long as she got back home.

Home.

She missed home so much that it hurt, but it also worried her. Things would have changed. Her life simply wouldn't be the same. She accepted it on an intellectual level, but the uncertainty of it still worried her.

“What's that look for?” Sarah asked.

“Just feeling a bit homesick.”

Sarah made a sympathetic noise. “You'll be home soon. Do you want to be distracted with party talk?”

“Lay it on me.”

“Okay, just as a word of warning, people are going to, I don't know, roll their eyes and make fun of you just over here.” Sarah waved to a spot by her shoulder. “They think teasing us about our lack of peripheral vision is funny.”

“Why would they do that?”

Sarah shrugged her shoulders. “People are massive assholes.”

“A universal truth.”

She laughed. “Don't worry. No one would dare make fun of us in front of the king.”

Yeah, Lenore had met the king three times now and wasn't terribly impressed. His words about her appearance, while accurate, hadn't been kind.

“People will behave if they know what's good for them,” Prince Vekele said.

That actually made her feel better. She and the prince shared the same grumpy disposition.

Currently, she stood on the observation deck of Station K-7, a military space station. An atrium was below, staged for a ball, and a field of stars spread in front of her. The portal to Earth was experimental tech, so a military installation made sense for resources and security, but it lacked creature comforts. K-7 had a brutal aesthetic thanks to the harsh lighting. It was cold, both visually and literally. The temperature was set lower than Lenore found comfortable, encouraging her to bundle up. The atrium, however, was kept a bit warmer than the rest of the

station and provided a bit of a greenery break from the bleak utilitarian design.

A sleek ship docked on the other side of a translucent barrier. Lenore pressed her hand to the glass—she knew it wasn't glass. It was some sort of high-density carbon filament polyblend technobabble that happened to be crystal clear. Her brain processed it as glass. Rolling with these things kept the feelings of dissonance to a minimum.

The not-glass was cool to the touch. Her faint reflection hovered on the barrier, ghostly against the black of space.

She'd be home soon, whatever home now looked like.

“Do you think anyone's made it back to Earth?” Lenore asked. She wondered if she'd be able to get her job back and finish her residency. Did practicing two years of medicine on an alien planet count? Her patients were all humans, but she used alien tech, and that had to be something she could spin into a paper or lecture. The status of her student loans was a worry. If lots of people vanished, had they been forgiven? Written off? Or would she get a grace period to get herself sorted before she had to start repaying? Did she even still have her bank account?

She'd have to live with her parents while she put the pieces of her life together. That would be...interesting. Lenore stayed with her parents for three vexing months after the divorce. They weren't bad or mean-spirited people. Her mother had opinions that she felt necessary to share with the world. Her father was very particular. Things had to be done in such a way, and heaven forbid you make noise.

Moving back home as an adult who was also particular and liked things done her way had been tough. There just hadn't been enough hours in the day to go apartment hunting after her rotation. She had to sleep. In the end, she rented a room, the first available one-bedroom, sight unseen because anything would have been better than her mother's constant nitpicking.

“It's a big universe,” Sarah said. “Hopefully, someone landed on a planet with the tech and knows how to get back to Earth.”

That was another problem. Earth was a long way away, and they simply didn't have a ship capable of the journey. One night, when Lenore felt particularly maudlin, she made Luca explain the problem to her. Basically, space was big and empty. Super empty. More empty than anything else. Navigators used waypoints, never straying too far off certain paths. It reminded Lenore of a computer strategy game when her civilization first built boats. Rather than exploring and conquering the seas, she had to end each turn adjacent to land lest the boat sink, at least until she developed the compass.

Arcos had no compass. Well, space compass. Something like that.

"What's the first thing you're going to do when you get back to Earth?" Sarah asked.

"Locate the first aid kits. Triage. Determine our location." Lenore rattled off the list of tasks that needed to be completed on the other side of the portal. The first trip through was stomach-churning, and she expected the second round to be just as nauseous.

"I mean *home*. Like drinking a cold beer and eating a steak dinner when you finally get out of prison."

"Oh." Lenore hadn't thought that far ahead. "I really hope it's pumpkin spice season."

"Really? Kinda basic."

Lenore shrugged. "Cinnamon, nutmeg, and allspice? What's not to like? And there's this food truck outside work that does the best pierogies."

"Sometimes I dream about the donuts from the Amish market. They are so good."

She and Sarah listed foods, mostly junk, that they missed. Not once did Lenore confess that she really wanted her mother's chicken salad, which she missed more than pumpkin spice lattes and pierogies. Her mother ran the chicken through a meat grinder, turning it smooth, mixed with sweet relish, mustard, and mayonnaise. The sandwiches were delicate,

sweet, and tangy, and reminded Lenore of weekend afternoons, the only time her mother cooked from scratch.

Homesickness was tricky. She'd go for weeks or even months without thinking twice that she was on another planet, surrounded by another culture, and then something small rattled her. Recently, it had been sunglasses. Arcosian design wrapped around the head for all four eyes, but even the smallest pair were too large on her head. Prince Vekele took Sarah to a picturesque beach for a few days, which meant Lenore had a vacation as well.

Fun in the sun is not fun at all when you're constantly squinting against the tropical sunlight, and not one pair of sunglasses fits your damn head. Nothing off the rack fit. That's one thing Lenore would not miss.

"What are you going to do now that Project Save the Humans is over?" Lenore asked.

"Is it, though?" Sarah tilted her head as she asked the question. "There are plenty of planets we haven't visited yet. People could still be out there."

"It's been months since the last successful rescue." Two years was a long time to survive on your own, especially if you needed medication. The portals weren't fussy about who they took, and no one had time to grab their inhalers. Either those people were long gone or found help with the locals. "Have you considered settling down in one place?"

Sarah shrugged. "There's so much I haven't seen yet, and I want to keep searching. Baris is sending me and Vekele off on a royal tour. I think we can do both and keep everyone happy."

Lenore couldn't argue with Sarah's logic.

Ghost, the hip-high almost-wolf but totally a walking nightmare, padded up to Sarah. Pitch, a massive four-eyed bird like a raven, rode on his back. Ghost nudged Sarah's hand. For a moment, the princess' face went slack, and then she smiled. "They're waiting for us."

That was another weird thing about this place. People had magical, mystical bonds with some creatures, like the not-

raven and the nightmare not-wolf. *A mutually beneficial symbiotic relationship*, Prince Vekele once explained. Yeah, well, the bond gave people superpowers, so Lenore didn't see how symbiotic was so different from magical, mystical. Anyway, the birds—karu—were super important in Arcosian culture. Lots of people were bonded with them. Buildings were designed with a karu's comfort in mind, including high ceilings and plentiful perches.

As far as Lenore knew, only one person had bonded to the not-wolf—a void beast—and that was the princess. Plus the superpowers. Lenore had only seen Sarah manifest shadowy tentacles from the ground and fling them around once, but once was enough. It was another thing Lenore didn't question for her own peace of mind. Ghost was a good boy despite looking like he was there to drag her soul back to hell, and the princess had tentacles made of shadows. And they talked to each other in their minds. Sure. Why not?

The karu pushed off of Ghost with a cry, startling Lenore. Pitch flew to Prince Vekele, who appeared at the far side of the observation deck.

“They are waiting for our entrance,” he said, extending an arm to escort Sarah.

Lenore followed in their wake, descending the stairs to the lower level of the atrium. Their names were announced to the crowd as if no one recognized the prince and his human princess. A murmur went through the crowd.

The space was the central hub of the station, a social gathering point with a large open space filled with greenery. While usually busy, it was never packed. Unlike now. The king brought some diplomatic hullabaloo to the K-7, dragging most of the royal court to the station in an effort to impress the ambassador. The portal project was being used for political drama.

Fine. Whatever.

Lenore could wear scratchy clothes and smile politely in a crowd. The fact that the king had been extraordinarily rude the last time they met didn't matter. Apparently, she was the kind

of person who rubbed shoulders with princes and rude-ass kings. She didn't care, as long as she got to go home on the other side of the event.

The king's entourage—Lenore didn't know how else to describe it—had been arriving steadily at K-7 for days. The busy military station was filled to bursting with nobility, servants, guards, clerks, merchants looking to make trade deals, and all the other people it took to run a kingdom. All of this was on top of the three dozen humans waiting for their ride home and the existing staff necessary to operate the station. It reminded her of the constant noise of the hospital. For the better part of the last two years, she'd been on the prince's ship with a small crew, with the odd field trip to a planet. It was nice, but it was too quiet for her liking. An energy pulsed through the station, and she liked it.

“Madam?” An attendant urged Lenore forward.

“Dr. Lenore Kelley,” she said, having no expectation that anyone would recognize her.

She was mistaken. The attendant bowed. “I know who you are, madam,” and announced her name loudly.

With a deep breath, she gathered her nerves and descended the stairs. This was just a party. A farewell party. She'd stay long enough to be polite and to put on a good show for the king. It didn't matter.

She was going home tomorrow.

CHAPTER SEVEN



LENORE

LENORE LEANED against the railing on the observation deck, her back to the central atrium below, and faced a wall of stars.

She'd never get tired of the view. It was familiar and so much more intense than the night sky on Earth. Back home, layers of pollution and light kept the stars distant. Here, they were so vivid that Lenore felt as if she could reach out and pluck them from a black velvet curtain. She'd miss this.

Beside her, a frock coat draped over the railing. Free of the stifling thing, she enjoyed the feel of cool air on her bare arms.

Below, the party continued. Music, conversation, and laughter drifted up. Normally, during the night cycle, a quiet fell over the station, and the usually busy corridors emptied. The lights followed a program to mimic day and night cycles, and while some station operations were around the clock, most everyone followed the day and night schedule with a nine-to-five grind in space. Life was strange and oddly mundane in that way.

Laughter drifted up and grew increasingly louder as the person approached. Lenore didn't have to turn to know who it was. She recognized Lydia's overexcited laughter.

Lenore sighed, wishing she had returned to her room instead of taking in the view. Well, it was too late now.

A twenty-something brunette in a red dress came up the stairs, accompanied by a smiling Arcosian soldier in dress uniform. He had an arm slung over her shoulder, holding her close to his side. He stood a good foot taller than her and had a solid build.

"Lenore! What are you doing up here? You'd better hurry up and grab yourself a soldier before all the good-looking ones are taken." Lydia growled playfully at the man, miming a cat raking imaginary claws in his direction.

Lenore liked Lydia, she did, but Lydia was a lot. Like *a lot* a lot. She was very much a party girl, which sounded harsher

than Lenore meant. Lydia was having fun in college when she got portaled, and the good times hadn't stopped. She did everything with an enthusiasm that exhausted Lenore. For a few months after Lydia had been rescued, she took an interest in Lenore's work and appointed herself as Lenore's assistant. She didn't have any medical qualifications, but she had a way of putting people at ease that Lenore lacked. She was like having a bucket of pure sunshine and puppies dumped over your head.

"I just needed some air," Lenore said. "I think I'm going to turn in for the night."

"Boring." Lydia rolled her eyes. "I want to study some alien anatomy. Make sure those diagrams are accurate. Right, honey?" She wrapped an arm around her soldier's waist, gave a comically exaggerated wink, and giggled. Lenore knew exactly what diagrams Lydia referred to, and she was reminded of an old comic about a greedy snake trying to eat an alligator.

Good luck to her. I hope her jaw unhinges.

Lenore took her tab out of her skirt pocket and snapped a picture of Lydia and the soldier.

"What was that for?" Lydia asked.

"In case you get murdered," she answered.

"I would never harm her," the man protested.

"Yeah, well, no one announces their murder plans to their victims," Lenore replied.

Lydia wrinkled her nose. "You're so square."

"It's called being a responsible adult," she said, slipping her tab back into her pocket. "Have fun."

"Oh, we will. You should have some fun yourself. You're too serious," Lydia said, already walking away.

"Use protection! No one will know what to do with an alien baby on Earth!" Lenore called after her.

Lydia raised her hand in a gesture that might have been rude but also might have been the equivalent of *Yes, Mother*.

She had to admit she was curious about the anatomical differences. Specifically, one major difference. She studied the same diagrams, listing the differences in Arcosian and human anatomy, from four eyes right down to the two dicks. That was surprising, but she was a professional. All bodies were kind of weird when you got down to it. Arcosian and humans were surprisingly compatible in that regard. She had a handful of patients in relationships with Arcosians. Asking about sexual health and activity was just part of the job. She hadn't seen an alien dick—or dicks—in person, though.

Maybe she should, for science. Tonight would be her last chance.

Lenore dismissed the idea. Hookups held no appeal to her. She needed to know a person before jumping into bed with them. Not even for science.

Another set of footsteps approached. Not the return of Lydia. The tread was different. She really should have gone to her room. The observation deck was too popular a destination.

Lenore spoke before glancing at the person joining her at the railing. "I believe you owe me an apology—"

Baris did not look well.

Terrible, actually. Terrible enough to make her regret her demand for an apology.

"Your Majesty," she added, bowing her head politely and trying her best not to stare. She kept her gaze on the stars.

Since their encounter, Lenore had seen him on the news outlets and in the media. On the screen, he looked fine. Stressed, sure. In-person was a different matter. That night, in the thick of the party, she only caught glimpses from a distance. Tonight, he was dressed in finery, a shirt with delicate lace cuffs probably made from an eye-wateringly expensive fabric spun from spider silk harvested on the night of the summer solstice. The pants were doing their job and

looking amazing. His boots were polished to a shine. He was elegance personified, down to the soft black leather gloves.

His silvery gray complexion, however, appeared washed out. The harsh overhead lighting certainly wasn't doing him any favors. Lines aged his face. He looked ill. Fashion could only distract so much. The difference between the man who carried her through the rainforest and this exhausted man was startling. Lenore wanted to dart forward and demand to know how long this had been going on and what was being done about it.

She couldn't explain why she felt protective. The king had been rude. Holding a soft spot for him made no sense, and it wasn't some idolization due to her proximity to the crown. He looked like he needed a solid week's worth of sleep and a gallon of chicken soup. It was her doctor instincts at play. Nothing more. She wasn't nursing some sort of infatuation because a couple of years ago, he had been handsome.

Gallant, she quickly corrected herself. He had been gallant until he had been rude.

"I am not in the habit of apologizing to those who barge into my private rooms uninvited," he said. His words were haughty, but his tone was almost friendly.

"Mistakes on both sides." She shrugged her shoulders, willing to accept that was all the apology she would get from him. She was a doctor. A good one. Because she was such a good doctor, she was more concerned about the obvious decline in his health than a petty grudge.

"You should be enjoying the party," Baris said.

"I could say the same of you. I needed to cool down." She could go back to her room, but she knew anticipation and nerves would keep her awake.

"It is too loud and too warm for my liking." He shrugged off the black feather mantle, draping it over the railing, and mimicked her lean. Although he faced forward, the eyes at the side of his head watched her.

"No guard?" she asked.

“Am I a prisoner in my own kingdom?”

The tone was gentle but had a bite, like a tired dog growling out a warning. The heat of annoyance rushed to her face. Like she was an expert on the habits of royalty?

“Sorry,” she said with a touch of sarcasm.

“My answer was unkind. The station is secure. I do not require an escort at all times,” he explained.

Well, that was probably as close as she’d get to an apology. She’d take it.

Silence fell between them. It felt tense and prickly, as if each was unsure what to say next. What kind of small talk did you make with a king? What even was small talk? She was going to blurt out something offensive and get beheaded.

Be cool. She could do this. She talked to Prince Vekele, who was a complete sourpuss, every day and managed not to get beheaded.

“You throw a good party,” she said, desperate to fill the silence. As a farewell bash, it was top-notch, with swanky music, fancy food, lots of booze, and people dressed to impress.

“My aide organized it. I had little input.”

Well, that went nowhere. Changing the topic, she asked, “Do you think anyone’s made it back to Earth?”

“The Khargal ambassador reports that they have some humans but did not say if those humans have been returned,” Baris said. With a frown, he added, “They do have ships with the capability to reach Earth.”

“Would the ambassador tell you if they had?” she asked. She caught a glimpse of the Khargal ambassador, a stony gray alien with gargoye wings.

Baris took his time to answer. “If the situation were reversed, I would not.”

Well, she didn’t know how to respond to that.

“Knowledge is power,” she fumbled.

Baris gave her an evaluating look. “Exactly. Make your opponent work for every scrap of information.”

“Are the Khargals your opponent? I thought they were allies.”

“It is the same thing.”

Yikes. That was a conversation killer.

This was ridiculous. If the man didn’t want to talk, then why come and stand next to her? There was a whole-ass space station he could lurk in, but no, he had to pick the spot right next to her.

“Look,” she said, done with small talk, “you’re making me incredibly nervous, and right now, I’m not sure I even remember how to talk like a regular person, so this is going to come off as rude, but you look like death warmed over.”

Yeah, that helped. Good job.

Baris turned his head slowly to face her with his front eyes. “You are not wrong.”

“Fantastic.” Well, at least she didn’t have to try to be polite. “Tell me you’re seeing a doctor about all of this.” She waved a hand in his direction.

“My medic tells me to rest.”

But he wasn’t resting. He was throwing parties and entertaining ambassadors.

“Oh, you’re one of those, the kind of patient who doesn’t listen,” she said, unimpressed.

“I listen.”

“But you’re not resting. *This* is not resting.” Now, she waved to the atrium and the party below.

“My aide organized it.”

“Sure, and the caterers did the cooking, but you’re still on your feet, making nice and smiling and being, I don’t know, regal, and none of that is resting.”

The king’s reply came with a cold delivery. “You sound like Harol.”

“Harol sounds like someone I’d like to meet.”

Baris huffed; the noise almost sounded like amusement. “I will rest after the trade negotiations.”

“They’re that important? Worth your health?”

“Yes. You do not know our history, but internal conflict has eroded our trade networks. War is good for warmongers and few others. Trade routes are unprotected. Merchant vessels are unwilling to take the journey with so much risk.” Baris expounded on the rise of piracy and the strain to protect trade routes. So many resources had been poured into installations like the station they were on, but that only benefited the military. The average person was left with crumbling infrastructure and increasing lawlessness.

Lenore nodded. She wasn’t the biggest history buff; she read a few gothic novels that took place in seventeenth-century England. Civil war and general chaos in the government allowed outlaws and highway robbers to flourish. She followed most of what he said, but mostly, she admired his enthusiasm. He cared deeply about trade networks and cost-to-risk ratios. He’d probably wax poetic about import taxes soon.

“Forgive me. This must be tedious,” he said.

“No. It’s interesting.” Well, that might have been a stretch, but he was certainly enthused by it. “Would the increase in traffic offset the loss of revenue from reducing import taxes? It seems like a gamble, spending a lot of money upfront on what might pay off.”

He stood a little straighter, as if surprised by her question. “It is a risk. There is wear and tear on facilities, the salaries of staff to operate stations and ports to consider, but there is no profit to be made with no trade, which is what we have now.”

Got it. Something was better than nothing.

“And how does tonight’s sendoff fit into your plans to impress the ambassador?” she asked.

“A gross display of wealth for no other reason than goodwill,” he said smoothly. “I spent a great deal of the treasury on Khargal tech.”

She nearly laughed out loud.

“I am a very benevolent monarch,” he continued, amusement creeping into his voice.

“No doubt. Although, now that I think about it, building a portal to send us humans home is probably cheaper in the long run than supporting us for years.” She couldn’t imagine the bill for supporting all the rescued people. If throwing a party in a fit of conspicuous consumption to impress a bigwig meant he got something in return, she couldn’t fault him.

He dipped his head in acknowledgment of her statement. “Humans are expensive.”

The awkward tension eased for a moment, and Lenore was transported back to that moment when an alien asked for her trust without using any words at all.

This was nice. Where had *this* guy been the entire time she was here?

He cleared his throat, glanced away, and adjusted the cuffs of his shirt. “Do you anticipate tomorrow?”

“I’m excited to go back home,” she said honestly. Then added, “I know it won’t be the same. I won’t be able to pick up where I left off.” She wasn’t sure if she wanted to. She would finish her residency, that wasn’t a question, but she’d transfer somewhere else. She refused to work in the same place as her ex. “Sorry. You don’t care.”

A server appeared with a tray of drinks. Baris reached for one with his right hand and grimaced, quickly jerking his hand back. The leather glove hid the amputation scar but did not disguise the fact that his thumb was gone. Using his left hand, he offered the glass to Lenore.

“I’ve already had my one and a half drinks. Anything more, and I’ll feel miserable in the morning,” she said, declining. “I should try to get some sleep. Big day tomorrow.” She paused, unsure how to proceed. She had so many questions and an increasingly small window to get answers.

Fuck it. Take a risk.

“Will you walk me back to my room?” she asked.

He seemed surprised but tipped his head. “Certainly.”

As they left the observation deck, the quiet of the station returned. They came to a juncture. Baris headed toward the dock, but Lenore pointed in the other direction.

“I’m in a station suite,” she explained, assuming that he expected her to be bunking on the prince’s ship. Which made sense. It had been her home since being rescued, but the station offered more room and her own bathroom. No more sharing with everyone on the ship. “No timer on the showers here.”

Before long, they were outside her room.

She took a deep breath because the next bit was tricky. She said, “Thanks. Now get inside and take off your shirt.”

BARIS

Lenore's request took him by surprise.

"I'm flattered, but tell me, are all humans so upfront with what they desire?" he asked. When he accompanied her back to her room it was because he enjoyed the conversation, not because he was looking for companionship. Although he had no issue with taking her as a companion for the night, he usually sought partners carefully, valuing discretion to minimize any complications. With his position, he always had to consider the complications.

A greedy voice reminded him that she would be leaving the next day. No complications necessary.

Tempting, but Baris did not know if he could trust the female. A moment of pleasure could end with a slit throat.

Before he could decline, Lenore grabbed his wrist and pulled him into her room.

The room was standard issue with the bare minimums: a bed, a console for storage, a table and two chairs, and a small station to prepare modest meals and drinks. The space lacked any personal touches, but he did not expect any for a temporary abode.

"Honestly," she grumbled. "You're sweaty and your eyes are glossy. You look like you're running a fever." She stretched up on her toes and pressed a hand to his forehead. "You're mollusky."

He had no idea what that meant. The translator chip struggled with words that had dual meanings. "Is that good?"

"Clammy. Damp, from a fever. Now sit and take off the shirt. Gloves too. Everything you say will be confidential. I don't go gossiping about patients."

"I am not your patient," he replied.

She gave him a stern look. For being nearly a head shorter than him, she had a large presence.

“Very well, but I will not sit.” Reluctantly, he removed the gloves. His amputated thumb was no secret, and she had seen it before. Still, he wore the gloves in public not to hide the injury or because he was ashamed. He was simply tired of the stares. He peeled off the leather, slapping them down on the table and splaying his hand wide. “Satisfied?”

She picked up his right hand, turning it over as she inspected it. “I worried that the amputation might have been infected, but it healed nicely.

“It has been two years, and I do have my own medic to monitor these things.”

Her brows went up, expressing so much with only two. Odd.

“And pain?” She rubbed a thumb over the scar and pressed. When he did not howl in pain or wince, she seemed satisfied.

She retrieved a pack from the bed and set it on the table. One by one, she removed items from the pack. “We don’t know where the portal will land us, so everyone gets an emergency kit. Water, food, flares, all that. It doesn’t leave a lot of room for souvenirs. Ah, here we go.”

She removed a forked metal prong attached to a rubber tube with a metal disc at the end and slipped it around her neck. She gave him an expectant look. “I wasn’t joking about the shirt. Off.”

“What is that?”

“My stethoscope.” She held the metal disc up, like that explained the function. “It allows me to listen to your heart and lungs.”

“It looks primitive.”

“It’s a genuine relic from Earth.”

“We have more advanced medical technology.”

“Do you happen to see any of it in my room?” Sarcasm dripped in her voice, and he appreciated the honesty of it. In a gentler tone, she added, “My parents gave me this when I started medical school. It’s not fancy, but it gets the job done.”

She placed the metal prongs into her ears and held out the metal disc. He lifted the bottom of the shirt. There were too many buttons for him to undo, at least in front of another person. His left hand had grown in dexterity, but his pride demanded that he avoid fumbling as he undressed like a nervous male trying to impress a female.

“Face away from me,” she said, moving to stand at his side. Without warning, she pressed the metal disc against his skin. It was alarmingly cold.

“This is ridiculous. You are not my medic,” he said, and she was untrained on Arcosians.

“Now we have to start over. Hold still. Breathe in.” She moved the disc to the left side of his lower back. “Out. In again,” she ordered, moving to the right side.

He complied, holding his opinion as that would only prolong this indignation.

“Face me.”

He turned to face her. Standing this close, when he looked down, all he saw was the top of her head. A bit of silver threaded through her hair.

Starting on the left side of his chest, she listened for a moment, frowned, and moved the disc down a fraction. Then, over to one side. “Found it,” she whispered.

After a moment, she nodded and indicated that he could lower the shirt. “Your heart rate is fast. Is that normal?”

“Compared to a human? I cannot say, and nor can you. You are not qualified. Are we done?” He tugged his shirt down, keenly aware of how the fingers on his right hand grasped at the fabric but didn’t quite hold on. Frustrated, he smoothed his hand over the shirt until it fell into place.

“Oh, chill,” she said, completely unimpressed. “You’re clearly not well, and it would be remiss of me to ignore you. Did you want me to examine you at the party? Call in someone with the right qualifications?” She continued, not pausing for him to answer, “I thought you’d appreciate privacy.”

She had not been flirting with him. The realization stung his ego, and he did not like admitting that she was correct. With the greatest of reluctance, he said, “You are correct. I appreciate your consideration.”

Her eyebrows shot up again, this time in surprise. “Thanks.”

Baris reached into his coat hanging over the back of the chair and wrapped his hand around the vial of pills, hesitating. He needed another dose to ease his symptoms, but Lenore would not simply ask questions—she would demand answers.

He saw no point in suffering. Disclosure was inevitable.

Baris removed the vial and set it down on the table, the contents rattling.

Lenore raised an eyebrow. “Treatment or recreational?”

“Palliative,” he answered. The pills soothed his condition but did nothing to correct it.

She accepted his answer with a brisk nod. “Do you need a drink to wash that down? I have water and...water.” She opened a cabinet. “Tea?”

“Moon root, if you have it.”

Lenore placed a tea box on the table. “Variety pack. Knock yourself out.”

“I most certainly will not.”

She laughed, the sound unexpected and at odds with her grumbly disposition. “Sorry. Idioms. I forget they don’t always translate.”

“Yes, like your mollusks.”

Baris tried not to stare as she leaned against the counter, waiting for water to boil. The dress was lovely, a creamy white bleeding into a vibrant pink where the fabric brushed against the floor, wholly unsuited for bustling about in the room’s tiny kitchen. Without the frock coat covering her arms, he watched the muscles tense and flex as she poured boiling water into mugs.

It was remarkably domestic, like they had retired to his quarters for a bit of quiet after a long night of dining or dancing or otherwise being a spectacle.

She returned to the table with two mugs emblazoned with the station logo, steam curling above the water. Baris selected a packet of moon root tea—he would learn to tolerate the taste—but found himself watching Lenore as she proceeded to doctor the tea to her specifications. He noted which blend she selected and counted how many packets of sweetener she added, even though it was pointless. They would never share another cup of tea after a long evening. They would never speak again, and that realization filled him with a yearning for something he never had and already lost.

“God, these shoes,” she said, kicking them off with a sigh. “Much better. Now, what’s going on with you? And don’t say nothing because that’s a lie.”

Baris took a mouthful of the hot, bitter tea and swallowed two pills. He said, “It is Symbiote Death Syndrome.”

She blinked. “Wow. That’s an honest answer.”

“I see little reason to be untruthful. You would know.” His first instinct had been to deny, but, as he noted earlier, they would never meet again.

“Untruthful.” She took a sip of the tea. “That’s a politician’s response.”

“It is not something I wish to be freely known.”

“This is confidential.” She waved a hand between them. “Tell me about Symbiote Death Syndrome. Not gonna lie, it sounds gruesome.”

Baris recounted the facts. Triggered by a broken bond with a karu, it was slow-moving, unavoidable, and painful.

“Rest is the best treatment for your condition?” she asked.

“Some medications mask the symptoms, but they wear off. Otherwise, I must wait for it to pass.” He drained his mug, flinching at the bitter taste of the moon root tea. Thankfully, the medication was fast-acting. The ache in his head eased.

Unfortunately, he had expected the medication to reduce his fever all evening long. It did not, wearing off alarmingly quickly. Harol had warned that his symptoms would grow worse before they improved. He had hoped for more time.

Lenore made a grumbly, judgmental noise. "I already told you my opinion about patients who can't follow orders." She leaned back in her chair. "I'm kicking you out, Your Majesty. It'll be a long day tomorrow. We both should try to sleep."

Disappointment twisted in his stomach, taking him by surprise. He couldn't explain it. This female was a stranger to him, and their conversation was brief in the grand scheme of things, but it pained him to know that they would never share another late-night cup of tea, and she would never scold him for ignoring his medic's orders.

"I will not take up any more of your time," he said, shrugging on his frock coat and shoving the gloves into pockets. He moved to the door and exited into the corridor. "Sleep well."

She followed, leaning against the open doorframe. "Good night."

No. This wasn't right.

Baris tugged on the cuffs of his frock coat. He would not let their encounter end like this.

"Are you attractive by human standards?"

LENORE

“Wow, you’re just asking all the questions tonight,” Lenore replied without thinking. She didn’t know how to answer without sounding vain or artificially humble. “You’ve met other humans. You know.”

“I can only judge you by Arcosian standards, but I am asking about human standards.” He took a step closer, narrowing the gap between them. He rested his hand against the door frame above her head, leaned in, and fuck, *that* was not fair.

“Plain,” she said quickly. “I’m plain. My face isn’t unfortunate enough to be ugly, but it’s not pretty, either. I’m just sort of average. Nothing special.”

With his left hand, he took her by the chin and slowly turned her face from side to side, as if inspecting her for defects. At least, that was how it felt. It also made her all fluttery inside.

“You are incorrect. A pair of fine eyes can elevate a face from ordinary to remarkable.” He brushed his thumb along her jaw, holding her gaze. “Yours are intelligent and kind.”

And now she was blushing.

There was an undeniable pull that she recognized, though she hadn’t experienced it in quite some time. She was about to be kissed, and the internal fluttering intensified.

Lenore held up a finger, placing it over Baris’ lips. “You’re unwell, and you’re a patient. This is an ethical line I can’t cross.”

“My condition has improved, and I am not your patient,” he said, his voice low. “If my advance is unwanted, you need only say.”

The trouble was, it wasn’t unwanted. It was very much wanted. The horny part of her brain spun a dozen reasons why this was a great idea. The best idea. Starting with the fact that Baris wasn’t her patient, there weren’t any questions of ethics. She’d be gone tomorrow, so what did it matter? A handsome

man wanted to kiss her, and that didn't happen too often on Earth or any planet. He hadn't been well, but he said he felt better now, and who was she to take away his self-determination?

Fuck it. She was taking this far too seriously. She could be spontaneous and have fun. Probably.

"Very much wanted," Lenore said, stretching up on her toes.

Their lips met, first softly, mouths brushing against each other shyly. Their touches grew heated and the kiss deepened. One hand settled on her waist. His touch was stiff, but as Lenore leaned into him, planting both hands on his chest, his posture relaxed. His tongue swept across her lips, demanding that she yield to him. She melted, her fingers clutching the collar of his coat, tugging on the fabric to be closer.

They parted. The moment stretched out. His skin was flush in the bluish-violet way of Arcosian complexions. Reluctant to step away, Lenore stayed put. The horny part of her brain—the bit with the awesome ideas that were bad for her—demanded that Baris stay the night. The reasonable but boring part of her brain reminded her that Baris was ill and required rest. What she desired involved very little rest.

Eventually, Baris removed his hand from her waist, and he stepped back.

His eyes were bright, this time from delight and not from illness. He opened his mouth as if to speak but instead pressed his lips closed.

What the hell? She liked Baris, and it would be a crying shame if she didn't seize this opportunity.

As he stepped away, Lenore reached out. Her fingers brushed his wrist, halting him instantly.

"Stay," she said.

"Tomorrow is a long day," he said, repeating her earlier words. "If I stay, I have no intention of letting you sleep."

"I'll sleep on Earth."

CHAPTER EIGHT



LENORE

THIS WASN'T LIKE HER. The excitement of it encouraged her to keep moving and avoid thinking too deeply about it. Enjoy herself for one night.

Lenore pulled Baris into her room. They stumbled toward the bed, a tangle of kisses and moving limbs as they kicked off shoes and shed clothing. Lenore stripped off the gown and tossed it to the floor. She stood before him in nothing but her bra and panties.

Baris made this rumbling noise in his chest that just absolutely made her melt. Gently, he pushed her onto the bed.

Lenore scrambled backward until her back rested against the headboard. "I want to see you," she said.

Keeping his gaze on her, he removed the last layers of his clothes. He reached a hand behind his head and removed the band holding back his hair. Long black strands spilled down.

He was gorgeous. Thinner than she expected, but lean muscle. His chest and shoulders just begged for exploration. She wanted to run her fingers over every dip, to map out the spots that made him sigh and made him growl. Her eyes drifted across his abdomen, to the dusting of hair that led downward, to his double penises.

She had seen anatomical diagrams, but diagrams weren't even close to the in-person experience. Stacked on top of each other, the top cock was slightly shorter and thinner. Dark at the base, nearly black, the color faded to a pale lavender at the tips. Both were generously sized. Ridges ran along the top and bottom.

He held both his cocks in one hand, demonstrating how the ridges allowed both parts to lock together. Slowly, he worked his hand up his length and completely derailed her train of thought. Not fair. He smirked, clearly enjoying the effect he had on her.

Lenore licked her lips, desperately trying to remember that thing. The important thing. “Wait, before we get too far into this, I don’t want to get pregnant. Do you have a condom or an equivalent? The barrier that you spray on?”

“Pregnancy requires the seed from both my cocks. It is easily avoided.”

She nodded, struck mute at the idea of both his cocks inside her. That sounded really, really good. Mouthwateringly good. Probably something she would need to work up to because Baris had a lot going on. Fine, taking both dicks was a bad idea masquerading as a good time.

So good.

“What about sexually transmitted diseases? I tested negative after my divorce. I haven’t been with anyone else.” She wouldn’t apologize for asking. Human-Arcosian pregnancy hadn’t occurred yet, to her knowledge, but she absolutely knew that humans and Arcosians could trade other various itchy and contagious conditions. She had treated more than a few and did not want to explain to a doctor on Earth that her pee burned because she couldn’t take a minute to spray a film on an alien dick.

“I was negative on my last test. There has been no one.”

“I find that very hard to believe,” she said.

His lip pulled up in a grin, flashing just a bit of fang. “Any other questions?”

“Can I touch you?”

“Yes.”

Lenore moved to the edge of the bed and he positioned himself before her. Starting at his shoulders, she ran her hands down his arms, enjoying the feel of the sinewy muscles. She caressed his abdomen, letting her touch drift lower and lower. Finally, she brushed his top cock, running her finger along the length. The ridges were softer than she expected, firm but yielding.

She wanted to wrap her hand around both cocks to copy his earlier demonstration, but her hand just wasn't large enough. This was a two-hand job.

Baris groaned, leaning into her strokes and pumping his hips. His right hand reached for her breast but pulled back.

Lenore grabbed his hand, pressing it to her chest, aware that it was his injured hand. She wasn't sure what the protocol was in this situation. She didn't want to draw attention to his injury, lest he grow self-conscious, but ignoring it felt wrong. This was him, and she liked him as he was.

"I want you to touch every part of me, with any part of you that you like, every part of you," she said.

His fingers flexed, brushing against the silken fabric of her bra, then tugging down the cups. She spilled out, nipples soft and pink. He leaned in, lips hovering over the peaks before kissing them. With his tongue, he alternated, teasing her nipples and lightly biting the delicate skin.

"Look at you," he said, pulling away. His lips were glossy and swollen.

Lenore reached for him, their lips colliding. He climbed on the bed, straddling her and pressing her down onto the mattress. Stretched over her, the weight of him felt divine. Hands and mouths roamed, exploring as much as possible in the limited time available. She wanted to remember the feel of his mouth on her breast, teasing her until she ached. She wrapped his hair around her hand, tugging to direct him to where his attention was required.

He hooked his fingers into the band of elastic and tugged her panties down, dragging the fabric down her legs.

"Spread your legs. I want to see you."

Every part of her responded to his commanding tone and obeyed. She opened her legs, displaying herself.

Baris moved to kneel between her legs, his hands on her thighs holding her open. "Very pretty," he said.

"Thank you."

One hand cupped her, dragging a finger along her folds from taint to her clit. When he reached that sensitive nub, her entire body jolted at the touch.

“What is this?” he asked, circling his finger around the delicate spot.

“My clit. Just human anatomy,” Lenore managed to say. She knew Arcosian women had a similar bundle of nerves, but it was internal, and he made it really hard to think.

“Is it pleasant?” He brushed his thumb back and forth, toying with her.

“Yes,” she moaned, bucking her hips.

“And this?” He pushed a finger into her. Then another. And a third. He pumped his hand, maintaining pressure on her clit and stretching her open. “Look how hungry you are for me.”

Her replies were moans and barely audible whispers. At some point, he removed his hand. Lenore’s eyes fluttered open. Baris licked his fingers clean, his eyes on her as if he studied her every response.

Perhaps he had.

“I want to taste you,” he said.

“Yes. Please. Yes.”

He pressed his mouth to the apex of her thighs, his tongue hot and perfect. He lapped and licked, alternating between not enough pressure and too much. For a man who hadn’t encountered an external clit, he knew his stuff. Both hands pressed at the back of her thighs, nearly folding her in half. He picked up speed, working like a man possessed. Pleasure and the most delicious tension coiled inside of her, making her breath short and her thighs quake. She tugged on his hair as she reached her climax, pulling harder than she meant.

With his mouth still pressed against her, he growled. She arched her back and begged for more.

“I want all of you,” he said, moving to his knees.

“Yes. Anything.”

BARIS

Lenore moved to her hands and knees. With a hand in the middle of her back, he pressed her face down to the mattress until her rump was exposed. Lovely. He ran his hands over the pale skin of her ass, enjoying the softness of her curves. She moaned, pushing back against him.

“Keep your thighs together,” he ordered. She shivered, responding to his commands.

With his right hand on her rump, he used the other to guide himself into position. The human clit was new, but he had ideas. The top cock prodded the entrance to her core but did not enter. Not yet. The bottom cock fit snugly between her folds and the top of her thighs. He rocked forward, sliding along the wet flesh, testing the efficacy of his idea.

She gasped.

“Good?”

“Oh my God, yes,” she moaned. “Do that again.”

“Demanding female,” he said, happy to deliver whatever she desired.

He pushed into her core, reveling in the warmth of her and the way she gasped as he stretched her. That was only this top cock. He would love to hear the pleading, blissful noises she’d make when she took all of him.

With a hand on her hips, his hips snapped back and forth, keeping a steady pace. He wanted so much. He wanted to leave his mark on her skin. She would be on Earth, but she would be his. Only his.

Her shoulder was there, exposed and ready for his bite. Tempting him.

Lenore’s hand clawed at the bedsheet. His pace quickened. He leaned over her, driving harder into her warmth. She squirmed, threatening to relax her thighs, but he had her pinned in place.

She was his to please. One cock was buried deep in her. The other rubbed along that marvelous bundle of nerves.

She could take all of him, he was certain. He'd fill her full of his seed, and she'd give him an heir. He'd breed her, his pretty human with her sharp tongue and clever eyes. She'd grow round with his hatchling, and he wanted that. He wanted an impossible future, lavishing jewels and treasure on his female and the contentment that came with having a beloved mate.

Baris did none of those things because she asked him not to. His pace grew erratic. She trembled beneath him, her thighs quaking as she reached yet another climax. Her cry of pleasure took him with her, pulling him over the crest until he was spilling inside her and along her thighs.

He collapsed beside her, pulling her to him. He placed his hand on her chest, her heart racing beneath his palm. His raced as well.

They rested there until their pulses slowed.

"I'm a mess," she said, moving away.

"Stay a moment." He pulled her back. "We have all night."

CHAPTER NINE



BARIS

AWARENESS WASHED OVER BARIS. Something was wrong.

A docking bay had been repurposed for the construction of the portal. The machine was huge, spanning the entire bay. The gears and cogs of the machine whirled around them. They were merely tiny specks within its grand schemes. At the center was a gyroscope on a platform. The scope's hoops spun lazily within the frame.

Technicians flitted about from panel to panel, checking and double-checking the readings. The air thrummed with excitement.

Baris spun, scanning the hangar for a saboteur or a weapon. His instincts about danger were never wrong, and that sense of dread had kept him alive despite the best efforts of all and sundry.

"Your Majesty?" Des inquired in a soft voice.

"I do not know." Something was off. "I would speak with the head engineer. Bring him to me."

The gyroscope at the center of the portal spun faster and faster. The floor vibrated. He felt it in his bones. It was a bit of impressive engineering. The gears of the great machine spun around them.

Des returned with the head engineer.

"Explain what I am looking at," Baris said.

The head engineer, Luca, practically bounced on his feet at the opportunity to explain the process. "It's based on the same principle that the old tunnel drive ships use. The spinning rings create a hole in the fabric of space." Luca paused, then added, "That sounds much worse than it is. It's very safe. Tunnel drives are a stable technology."

Yes. It had been a good century and a half since the last major tunnel drive disaster. Early in its implementation, the ships had an alarming habit of entering a tunnel and never exiting. It

remained unknown if the ship broke apart from stress or if the engine failed, trapping the ship and all the passengers in a subliminal space.

“This is much larger than a tunnel drive on a ship,” Baris said.

“A ship has limited range. This journey is much further. The calculations support this.”

“If the calculations support it. Is the journey safe?”

Luca had enough grace not to reply that it was too late to ask those questions now. “I sent a drone through and back again on a test run. All readings indicate that the journey is within tolerable limits for humans.”

Baris made a contemplative noise. Tolerable but not pleasant. He had traveled in a tunnel drive ship. The sensation of being stretched when the ship entered and exited the tunnel was not one he would recommend. He disliked the idea that Lenore would experience even temporary discomfort. The notion that the portal could fail and she could be lost...

It was unacceptable.

He had no right to feel as possessive as he did about Lenore. They had only spent a night together, yet that brief time felt more substantial and more real than anything had in ages. They knew it was temporary, enjoying each other before the opportunity escaped.

He wanted more. More time. More quiet conversations over tea. More of her intelligent eyes watching him. Definitely more kisses.

He would have her safe, even if he couldn't keep her.

“How soon will the portal be operational?” Baris asked.

“The rings are building the kinetic energy necessary to puncture space. An hour. It is not a fast process.”

An hour. Not time enough to do anything other than torture himself over Lenore's wellbeing, and far too long to brood on his feeling of unease.

“That’s the subsonic frequency you’re feeling. It is unnerving,” Luca said, anticipating Baris’ next question.

“Is it damaging?”

“With prolonged exposure. Days, not hours. The portal is safe for our purposes.”

The humans were corralled at the far end of the hangar, receiving treatment to help ease the discomfort of the journey through the portal. That would take some time. Lenore’s stern and efficient voice drifted over the noise of the crowd. She had a commanding presence.

She’d make an excellent queen.

Baris had no clue where that sneaky idea came from, but the more it sat with him, the more he liked it. Yes, she was a poor choice politically with her lack of connections or the potential of an alliance. He’d be much better off settling for whoever the council picked.

The council’s decision had two possible outcomes. One, they’d pick some aristocrat from a well-respected family that could bring stability to his reign. His chosen mate would be a stranger, and there would be no expectation of love between them. If they were fortunate, Baris and his unknown mate might grow fond of one another.

Only he had done that before. It did not end well. He did not want to tread that path again.

If the council wanted to emphasize Arcos’ return to the galactic stage, they’d choose a candidate that brought trade and connections. A scion of some merchant or entrepreneur, that would be more interesting than another noble from a good house. Perhaps a Khargal.

Still, they wouldn’t be Lenore.

This was pointless. She was returning to Earth, and even if she wasn’t, she brought nothing to a union. He enjoyed speaking with her. That was hardly the foundation on which to build the kingdom’s future.

He was duty-bound to the kingdom. It came first. Always. He could not serve the crown and have Lenore as his mate. It was fortunate that she was leaving, to spare him the torment of wondering what would happen if he listened to his heart instead of his councilors.

Luca followed Baris' gaze. He made a knowing sound. "If I may speak freely, Your Majesty—"

"You may not," he said, forcing himself to look away from Lenore. He did not need advice from a male who did not understand the burden of he faced. Luca would spout nonsense about following his heart, and it did Baris no good. Better to quell that now. "I will not keep you from your work," he said in clear dismissal.

By all measures, the project would launch smoothly. His personal feelings about a certain human did not matter.

Yet he could not shake the sense of wrongness.

LENORE

“Keep the line moving. Take an emergency kit and see the medic.” The guard paced up and down the line while people shoved the emergency kit into their backpacks. The line shuffled forward.

Lenore handed over a pill and a small cup of water. The man looked as if he would refuse. “It’s a motion-sickness pill,” she said. “You’ll regret not taking it now. Remember how you got here. It’s a bumpy ride.” Because he had a stubborn look about him, Lenore placed a hand on her stomach and stuck her tongue out, making a retching noise.

That did the trick. The first trip through the portal was rough, and several people lost their lunches. The anti-nausea pill was preventative. She didn’t want to have to hold the hands of two dozen vomiting people on the other side when she’d be in just as rough shape.

Lenore’s gaze kept drifting across the hangar to Baris. Who could blame her? He had a presence that filled a room, a regal bearing. Haughty and cool, with his dark hair neatly held back by a circlet, and she knew exactly how he looked with his hair undone and spilling over his shoulders.

Lydia cleared her throat, snapping Lenore’s attention back to the task at hand.

She was the last person at the end of the line, shuffling her way forward until she reached the table. She had circles under her eyes but wore a huge smile. “Will this help with my hangover?”

“Good time last night?” Lenore couldn’t help but ask.

“You know it. I wasn’t the only one. I saw you talking up your own piece of—”

“I stole a mug,” Lenore said quickly, speaking loudly over Lydia. She wasn’t embarrassed about what happened with Baris, but she didn’t kiss and tell. Petty theft seemed like a

viable distraction. “The one with the station logo that came with our rooms. As a souvenir.”

“That’s what she said.” Lydia winked. Winked. Like they shared a secret.

“You’re impossible. Now take your pill so we can go home.”

For once, she followed directions.

Of the eighty-seven humans located, forty-two were returning to Earth. The rest chose to remain for one reason or another. Lenore got it. What was waiting back on Earth but bills and endless grocery shopping? The forty-two had families they were desperate to get back to. Lenore felt the same. As much as her parents worked her nerves, she missed them. She missed Sunday brunch with her father’s nose in the paper and her mother cutting coupons.

Some days, she even missed Brad. Not often and not for long.

Thankfully, she wasn’t going home to a partner. Anxiety about her job and student loans was bad enough. She couldn’t imagine the stress of worrying if her partner waited for her return. And if she were still married to Brad? Mr. Impatient wouldn’t have waited a week before finding solace with someone new, and a week was Lenore being generous. Thank heaven she ditched him years ago, but she’d love to give him a piece of her mind for shoving his phone in her face, forcing her to hold it when the portal went off.

Plus, he let her go. In that horrible zero-gravity moment when the pull of the portal lifted her off her feet, *he let her go*. Yeah. He deserved a lot worse than being yelled at. A key scratching along the side of his car. A tire iron to the knee. Okay, assault was a bit too much, but she craved petty revenge; the pettier, the better. Was this healthy? No, but she’d focus on being a better person once she made Brad suffer.

And hug her parents. Maybe hugging first. Petty vandalism second.

Fuck. It felt good to have a plan.

Lenore packed away the remaining anti-nausea meds in a backpack. She carried the supplies for basic first aid in

addition to her own personal pack. They had no idea where the portal back home would dump them, and help might be days away. People carried their own medication in their packs in case the group was separated, but Lenore didn't mind the extra weight if it meant having more bandages and antibiotics.

Shouldering both packs, she joined the other forty-one humans.

A docking bay had been repurposed for the construction of the portal. The machine was huge, spanning the entire bay. She felt like they were inside a massive astrolabe, surrounded by gears and cogs working with celestial precision. At the center was a gyroscope on a platform. The scope's hoops spun lazily within the frame. Lenore had no idea how the portal was meant to work, but it appeared impressive.

"All this for us," Lydia said.

Technicians moved from control panel to control panel. No one seemed particularly distressed or worried that the massively expensive project would fail.

Lenore scanned the crowd, her eyes roaming over all the aristocrats and dignitaries doing their best to look important, the restless humans, and once again, her gaze settled on Baris, but this time she wasn't so fluttery and enamored. She looked critically at him.

Objectively, he looked better today. Rested. Or as rested as he could be, considering he only slept briefly before leaving her room. The circles under his eyes were less noticeable but there. She wanted to drag him back to bed. *To sleep*. He clearly needed it.

The murmur went through the crowd, parting to make way for a large black voidbeast, a particularly vicious creature. Ghost headed right for Lenore, his tongue lolling out the side of his snout.

Lydia gasped, backing away. Despite her time on the ship, Ghost made her nervous. Ghost made a lot of humans uneasy. "He's here to steal our souls."

Lenore ignored the woman's outburst and gave Ghost a pat because he was a good boy, if slightly terrifying. "He's a sweetheart."

Sarah followed Ghost. "They're ready." She paused, unsure about what she wanted to say. "I know you're not big on emotional displays—"

"Oh, give me a hug," Lenore said, breaking the tension.

"I'll miss you," she said, wrapping her arms around Lenore in a fierce hug.

"Same." The princess hadn't been her closest friend, but she had been a friend.

A ripple of excitement went through the crowd. It had started.

The cogs and gears around them moved, slowly gaining speed. The gyroscope on the platform spun faster, the metal hoops blurring until they were invisible, only a dark smudge on reality.

A pinpoint of light pierced the veil. It grew, and the light emanating from it had a strange quality, like they were underwater. An impossible wind picked up, pulling her hair forward.

Lenore's gaze sought Baris again.

The cogs and gears moving around them gained speed. It vibrated through her entire being. She couldn't place this wistful feeling. A yearning for something she almost had.

Soldiers barked orders for everyone returning to Earth to form a line. Slowly, the line moved forward as technicians urged people forward. One by one, people walked into the light and vanished.

Lydia's grip on Lenore's arm tightened. "That doesn't look like the portal that took me here."

"It doesn't, but it works," Lenore said.

"Does it? How do we know it works?"

"The people are gone."

“Right, but they could have been vaporized for all we know,” Lydia said, worry creeping into her voice.

“No one is getting vaporized,” Lenore said, ready to squelch these last-minute nerves.

That was when it all went wrong.

CHAPTER TEN



LENORE

VIBRATIONS SURROUNDED HER, coming from all directions at once. The floor. The walls. The very air. It got right down into her bones, rattling her soul.

“What’s happening?” Lydia clutched her arm.

“I don’t know.” Nothing good. Even she could see that.

Ahead, the line dissolved into chaos. People shoved, desperate to get through. Guards tried to hold them back. Technicians barked orders.

“We have to hurry.” Lydia raced forward, only to have a soldier grab her around the waist and hold her back. “Let me go!” she shouted, feet kicking uselessly in the air.

Metal groaned overhead. A giant cog came undone on one side, hanging in mid-air. For a moment, it seemed as if the cables supporting it would hold, then came the unmistakable noise of the cable snapping.

People—humans and Arcosians alike—scattered. Screams filled the air.

Lenore gripped the straps of her backpack, ready to dash into the portal while there was still a portal. Pushing her way through like a linebacker wouldn’t work, but she could be nimble and quick. She darted through the crowd, avoiding collisions with other panicky people. The light from the portal grew blinding. It emanated a hum, drowning out all other sound. There was the pounding of her heart and the pull of the portal.

A strong hand grabbed her arm, yanking her back.

“The tunnel is collapsing,” Baris shouted. “If you go in, you’ll never come out.”

Looking around, she believed him as she saw the Arcosians doing their best to keep the last of the humans from the portal.

The floor quaked, shaking the entire station. The hanger grew darker, which made the light radiating from the portal seem all the brighter. The giant cog finally made good on its threat, another cable snapping. It swung in an arc, knocking people over until it crashed into a pillar. Arcosians in the crowd sprouted large feathery black wings, using those wings to shield themselves from falling debris.

The soundtrack to the world turned off. She felt suspended in a strange bubble in the quiet.

Then, the world tilted.

Panic raced through her as gravity seemed to disconnect from reality, and she was lifted off her feet in a disturbingly familiar sensation. The portal had her—only this time, there would be no coming out the other side.

Baris grabbed her with both hands, baring his teeth and bracing his feet against the floor. Fingernails dug into the delicate skin of her wrists, sure to leave a bruise.

Debris flew by, clipping Baris on the shoulder. He stumbled forward. Lenore was now fully in mid-air and parallel to the floor. He was going to let go. He had to. His arm was stretched to the point of tearing ligaments. No one could hold on, and why would he risk injury for her, a stranger?

A loud groan from overhead was all the warning they had before a large beam crashed down. The end clipped Lenore's leg. Pain burned but otherwise barely registered. Dust and tiny particles swept toward the portal. With her eyes closed, she tucked her face down, trying to avoid being blinded by dust or worse.

The pull was constant. She felt herself being dragged backward into the collapsing portal. Hair whipped around in the wind, lashing against her face.

Baris' grip slipped. She jerked back abruptly, the distance between them doubling before he caught her again.

Lenore twisted to find her foot brushing against the aura of the portal. Her foot elongated like it was made of rubber, which had to be a trick of the light because that was not possible. At

the very least, being pulled like taffy should hurt, and she was dissociating too badly to feel it. This was a losing battle. She was going in and dragging Baris with her.

“Let me go!” she shouted, the portal wind ripping her words away.

Vekele appeared behind his brother, grabbing onto his waist and anchoring him in place. Feathery black wings as dark as ink unfurled, shielding them from the flying debris.

The bubble burst. The portal collapsed, vanishing with an audible pop.

Lenore fell to the floor, flat on her stomach, and knocked the air out of her lungs. Sound rushed in, like water flooding a dry riverbed. It overwhelmed and threatened to drown her. She hurt all over, and her heart raced. Alarms wailed. People shouted for medics and cried for help. Smoke and the scent of burning electronics hung in the air.

She had to help. The station had medics, but they weren't trained in human medicine.

Lenore pushed herself upright, but her arms were distressingly weak. Baris helped her to her feet and pulled her into an embrace, wrapping one arm around her. The other hung limply at his side.

“You didn't let go,” Lenore said, her voice barely more than a whisper.

“Never.”

With the emergency passed and adrenaline fading, delayed fear made her hands shake. She nearly...she didn't have the words. The portal was self-destructing, and it was determined to take her along with it. It nearly had her, too. Her foot felt stretchy and weird, like it was still caught in the portal.

“Are you well?” Baris asked.

Lenore couldn't tell. Adrenaline pumped through her, and the world felt hyper-focused. She scanned the room, noting the injuries and ranking them in severity. Training kicked in. Triage. Treat the critical. She could do this.

A touch on her arm snapped her attention back to the king.

“Forget about me. Your shoulder is dislocated,” she said.

“It is nothing.”

“No. I’m the authority in medical matters. You’ll have to listen to me,” she said, giving him her best doctor stare. Then added, “Your Majesty.”

He huffed with amusement. “Do your worst, medic.”

Gently, Lenore ran her hands up his arms and over his shoulder. She pressed gently on the shoulder joint, causing Baris to hiss.

“Okay, it’s out of joint, but we can pop it back in. Lift your arm over your head,” she said, gently guiding his arm up. “Now touch the back of your neck, and move that hand to touch your other shoulder.”

Baris hissed as his shoulder popped back into the joint. He flexed his hand, trying to shake away any lingering pain. “My thanks.”

“Oh, it’ll hurt like a bitch tomorrow. Use an ice compress. Take an anti-inflammatory med. Rest. Get checked out for possible tendon and ligament damage as soon as you can.”

He rubbed his shoulder. “Tomorrow.”

This stubborn alien was going to do permanent damage to himself. “You need to rest. Real rest,” she said.

“There is much to do—”

Lenore put her hand on his chest. “You have people to handle that.”

He glanced down at her hand and raised two eyebrows, as if amused by such an impertinent action.

She snatched her hand back and said, “You injured yourself being quite heroic. No one will question if you take a nap.”

He took her hand, pressing it back to his chest. “A hero’s reward?”

And suddenly, they weren’t talking about taking a nap.

Heat flushed Lenore's face. She...she wasn't prepared to handle this. No one flirted with Lenore. She was plain. She was blunt. Yes, she knew Baris found her attractive. There was no question about that after last night, but the voice inside her head that reminded her that she was too plain and too blunt also told her not to expect anything today.

Maybe people did flirt with her, and she never noticed because she was too focused on work to be bothered with hookups or whatever it was that people did. She only started talking to Brad back in college because he wanted to copy off her biology notes. She took a full five minutes to dress him down.

Apparently, some guys like shouty, rude women. Or liked the quality of their biology notes and parlayed being a study buddy into study-buddy-with-benefits into fiancé.

What was even happening? She was a wreck.

"Rest," she repeated, her voice cracking.

She cleared her throat. She wasn't a flustered tween. She was a grown-ass adult.

"Doctor's orders," she said, her voice not firm.

Baris cupped his hand against the side of her face and smiled, not the least bit fazed by her super-serious doctor voice.

"You're bleeding," Baris said, pulling back to reveal bloody fingers.

"Something hit me. Probably nothing serious." She tugged on the sleeve of her shirt, bunching up the fabric to press against her temple. The area felt sticky and wet but did not hurt at the moment. She'd have a whopper of a headache tomorrow.

"No. This is an alarming amount of blood. Medic!" Baris shouted, drawing a medic to his side immediately.

"I'm fine," she said, taking a bandage from the medic. "Head wounds bleed a lot. It looks worse than it is."

"You are *that* kind of patient," Baris said, his tone almost fond as he repeated her words from the night before. How was that only last night?

The world rushed around them, but they were stuck in a slower, gentler moment. It was just them, battered, bleeding, and smiling at each other.

Prince Vekele brought the moment to an end. “Tend your injuries, medic. I will see that this one obeys orders.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN



BARIS

“SHE DOES WELL UNDER PRESSURE,” Baris said. Lenore had clearly been distressed, blood pouring from her head and her hands shaking, but she rallied and took charge. She diagnosed and treated his injury without hesitation. He had no doubt that if he had not ordered her to undergo treatment, she’d take control of the entire scene.

Like a queen.

The clean air in the corridor stung his lungs. He hadn’t realized how the atmosphere filtration struggled to clear the smoke from the hangar.

Station guards set up a command in the corridor. Baris worked from there, safe from the electrical fire and threat of falling equipment. There was much to do, and the pain stayed at bay as long as he kept busy.

It did not take long for his aide to organize the cleanup. Medics were already on scene. The worst were removed to the station’s sick bay. Those with superficial wounds were treated on-site. Guards escorted out the injured.

Engineers had already begun the task of clearing debris and analyzing how the portal failed, though Baris had his suspicions. The portal was based on the tech used on tunnel drive ships. Unfortunately, such technology was no longer manufactured within Arcos. The necessary components had been purchased from the Khargals at a rate just short of extortion.

Even with the correct technology, Earth was a considerable distance away, and the portal had to be more powerful than the average ship to reach Earth. The engineers could run simulations all day, but reality often had complications. Initial reports indicated a mechanical failure. The components were faulty.

“Where is the ambassador?” Baris asked.

“Escorted to his quarters,” Des answered. Then, he added, “He was uninjured.”

Good. While Baris would not write off the negotiations as a loss just yet, the situation was a mess. The plan had been to impress the ambassador with a display of wealth, the altruistic act of sending the humans back to Earth with Khargal tech, all purchased at great expense to the crown. His kingdom had credit to spare and needed access to all manner of Khargal tech and goods.

Instead, what he had was an embarrassing demonstration of how badly his kingdom had fallen behind.

Baris heard the ambassador before the male pushed his way through the guards. “I do not care. I will speak with the king this instant.”

“Let the ambassador through,” Baris said with a wave.

The Khargal male flexed his wings, forcing the guards back.

“I understood that you were escorted to your quarters for your safety, Ambassador.”

“I demand to know what is happening.”

“I thought that would be obvious,” Baris replied. Not for the first time, he was struck by the unpolished nature of the ambassador. Some of that could be cultural. Khargals could be as blunt as the stone their skin resembled, but this male was creating a scene in the midst of a crisis. “The portal collapsed.”

“Highly irregular.”

“I assure you, it was not planned.”

“If this is how you treat your guests. I can assure you that the Khargals will not be interested in pursuing further relations,” the ambassador said.

The male was all bluster, nothing but wind and empty noises.

Baris was out of patience, and his shoulder ached. He was too busy to placate this male’s ego. “How I treat my guests? I’m glad you mentioned the issue of hospitality because I have

concerns about the quality of the Khargal representative. Clearly, this was an accident.” Baris waved a hand to chaos in the hangar. “I take no pride in having a highly technical and very expensive project fail in front of guests. I would expect some degree of sympathy or concern for the injured, at the very least.”

“Typical Arcosians, always wanting sympathy for problems of your own making. Frankly, this cobbled-together monstrosity of outdated tech was inept from the start. It’s amazing it worked at all.”

Baris narrowed his eyes. A guard moved forward, stopping when Baris raised a hand.

“You’re not very good at your job, Ambassador,” Baris said, no longer striving to be civil. “The fact that the Khargal council sold us outdated technology to cobble together a portal when you have ships collecting dust that are capable of reaching Earth demonstrates how little they think of the Arcosian kingdom. Not to mention sending a representative lacking the necessary skill of diplomacy and tact.”

The male’s face flushed a dark violet. “I simply asked to be informed of the situation, not to be insulted.”

“You were escorted to your quarters—”

“To keep the scale of this...this disaster from me!”

“For your safety. There is structural damage in the hangar, and the air filtration—” Baris shook his head. There was no point in explaining all the ways the failed project could become worse. An electrical fire was still a very real danger, and some piece of metal may have pierced the hull. Flying debris did its very best to pierce him.

“The council will hear of this in my report.”

“Yes,” Baris said in a flat tone. “Make a report. That’s what ambassadors do. Please do not feel you must remain on K-7. You may leave at your earliest convenience.” Baris turned to his aide and took the male’s tablet, a clear sign of dismissal.

The ambassador huffed and made various offended noises. Baris flicked through the tablet’s screen, pointedly ignoring

the male as he checked the status of various projects. Des had a constant feed of notifications chiming without pause. Baris anticipated that his actions would set back Arcos-Khargal negotiations, but the Khargals needed a new market to sell outdated tech, and Arcos had a surplus of resources. Trade negotiations would recover.

After the ambassador left, Baris returned the tablet to Des.

“Councilor Raelle will not be pleased.”

“She rarely is,” Baris replied, understanding that Des would report the incident to the councilor almost immediately. Councilor Raelle also happened to be Des’ grandmother. Baris did not mind that his aide was effectively her spy. Usually, it was helpful to have a councilor be so well-informed, but when they clashed, her disapproval was known immediately. He anticipated a scolding within an hour about how he deliberately undermined the talks.

He would not back down. The Khargals did not act in good faith or send their best representative to open a friendly dialogue. That spoke volumes.

His head hurt, and the ache in his shoulder could not be ignored. The cloth of his shirt clung to his lower back, suggesting that he had sustained a laceration, but the fabric of his dark coat hid the bleeding. Lenore would not be pleased that he refused further attention from a medic.

“Is there anything else that cannot wait? I have a medic’s orders to rest,” Baris said.

Assured that the situation was under control, Baris returned to his cabin on the royal ship.

Alone, exhaustion overcame him. The day teetered on the edge of disaster. He nearly lost Lenore. If she had entered the portal as it collapsed, never to escape and forever caught in liminal space, that transitional space between nowhere and everywhere...

The thought chilled him. Injuries were still being reported, and structural damage to the station was being assessed. He felt the

responsibility to safeguard many lives, but Lenore dominated his thoughts.

Slowly, he peeled away the layers of clothing. The frock coat was torn in several locations. A shame. He rather liked this one. Perhaps it could be mended, but a king could not be seen dressed in anything less than opulence. Such a waste.

For personal moments, then. He'd have the coat mended and wear it in private.

The shirt had dried and clung to his back. Removing it caused the wound to bleed again. Baris twisted in the mirror, trying to gauge the damage. If he had been able to call on his wings, he could have shielded himself. The wound was on the lower left side, which he could easily reach if his left shoulder had not been forced out of its joint a mere hour ago. His right arm was perfectly operable, but holding the rag with his thumbless hand was...challenging. Not impossible, but now it would take him quite some time.

That was how his brother found him.

"As a courtesy to me, please refrain from putting yourself in peril," Vekele growled as he entered the room.

Baris did not suppress his smile. Vekele had a way of lightening his mood. "You are my favorite brother as well."

"I am your only brother and your heir," Vekele replied, unmoved by Baris' genuine affection. "Stop trying to die. I do not wish to be king."

Yes, well, there was that. Baris did not particularly want to think about it.

"I am not trying to die. I am very much against being impaled and otherwise perforated," Baris said.

Vekele huffed, tilting his head in that peculiar way of his to stare down Baris. "Why did you not deploy your wings?"

And there was the other thing Baris did not want to think about.

The karu on Vekele's shoulder made a disgruntled noise and nipped his ear. He rubbed the offended spot and said, "I will

not apologize. I have no reason.”

Emptiness ached inside Baris at the familiar affection between them. Two years had not been nearly long enough to dull the pain of losing his karu.

Launching herself into the air, the karu settled on a perch overhead.

“Spoiled old thing,” Vekele muttered before turning his attention back to Baris. He snatched the cleansing cloth from his hand. “Turn around so that I may inspect the wound.”

Baris did not bother to protest that he could clean the wound himself. He turned, facing away. In the mirror, he saw Vekele shake his head. “The royal tailor will have words with me. Apparently, I ruin an alarming amount of clothing,” he said, trying to lighten the mood.

“As I said, you have an alarming affinity to peril,” Vekele said.

“I am surprised you did not bring a medic with you.”

“I assumed you would want as few eyes on this as possible, and I only have two.”

The room went silent.

“Was...was that a joke?” His prickly, proud brother making a joke at his own expense?

“Do not sound so amazed. I make jokes,” Vekele said.

“Very few and far between.”

“Harol is the only one I trust, and he is occupied tending to others,” Vekele said, ignoring his comment. He applied a cleanser to the wound. The solvent stung as it fizzed.

Baris hissed. That sensation was somehow worse than the constant throb in his shoulders.

“Serves you right, as my mate would say,” Vekele said, speaking harsh words with a compassionate tone. “You were rude to the ambassador.”

Baris resisted the urge to claim that the ambassador had been first, thereby justifying his actions. “Councilor Raelle

contacted you?” Des did not waste a moment in contacting his grandmother.

“Not yet, although I do not anticipate much enjoyment in being lectured on your behalf.”

“The situation could not be salvaged.”

“The ambassador is our guest and deserves our hospitality,” Vekele said. After a pause, he added, “Even if he was rude first. You are too imprudent.”

“Me? Imprudent?” Baris turned to face his brother. Baris debated every decision. Planned every detail and possibility. “I always put the needs of the kingdom above my own.”

“Until you are angered, then you become reckless.” Vekele planted his hands on Baris’ shoulders and forcibly spun him back around. “Stop moving. If I do not apply the ointment correctly, you will have a scar.”

“Hardly my worst feature.”

“Yes, but it is easier to hide your rotten personality by saying nothing.”

Baris laughed, but in the mirror, Vekele’s expression remained serious.

“You were reckless with the Starshades.”

“That was years ago,” Baris replied. Then, feeling the need to defend his actions, “They forced my hand. It was necessary.”

“I do not disagree, but you placed yourself in a dangerous situation.” Vekele tore open a package and applied the bandage to the wound. “What if our intelligence had been incorrect and the Starshades had more arms or guards?”

“It was not.”

“You used yourself as bait. I do not approve.”

“I do not seek your approval,” Baris said, his voice growing cool.

“I am very much aware that you are my sovereign and I am your subject, but I ask you to consider how your actions

impact me and my mate the next time you decide to play bait.”

“I do not understand why you waited years to bring up your concern,” Baris said. His brother spoke as if those events were recent and not long settled.

“Today was unnerving. My mate says I ignore my emotional baggage unless I trip over it. The baggage is a metaphor,” Vekele added, as if he did not expect Baris to understand. He drew his shoulders back and lifted his chin. “Your behavior has grown increasingly erratic in the last year.”

Baris pulled a fresh shirt over his head, his shoulder screaming in pain. His health had steadily declined over the last year. Ignoring the condition and outlasting it by sheer stubbornness had not worked. While he had been able to hide it from the court with Harol’s medical care, Vekele noticed. The blasted male noticed everything. Baris knew the Symbiote Death Syndrome affected his mood and ability to think critically on days when his head pounded; he did not believe it made him erratic. He said, “I consider all my actions. I do not act on impulse.”

“And the Khargal ambassador? Was that well-considered?”

Baris growled in frustration both at the finicky ties on the shirt that refused to cooperate and with Vekele.

“I do not wish to argue with you,” Vekele said.

“You are very good at it.”

Vekele waited patiently while Baris fumbled with the ties. He did not offer to help, which placated Baris. He was perfectly capable of dressing himself. He did not want his brother’s pity, and Vekele certainly understood what it felt like to be the recipient of well-intentioned yet still insulting pity.

“I am very good at it,” Vekele agreed, once the last tie was fastened. “Now, your shadows. Do not tell me that you do not wish to discuss it. If I can jest about my eyes, you can tell me why you did not summon your shadows to protect yourself.”

Baris hesitated from more than wishing to avoid pity. The truth was a weakness; for the king to admit it, even to his brother, was asking for a dagger in his back.

No. This was Vekele. They shared more than a relationship based on genetics and birth order. He was his confidant. His friend.

His only friend these days.

“Forgive me. Old habits,” Baris said. Before he could share the details of his situation, Vekele’s mate, Sarah, and her bonded beast, Ghost, entered the room. She carried a steaming mug. Baris caught the distinctive aroma of moon root tea.

An audience. How delightful.

“Harol told me to make you drink this,” she said, handing the mug to him. “What’s going on?”

Vekele pressed his lips together. Baris raised his brows in return.

Sarah’s gaze bounced between Vekele and himself. “I feel like you two just had a whole-ass conversation without saying a word, and frankly, rude. I don’t have your sibling telepathy.”

“We are not telepathic,” Vekele said.

“But what about your bro bond?”

Vekele laughed. Genuine mirth radiated from his brother, a male whose life had been imprisonment, assassination attempts, and betrayal. Sarah did that. She brought life back to Vekele. He wanted that for himself. Desperately. Enough to be reckless.

“What I will tell you must stay between us three,” Baris said. Everything in him screamed that three could not keep a secret, but they saw what happened. His failure. His condition would not remain a secret for much longer.

“Understood,” Vekele said in a serious tone.

Sarah glanced at Vekele and then nodded her head in agreement. “What is it?”

“Without my karu, my symbiote is dying,” Baris explained.

“What does that mean?” Sarah placed a hand on Ghost’s head, as if seeking comfort.

“I see. We are not finished,” Vekele said, gesturing for Baris to step closer. With efficient movements, Vekele untied the fasteners enough to expose Baris’ shoulder and applied a cooling gel to the injury. “What are you going to do about this?”

That was what Baris liked about his brother. He skipped the existential crisis of what it meant to lose a bonded karu and the symbiote and went straight for the practicalities.

“Wait for it to die completely and attempt a second bond,” Baris said.

“That is risky,” Vekele said, his tone flat.

“As much as I enjoy our continuous argument over my risk-taking behavior, my medic—*your* medic—says it cannot be avoided. The symbiote must die completely. There is no other option.” It was risky on several fronts. Even after the symbiote dies, a new bond may not take. It was well known that karu could bond several times in their long lives, but for a person to have multiple bonds was unheard of. An Arcosian simply did not outlive their karu. Should not.

Baris clenched his hand in frustration.

The second, more dangerous issue was political. Any sign of weakness in the monarch and the ambitious, ruthless ones at court would start scheming to put themselves on the throne. Baris had enough doubters who questioned his desire for peace. If it were discovered he could no longer summon the shadows, it would be the end of his reign.

Ghost nudged Baris’ hand, offering comfort.

And possibly the end of his family’s life. Everyone he loved was in this room. He had to protect them.

“The council is pressuring me to marry again,” Baris said. He did not wish to take another mate, but his duty to the crown came before his personal wants. No, he was being dishonest. He knew who he wanted to take as a mate, but it was a selfish choice. “You see the complication.”

Vekele made a noise of understanding.

“Is this another one of those political intrigue things? Because you’re going to have to explain it to me,” Sarah said.

“I need a queen capable of producing an heir,” he said. “An alliance with a powerful family will strengthen my reign. My current...condition will make me appear vulnerable and—” He made a stabbing motion with one hand.

The pink color drained from Sarah’s face. “Right. Got it.”

“I’ve had quite enough of my late queen’s family attempting to murder me.”

“You’ve got like a bajillion cousins. Pick the least awful one of them,” Sarah said. “Or, hear me out, you marry for love.”

Baris and Vekele laughed. His ribs ached with the movement, but it was worth it. *Love*. As if the council would ever allow that.

“It’s not such a far-out idea,” she said, sounding annoyed.

“Your happiness with my brother is a fortuitous anomaly. I would not dare hope for such a rarity for myself,” Baris said.

“Are you okay?”

“I am well. How is Lenore?”

“You know Lenore’s name?” Sarah asked, surprised.

The suggestion that he could ever forget Lenore Kelley was beyond absurd. The image of her standing in front of the refracting pattern of colors, glowing and shifting, was burned into his memory. Brown hair whipped around her steely gray eyes. There was an honesty to her face that compelled him. He wanted another kiss. More touches. More conversation. More time. Always more.

“She is rather difficult to forget,” he said.

“Harol patched her up, and she’s currently bossing around the medics. She’s right as rain,” Sarah replied.

He liked that expression. It evoked a refreshing sensation.

Vekele presented Baris with a clean shirt. “You’re not in danger of immediate death.”

“How reassuring for you.” Baris accepted the shirt. As tedious of a process as it was, he managed to put on the shirt with one immobilized arm and worked the buttons with one hand. Vekele watched the painfully slow process, his head tilted and said nothing. To struggle with such a common task was insulting to his dignity, but he was too stubborn and proud to ask for assistance. Vekele understood. They shared the same stubborn disposition.

“Rest,” Vekele said. “Drink the tea. I will pour it down your throat if I must.”

“Yes, yes.”

“I will send Harol to you for a more thorough exam. There may be metal fragments in the wound. I cannot tell.”

“The medics should tend to the others first,” Baris said. “I will wait.”

The two brothers stared at each other, arriving at an unspoken understanding. Both were stubborn. Baris would refuse medical care for himself, and Vekele would force it upon him.

“My mate, I need a moment to speak with Baris,” Vekele said.

Sarah made her farewells and left, Ghost trailing after her.

Vekele waited until the cabin door closed before placing a hand on his uninjured shoulder. His expression softened. “I am concerned. This is not like you,” Vekele said. “Is it the symbiote dying or something more?”

Yes, and more. The crushing loneliness. The constant ache in his head making it difficult to concentrate. The random appearance of fevers. The exhaustion and the inability to sleep. The need to maintain appearances and never let weakness show. He had to carry on. There was no alternative.

“I will consider your words,” Baris said.

Vekele pressed his lips together. He heard how Baris made no promises to act less rashly but did not call him out. Not yet. “That will have to do.”

Harol arrived shortly after. He declared the wound insignificant and forced another bitter mug of moon root tea

on Baris.

Once alone, Baris paced the length of his cabin. His mind would not quiet. He wanted what his brother had. He wanted a mate who was a true partner and a friend. Whoever the council selected, she would not be that, and that knowledge pained him. From the time of his parents' death, his life had been in service to the crown. When had he ever made a choice because it was best for Baris?

Never.

Every choice, every decision, was to obtain peace and stability for the kingdom. While he wished for a gentle universe, it was not. The universe was brutal and bloody. At times, he was forced to be equally brutal in return. He did not enjoy it. If Vekele thought he was rash because his mask of wit and civility dropped, his brother was mistaken. Baris was tired.

He was the king. Always.

Only occasionally did he have the luxury to be Baris Shadowmark.

He knew what—*who* he wanted.

Vekele would say he was being impetuous and rash, but Vekele was wrong. His choices were deliberate. Measured. Still, the hour was late. His eyes grew heavy. He needed to consider his words carefully for the conversation he wished to have. He slept, and when he woke, he remained determined in his objective.

Baris typed out a message to Des, requesting Lenore's presence. His finger hovered over the screen. Such a request was against standard protocol. Eyebrows would be raised. Surely, the king was far too busy to pay a personal visit. He had staff. Yet he wanted to speak with Lenore directly, not through a screen or through a messenger.

He pressed the screen.

Vekele would disapprove. He was about to do something reckless.

LENORE

She needed to find a job.

The thought hounded her as she drifted off to sleep and waited for her when she woke. The response to the portal collapse kept her busy for hours. She treated a concussion, a fractured arm, and various scrapes, cuts, and bruises. Busy hands meant her mind was too occupied for worries.

As a fun benefit, being focused on work kept her from noticing how her body felt like a lump of tenderized meat, mostly because she *had* been tenderized. Her ankle burned, which would be a problem if she didn't get off her feet soon, and her upper back ached.

When the last person had been released, Lenore dragged her tired ass back to her room on the station. She collapsed on the bed fully clothed, not having the energy to undress.

Now that she was awake, every part of her ached, and there was nothing to distract her from the stiffness in her upper back and the worries playing on repeat in her mind. She wondered about Baris' symptoms that morning, if he felt as stiff and sore as she did, but he had a personal physician. He wasn't her patient, and one didn't drop by unannounced to see the king—you requested an audience.

A shower helped revive her, but she soon realized she had no clean clothes. She'd lost her backpack, which contained literally all her possessions. Presumably, it was still in the hangar. She vaguely recalled setting the backpack on the ground. After that, the rest of the day blurred together.

Okay, first order of business: find her clothes.

Her stomach growled, reminding her that she hadn't eaten anything since yesterday morning.

Correction: find breakfast, then clothes. Wearing yesterday's outfit, she ventured out for food. With a full belly and a mug of coffee—it was amazing that every planet she visited had a

version of hot bean juice—her mind settled and her body began to feel somewhat human again. Much better than being a lump of tenderized meat.

Yes, she was still worried. Her entire world was upended yesterday. She was going home, and now...probably not. The portal failure seemed pretty final. That was her one ticket home, and the ticket blew itself up, metaphorically. The ticket actually folded in on itself.

She was stuck here. Not here specifically, here currently being a food court on a space station. Here in the *this side of the galaxy* sense. She needed to figure out some stuff.

Two years ago, the princess told Lenore that she didn't understand how the alien's money worked. At the time, Lenore thought Sarah was a bit flaky, but she got it now. She had credits in an account. The princess had paid her a salary. Her expenses had been nonexistent since room and board had been included while working for Sarah. When she needed supplies, she simply told the ship's computer her order, and the packages were waiting when the ship arrived at the next destination. She had enough credit to buy herself coffee and whatever street food smelled amazing. Fried foods were especially difficult to resist.

Lenore pulled out her tablet from her pocket. The screen had cracked during yesterday's excitement, but the device functioned well enough to check her account. She stared at the number, frustrated it couldn't tell her what she needed to know. Was that a lot of money? Was it enough to live on? Pay rent? What was the cost of living in this galactic neighborhood? She had no idea.

Maybe the princess would hire her back. Lenore technically never quit, but she had packed up her stuff from Prince Vekele's ship and moved onto the station. That felt like giving her two weeks' notice. The search and rescue for stranded humans was over, but surely Sarah would want a doctor who specialized in human medicine. The focus of her work would switch from patching together the refugees to...being little more than decoration in an automated sick bay that ran itself.

How tedious, even theoretically.

Practicing human medicine was obviously a very small niche. Forty-five humans elected to remain, plus the three that missed the portal, making the grand total of humans in this neck of the proverbial woods forty-eight.

Forty-eight humans and one human doctor. Even with that ratio, Lenore wasn't sure how in-demand her skills would be. Human biology was similar enough to Arcosian that any Arcosian medic could confidently treat a human without accidentally killing them because they didn't know what a spleen was. Spoiler: Arcosians had spleens in roughly the same spot.

She could study Arcosian medicine. That appealed to her. This was a society with interstellar travel; surely, it had higher education and medical schools. She'd need to research what options were available and the cost. Again, she didn't know if the money she had was close to covering tuition.

Yes, this is what she wanted. She'd find a way to make it happen.

"You are not answering your comm band." An Arcosian man with a young face stood in front of her table. Lenore recognized the king's aide, Des.

"It broke." She held up her wrist, devoid of the band she normally wore but sporting the first blooms of a purple and green bruise.

Des shook his head, fixing his gaze on his tablet. "A replacement is being delivered to your room."

"I also lost my backpack."

"And the hangar is being searched for your possessions. Now," the man said, finally looking from the screen, "the king requests your presence."

Her gut fluttered. It shouldn't. She wasn't a starry-eyed teen, enamored with her first crush, but there she was, fluttering.

"I'll find a med kit." Somewhere. She ran through possible diagnoses. Inflammation often caused more pain on the second

day after a trauma, and Baris had a lot of trauma.

“That is not necessary. He wishes to speak with you. Now.”

Lenore really wished she had fresh clothes for a royal audience and wasn't so clearly just out of a shower, but sure. The king gets what the king demands.

Des escorted her to an empty docking bay save for one sleek and elegant ship with the royal crest painted on the side. Outside the ship, guards waved a wand over her person, presumably searching for weapons, and deemed her safe enough to board. She recognized the ship's interior. This was the ship that rescued her two years ago.

Before she could worry about her still damp hair pulled back in a ponytail or the way she splashed coffee on her shirt that morning, she was pulled through a cabin door and announced, just like a debutante at a ball. Des cleared his throat, stood a little taller, and said, “Dr. Kelley, Your Majesty.”

With a bow, he left Lenore alone with Baris.

Lenore recognized the cabin as the one she inadvertently wandered into the day she had been rescued. This time, however, she had time to get a proper look. The interior cabin was spacious by ship standards, with a sitting area and a bedroom to one side, separated by a paper screen door. Two chairs flanked a large window. The surfaces were uncluttered and polished to a sheen. The carpet was thick enough that her shoes sank into it.

Lighting gave a soft, cozy feel to the space. A throw blanket over the arm of one plush chair invited Lenore to curl up with a book. In fact, the tablet and mug on a nearby table suggested that Baris had been doing just that. It was a far cry from the basic cabin she'd called home on Prince Vekele's ship, which was just wide enough for her to touch either wall with her arms outstretched. Not to say the prince's ship wasn't nice. It was. Just not kingly nice.

Baris faced the large window, his hands folded behind his back. The view was nothing remarkable, only the interior of

the station's dock. In deep space, it had to have been breathtaking.

"Is your shoulder worse?" Lenore asked, starting with the obvious. "Have you lost use of your arms? Tingling in your hands? You should be evaluated for nerve damage."

"Please sit. No, that is not why I summoned you. The royal medic examined me. No torn tendons or other damage. You did an excellent job adjusting my shoulder. My thanks," Baris said, still facing the window. "Have you considered your future in my kingdom, now that you are unlikely to return to Earth?"

"I have, actually." Lenore sat on the nearest chair, and it was just as plush and comfy as advertised. "I'd like to get qualified to practice medicine here. I haven't had a chance to research it, so I don't know if that means going to med school or doing a residency, but yeah. That feels right."

He made no reply.

She waited, unsure if she should continue.

And waited.

Did he want to talk about their night together? What was the protocol? Shit, there was protocol. Of course there was. When she was leaving, there was no pressure. It was a one-time thing. Fun. No strings. Now? All the strings and potentially a scandal.

Baris guarded his private life carefully. If the media caught wind of their night...well, Lenore had a hard time seeing how a single adult man spending the night with a single adult woman was scandalous, but the tongues would wag. The last thing he'd want was undue attention, for any reason.

"I don't kiss and tell, so you don't have to worry about that," she said, breaking the silence.

"No, but that is reassuring," he replied.

Well, now she was puzzled. Not summoned for a medical issue. Not worried about gossip.

Baris drew his shoulders back, as if coming to a decision, and turned to face her. Circles hung under his eyes, testifying that if he had slept at all, it was not nearly enough.

He walked away without speaking.

He paced between the door and the window and back again. He perched on the edge of the chair opposite her, drummed his fingers on the arms, and was on his feet again. Lenore watched, curious and concerned.

Baris sat back down and finally spoke. "I've struggled with a decision. Try as I might, I cannot ignore my emotions. I must tell you how much I love you and desire you to be my mate."

Her mind went to a blue screen. All higher functions ceased.

Baris took her hand, as if her silence encouraged him. "Such a union flies against the will of the council and even my own best judgment. You have no contacts. No influence. No wealth. I cannot even claim I am dazzled by your beauty, though you are pleasing enough. Do not think otherwise."

"I wouldn't dare," she muttered.

"There is no benefit to having you as a mate except that you please me in a way that no one else can."

CHAPTER TWELVE



LENORE

Wow. She didn't even know where to begin. Just wow.

"I imagine in situations like this, I should be flattered," she said, but Baris had to be tripping if he believed she should be flattered.

"You are welcome." His thumb swept over the back of her hand, and he smiled with affection.

Tripping hard.

The thing was, she was one hundred percent positive that he was being a great guy and meant every word he said. He loved her, allegedly, which was preposterous because they barely knew each other, biblically notwithstanding.

She snatched her hand away. "Is that all?"

"That is enough," Baris said.

"Oh, it's more than enough." Now, it was Lenore's turn to pace the cabin. The absolute nerve of this man. "No."

"No?" His eyes widened and his brows went up. "May I inquire as to the fault you find in my proposal?"

Lenore huffed. "Where do I begin? We don't know each other."

"We have known each other for two years."

"We've known *of* each other. We've spoken to each other three times, one of which you called me smelly and gross, which you *still* haven't apologized for, by the way, and that pisses me off more than your insulting proposal."

"I meant no insult—"

"The fuck you did. You deign to marry me, which goes against the advice of your political advisers and even your better judgment. Wow, *super* flattering. And then you called me ugly."

“I never said you were unattractive.” To his credit, Baris sounded genuinely baffled. “You know I find you pleasing.”

“My beauty does not *dazzle* you, though I am *pleasing enough*.” She intended a mocking tone as she threw his words back in his face. Instead, insecurity and doubt betrayed her, and her voice cracked. Her chest hitched with the threat of a sob.

No. She refused to cry because this dickbag hurt her feelings. She knew what she looked like, which wasn’t stunning or pretty or even cute. Her hair was mousy brown and her cheeks too red. She was plain and never had a problem with that.

“Tell me why I should be flattered that you would willingly lower yourself to marry someone like me with no connections, no money, and no influence.” She crossed her arms over her chest, instantly remembering a lecture from the early days of her residency about body language. People thought crossing their arms over their chest made them look tough, but it showed you were vulnerable, covering your most precious organs. Well, she felt vulnerable, so fuck it. Let Baris see.

“You should be flattered because I would make you a queen—my queen—to rule a kingdom that spans the stars and elevate you above all others. No one else can offer you such a position.” His tone had turned cold, and his eyes narrowed.

“First, if I ever do marry again, and that’s a big if, it will be to someone who respects me. The gall of you, insulting me to my face and then saying, *hey, baby, you’ll never get a better offer, so why not marry me?*” She was unable to stop the avalanche of words. The more she spoke, the angrier she grew. “The arrogance of you, to insult me to my face and expect me to thank you.”

Baris pushed himself up from the chair and went to the sideboard. With the press of a button, an entire drinks cabinet emerged from the wall, and he poured himself a drink. He did not offer her a glass, which was fine by her. He’d probably poison it. With glass in hand, he returned to the window.

Calmly, he sipped the amber liquor before breaking the silence. “You’ve made your feelings quite clear. I apologize

for the insult and wasting your time.”

That was as clear of a dismissal as she had ever heard. Not one to wait around, she headed to the door. It opened as she approached. She paused at the threshold, wanting to get in one last jab.

Baris had a hand pressed to the window, his head hanging.

There was nothing else to say.

BARIS

Baris waited for the soft sound of the closing door. When he was certain Lenore had left, he flung the glass across the cabin. It smashed into the wall, splashing liquor and ruining an exceptional rug.

He had acted impulsively, exactly as Vekele warned against, and he had ruined the tentative friendship between himself and Lenore.

He needed to correct the situation.

LENORE

“Have you given any idea as to what you want to do since we’re here for-ev-er?” Lydia asked, stretching out forever until it certainly felt that way.

Lenore stirred a packet of sugar into her coffee. Not sugar. Sweetener. The tiny crystals were pink and came from a root plant, not sugar cane, and that stirred up feelings of homesickness. No more sugar for coffee, just pink sweetener. Since she was here for the long haul, she needed to shift away from Earth-centric thinking.

As hard as that would be.

“A little,” Lenore answered. “I’m a doctor. It’s all I ever wanted to be, and I don’t want to stop being a doctor.”

“Isn’t that your job now? Personal physician to the princess seems like a sweet gig.”

“A boring gig.”

Lydia shrugged her shoulders. “Fair enough.”

“Sarah is great, don’t get me wrong, but I’m used to working in a hospital. I like being busy. I like helping as many people as possible.”

If the perfect job landed in her lap, Lenore would look at it and think *meh*. Baris’ bizarre and unexpected offer and their subsequent argument put her in a strange mood. Who knew he’d get so weird after a one-night stand? Who knew she’d be so hurt when he listed all her flaws and announced that he still desired her, regardless of her value, like she should be grateful?

That was why she didn’t do hookups. They got messy.

“You were on top of your girl boss game yesterday,” Lydia said, which Lenore assumed was a compliment. “So do that.”

She made it sound easy, like Lenore just had to *go for it*. There’d be a montage with the kind of peppy music played in

gyms, and by the end, Lenore would be striding down hospital corridors in a white coat with her stethoscope around her neck, looking successful and very girl boss.

“If only it were that easy. I’d probably need to take some classes, maybe an exam, and that costs money.”

“So, use the grant money,” Lydia said around a mouthful of eggs. She had her typical high-protein, low-carb breakfast. Meanwhile, Lenore had all the carbs.

“What grant?” Lenore spread a thick layer of jam on toast.

“You know, the king’s grant.” When Lenore didn’t immediately make an ah-ha noise, Lydia continued, “The money from the royal treasury to help displaced humans? To help us be independent? We can use it for training or setting up a shop or whatever. There’s a human restaurant in Farhaven already. They do Korean fried chicken. You remember Joy and Ha-Joon?”

“No.”

Lydia rolled her eyes. “High blood pressure and heart murmur?”

“Oh, *Joy*.” Now, she remembered a middle-aged woman with dirty blonde hair and faded purple streaks.

“You know, people might like you better if you remembered their names and not their medical conditions.”

“True, but rude of you to say,” Lenore replied in a mock-serious tone.

Lydia wasn’t impressed and rolled her eyes. “Seriously. There’s money on the table. No strings attached.”

“I doubt that,” Lenore muttered. Baris was definitely the type to attach strings.

That wasn’t fair. Their conversation—if you could call a surprise dual proposal and insult a conversation—souring her mood all day yesterday and following her when she woke up the next morning. The only good thing that happened yesterday was her backpack turned up and all the extra stuff

she boxed up for recycling was delivered back to her room. She had clean underwear again.

That wasn't the point. The point was Baris didn't strike her as petty. He had been clearly upset, but he didn't twirl his villain mustache and vow revenge. Then again, he never said he respected her decision.

Oh, Lord. She pissed off the most powerful man in several solar systems. He could make her life miserable if he were so inclined.

Lydia missed nothing. "What's that look?"

There was no point denying the look because Lydia tracked gossip like a bloodhound. Once she was on the trail, she wouldn't give up.

"I'm not so sure I'd be approved for a grant. I had...a disagreement with the king."

"Spill. Now." Lydia pushed her plate out of the way and leaned forward.

"Not going to happen. Doctor-patient confidentiality," Lenore said, slipping into her stern, super-serious doctor voice. As much as Baris pissed her off yesterday, she wasn't going to spread his business around.

Lydia glanced over her shoulder for eavesdroppers. She leaned in again. "Is he going to behead you? Like—" She ran a finger over her throat and made a croaking noise.

"What? No," Lydia protested. "Why would you even think that?"

Lydia shrugged, leaning back in her chair. "Just little rumors I've heard."

"Baris isn't like that."

"Oh, it's *Baris* now?"

Lenore added an icy glare to her stern voice, doubling her attack power. "No one is getting beheaded. I don't know why you would think that."

“We are eating in Decapitation Central. Haven’t you noticed the murals?”

Lenore looked around the dining hall. It was a large, open space with tables in the center and flanked by food stalls, reminding her of a mall food court. Abstract figures decorated the ceiling, warriors among the stars wielding swords and... oh. She never really studied that ceiling.

“It’s art. That guy holding a head in one hand and a star in the other is symbolic.”

“There’s a plaque. It’s history.”

“I’m sure if I were going to be arrested and decapitated, it would have happened by now.” The royal guards would have dragged her out of her bed in the middle of the night.

“Ugh, you were almost interesting.” Lydia rolled her eyes again. Lenore didn’t have a little sister, or any sibling for that matter, but this was exactly how she pictured it. “You’re so boring.”

“I’m sorry I’m not being decapitated. How tedious for you,” Lenore said in a flat tone. As sarcastic as she sounded, the dark humor deeply amused her. And why not? They were two women stranded on the far side of the universe, light-years from home. If she couldn’t laugh, she’d burst into tears. “I take it you have big, non-boring plans. Going to finish school?”

“Maybe.” Lydia pushed the last bite of food around on her plate. “I’m taking time to figure it out. Maybe go to the capital, Farhaven, and check out the vibes.”

Lenore blinked. “That’s remarkably mature.”

“I’m not a kid, you know.”

She held up a hand in surrender. “I know. I’m impressed, that’s all.”

She tilted her head back to examine the mural on the ceiling. She’d lived on the station for a month, had dozens of meals at this very table, and never bothered to look up. That said things about her, not necessarily bad things.

When she was interested in a subject, she focused on that with an alarming intensity. Usually, it was work. That focus propelled her through school and her residency. It kept her going when her life fell apart, and when she was pulled through a portal and light-years away from home, it kept her from despair. People needed her. She helped. So what if she didn't really have any hobbies or never took the time to notice public art?

Actually, she didn't like what that said about her.

A generous helping of gold leaf decorated the mural, making the ebony black angel wings seem darker and the stars glow brighter. The eyes gleamed in the light, even the eyes in the heads no longer attached to bodies.

"It's a bit over-the-top for a cafeteria," Lenore said. Now that she thought about it, the entire station had more adornment than she would expect for a military base. Ornate scrollwork hung in every entryway and corner. What did soldiers need with fancy gold leaf murals or scrollwork? Maybe in the officer's dining room for the top brass, but this was a common area. Except all the lavish details were high up, near the ceiling. No one noticed unless they looked up.

Or they were a bird.

Lenore could have slapped her face in embarrassment at how slowly she pieced all that together. The mural and the lavish details, the ornate scrollwork, weren't for the people. It was for the karu. Just like the beams that crisscrossed the rooms weren't for structural support.

"Later," Lydia said, finishing her plate. "I'm going to hang with Lev."

"Lev? Is that your gentleman friend from the party?"

"Don't lecture me. He's hot. And nice," she added, almost as an afterthought. "Don't worry. I'll be back before curfew, Mom."

Lenore put her hand over her heart, wounded. "Ow. My sense of youth and immortality...you monster."

Lydia's laughter drifted above the crowd as she walked away.

Lenore pushed around the remains of her breakfast, trying to muster the enthusiasm to finish but failing. Lydia's words killed her appetite.

She had a point. She had such a good point. Lenore failed to pay attention to anything that wasn't a medical diagnosis. She never bothered to look up and notice the damn place she had been living in for a month. A month! She'd been to palaces and whole-ass planets. What other marvels had she failed to notice? Even more mortifying was that she didn't remember Joy or Ha-joon. Bad enough but downright humiliating when there were fewer than ninety humans in this part of the galaxy. She had no reason to forget their names.

Lenore fiddled with the packet of sweetener and poured herself another coffee. She felt like such an asshole. Clearly, more coffee would stop her from wallowing in guilt.

Baris claimed to love her? What a joke. He knew nothing about her. If he knew how she really was, how she could be selfish and rude, he'd turn tail and run, head for the hills, or whatever space-age-appropriate metaphor. Her brain wasn't cooperating, too busy with all the wallowing. And yeah, let's add self-pity to all the guilt. What a fantastic duo.

Lenore drained her now lukewarm coffee. She was so fucked.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



LENORE

“DR. KELLEY.” A tall, strongly built woman wearing the royal guard uniform stood in the door.

“Oh my God, am I being decapitated?”

“What?” The guard blinked at Lenore, first her front eyes, then the side.

“I assume you’re not here for a good reason,” Lenore said.

The woman held out a folded letter sealed with wax. “I am instructed to wait for your answer.”

“Paper. So fancy.” And worrying. Lenore ran her thumb over the seal, recognizing the royal crest. Communication was usually text messages or voice. No one used paper. She broke the seal and read the letter.

And read it again.

It seems she had a job, after all. Or at least a job offer.

“Is he serious?” Lenore asked. Perfect jobs that fulfilled all her requirements did not fall from the sky. She didn’t trust it. Not one little bit.

“The king is not one to jest,” the guard said.

No, but he sure had some audacity.

Lenore crumpled the paper in one fist. “Where is he?”

“If further negotiation is required, I can relay the message.”

“Right, because a never-ending game of telephone sure does sound swell, umm...”

“Kenth,” the woman said, supplying her name.

Lenore nearly fell into the trap of playing back and forth. “You know what, Kenth? I’ll find him.”

There were so many layers to get to Baris: aides, guards, staff, stewards, and that was just on the station. It’d be worse at the palace with councilors, butlers, valets, and all the staff needed

to keep the palace running. A person could spend a lifetime peeling back the layers and never actually get to Baris. They got the king and all the trappings that went with the title, never the man.

Lenore marched out of her room, the letter clutched in her hand. Now that she was on the move, she had no idea where to find Baris. Kenth certainly was no help, keeping her mouth shut, but it was too late to go back. Yes, she was very much aware that this was basically a tantrum, but she was committed to the tantrum.

He wasn't on the ship. Or visiting Prince Vekele's ship. Or in the hangar overseeing the portal cleanup. She found him touring the medical bay, wearing a serious expression. The extra layer of guards outside medical was a big clue, and if she had taken a moment to calm down, she would have saved a lot of running around by just looking for the concentration of guards.

For all the good that extra layer of security did. Lenore strode right in. No one stopped her or asked for credentials, partly because she had spent hours in the medical bay the day of the portal collapse but mostly because of confidence. If you walk as if you belong, people assume that you do.

"You," she said, shoving the letter against his chest.

Baris covered her hands with his and smiled like this was a sweet moment. He pulled her hand away, careful of the purple bruising on her wrists. "Dr. Kelley, how pleasant to see you recovered from your ordeal, though I believe you were instructed not to attempt to work for at least three rotations."

"I'm fine." She jerked her hand away, still clutching the letter. "Explain this. Please."

"One moment. There is a matter I wish to discuss with Dr. Kelley," Baris said in a smooth, polished voice. She didn't like it. It was his politician's voice, not his real voice.

They went to a private patient room. Lenore drew her finger down the control panel, and the walls went from transparent to

a smoky gray. The walls were thin, but it was the best option for privacy.

Still clutching the letter, Lenore forced herself to take a breath and calm herself. “A job at the Royal Academy? Is this a trick?”

“It is a sincere offer. You expressed a desire to continue your education and become qualified in Arcosian medicine. The Royal Academy is the best institution with the most qualified medics and the latest advances. There is no place better,” Baris said in a cool tone. “You will be apprenticed to Harol, my personal medic, who you have already met. There is no one more skilled. During your apprenticeship, you will receive a salary, along with room and board. The compensation is very generous.”

Lenore did not trust the measured, dispassionate tone with which Baris spoke. “Right, and I’d be your little medic at your beck and call?”

“Harol is my medic, and I do not wish to change that. Your duties will include providing care for palace staff and guards, as well as a rotation in the community clinic at the Royal Academy.” He paused, waiting for a question or a flippant comment. Lenore said nothing, despite being terribly interested. Baris continued, “The academy is housed in the White Palace. Not a terribly creative name, but we make do.”

She snorted. Make do with a palace. “Must be a real hardship.”

“It is.” Baris pushed off the wall. He crossed the small room to stand directly in front of her. His front eyes focused on her alone. “The palace has been retrofitted to be a modern facility, but issues remain. It was originally the residence of my, let’s see, great uncle. The brother to my grandmother, Queen Taras. He was king for nearly half a day before dear grandmother poisoned him.”

“What?” she asked, lulled by the juicy story into forgetting her mistrust.

“By all accounts, he was cruel and would have been a tyrant. Grandmother was more of a benevolent tyrant. She converted his palace into a charitable hospital out of spite. She spent more converting the old palace than it would have cost to build new. Even now, the building is drafty. The cost of upkeep is staggering.”

“But spite.” She got it. Lenore took all the charger cables with her when she moved out. Childish? Absolutely. Satisfying knowing that Brad wouldn’t be able to charge his phone and would tear the house apart looking for nonexistent cables? Very.

“Yes,” he agreed.

“See, all that sounds too good to be true,” she said. “We’ve got a saying on Earth—if it’s too good to be true, it is. So what’s your angle?”

“My angle?”

“What are you getting out of this? Are you trying to punish me because I said no?”

He blinked. “How is this a punishment?”

Lenore tossed up her hands. “I don’t know! It’s controlling. Manipulative. I can’t imagine why you’d go through the trouble, but you just told me about the spite hospital, so yeah. Punishment.”

His eyes narrowed and his fingers flexed. For a moment, the mask slipped, and Lenore saw a man who was genuinely offended. “Perhaps I want to recruit a highly skilled medic. Humans are popular in the media, so I am told. The public is fascinated with your story. A human medic will bring me prestige. A human medic at the academy, seen by the public, and one who attends to all the residents of the palace will keep the media’s attention for at least a season.”

“And if they’re watching me, they’re not watching you,” Lenore said, understanding. “I’m a distraction.”

“You’re an opportunity,” he clarified. “My reign has not lasted this long because I let opportunities slip by.”

Lenore rubbed her tender wrist, thinking. His reasoning was mercenary but honest. “You’re not trying to get me to change my mind about the marriage thing?”

“You declined and made your feelings quite clear.”

“Yeah, but that’s not saying you respect my decision.”

Baris’ hand rose, as if he would reach for her, but he drew back. When he spoke, he dropped the politician’s smoothness. “I apologize for that oversight. I respect your decision and will not try to sway you otherwise.”

The apology was barebones but sincere. It soothed her bruised ego. She believed him.

“Okay. I’ll take the job. Shake on it.” Lenore stuck out her right hand.

BARIS

Baris looked at her outstretched hand with confusion. She wiggled her hand, clearly waiting for...something. Lightly, he pressed the palm of his hand to hers. This appeared to be the correct action. A smile spread across her hand as her hand wrapped around his.

“Explain why we touch hands,” he said.

“It’s how we seal a deal on Earth. It’s tradition.”

“My word is enough,” he said, filled with the confidence of authority that came from a lifetime of unquestioning obedience.

“For crying out loud—” Lenore pumped his hand up and down. “Baby’s first handshake.”

“This ritual does not inspire confidence in the legally binding nature of our agreement,” he said. “Must it be this hand?”

Lenore glanced down, and her eyes widened as she realized she held his thumbless hand. He prepared himself for her to drop his hand immediately and the revulsion that would surely follow.

It did not come. Instead, she continued to smile and pump his hand up and down. His hand was just another hand. He appreciated the point she was trying to prove, but it seemed excessive.

“Yes, it must be this hand,” she said. “The right hand is dominant for about ninety percent of all humans. Also, there’s superstitious nonsense about the right and left hand.” Another pump. “The left hand is sinister, which...okay, you don’t need a lesson in Latin. That’s an ancient language, by the way, that no one uses except for the sciences and medicine. We love Latin. Anyway, the left hand is evil, but the right hand is good.”

Another pump.

“Does the ritual require a certain number of shakes?”

“Maybe I just like holding your hand?” she asked in a playful tone and gave a comedic wink.

Baris frowned and jerked his hand away. “You tease me.”

“That’s what friends do,” she said.

He huffed, as if disbelieving her words. Still, it felt correct. The tension between them had disappeared. He had the same comfortable feeling as he had the previous night before he mucked it up.

Friends. It was not what he desired, but more than he deserved.

“We have a similar superstition,” he said.

“Really?” Lenore perked with interest. “Tell me everything.”

“It is said that the peripheral eyes watch you with suspicion but the front eyes for trust,” he explained.

“Wait, the peripheral...you mean the side eyes are dodgy? We say that, too, giving someone the side-eye when you think they’re acting suspicious.” She looked out of the corner of her eyes to demonstrate.

“Not exactly. We do not use all this constantly.” He waved his hand from ear to ear. “When we are in conversation with someone who has our full concentration or trust, we use the front and let the peripherals drift out of focus. But if we are on alert, all eyes are focused.”

“Interesting. Is that why people are always spooked with Prince Vekele? Because he does this?” She turned her head to look away and tilted her head. “It freaks people out because his body language is on alert?”

“It is a combination of his vision loss and the use of his peripheral sight. Arcosian culture can be unforgiving. A physical weakness in an opponent is to be exploited. When you are the one who is weak, you hide it or yourself,” he explained. “Vekele does neither.”

Not now. In the months after the attack that cost him his vision, Vekele had spent nearly a year hiding. Baris never, not once, considered his brother damaged or without value. It took

sending him on a mission to investigate an anomaly that turned out to be a portal from Earth to convince Vekele that he still had worth.

“Right, right. You’re all fancy murderers,” Lenore muttered.

“Is Earth such a peaceful planet? No scheming or betrayal? War and conquest?”

“We definitely have those things. Are you doing it now? Using your side eyes?” She leaned to one side, making a comedic production of examining him.

“No.”

“Ah, you trust me.” That smile returned to her face. It was like the first touch of a cool breeze on a stifling hot day. It revived him.

It would not be easy to remain merely a friend and keep distance between them, as she requested. He craved her. She affected him and inspired great emotions. It was no simple trick to turn off those emotions. He did trust her. She had captured his attention completely.

She could never know. So he lied.

“It is difficult to maintain such constant awareness.”

“Because of your condition?”

“Yes,” he said, thankful that he could mostly speak the truth. Lies were more effective when they were built from truths.

“My eyes tire, and I am prone to headaches.”

“I’ve got like a dozen more questions—”

Baris held up a hand. “Prepare a list. Medic Harol will be thrilled to have such an enthusiastic pupil. We depart in a few hours. Will you be ready?”

She bobbed her head up and down in the same motion he had observed in Sarah when she meant to agree. “Everything is still packed. I want to talk to a few people before leaving.”

“See Des. He will authorize you for the ship and see to the transportation of your belongings,” Baris said. When she left, she took the warmth and vitality in the room with her.

Baris tapped the side of his head, just below the peripheral eye.

A friend. He hadn't had one of those in a long time.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



LENORE

HAROL WAS, in fact, not thrilled. He had several choice words but seemed to accept their joint fate as apprentice and master.

In the following month, he kept her busy with reading. So much reading. There were tomes on basic Arcosian biology, which she had already grasped from her limited resources, along with biologies of other known alien species: Khargal, Nakkoni, and Reilendeer. These didn't delve into great detail; instead, they focused on the basics. Universally safe medications. Poison. How to keep an injured person alive long enough for a specialist to arrive. It felt very much like the survival handbook Lenore found in that cabin when she first arrived: useful but limited.

She was given a lavishly decorated suite in the palace. Lavish seemed to be the default style for the palace, with ornate details, gold gilding on every surface, marble polished to a shine, and murals on every ceiling, even in her bedroom.

Her rooms were definitely more luxurious than the bare room and board she expected from the description in the job offer. The suite consisted of three rooms: a parlor, a study, a bedroom, and a private bathroom with a tub large enough to fit three people comfortably. Not that she was doing that kind of entertaining. Or any entertaining. There was a lot to learn and not enough hours in the day.

The furnishings were plush and comfortable, homey if lavish, like Marie Antoinette playing a country farmer. Faux simple. The mural above her bedroom erased any notion that the decor was simple. A flock of karu took flight across the ceiling, their inky black wings against a deep blue night sky, moonlight playing on their feathers. Silver stars twinkled in the light from her bedside table lamp, and the karu wings seemed to move as the moon traveled through the night.

The view during the day couldn't be beat, either. The palace sat on an island in a harbor with open water to the south, a river carving out the island from the mainland to the west and

north, and another island to the east. Farhaven, the capital city, surrounded the palace, an intriguing mix of shining tech and ancient stone. Gleaming steel bridges spanned the water, connecting the palace's island to the rest of the city. Her suite faced south, offering gentle sunrises and colorful sunsets. Not that she had time to explore the city or enjoy sunsets.

Lenore shadowed Harol at the Royal Academy, where she was not quite a student and definitely not viewed as a doctor. She also shadowed him during patient appointments but was not yet trusted to see a patient on her own. In theory, if a human showed up, she'd be in charge, and Harol would shadow her, but it hadn't happened yet.

The days were long, and her feet ached by the time she collapsed in bed. It wasn't worse than her first year of residency, but she wasn't in her twenties anymore. She was a thirty-six-year-old woman with graying hair and knees that made alarming noises when she rolled out of bed.

Harol pumped her for information about humans, common medical conditions, and reactions to Arcosian medications. A Harol bearing a plate of treats, or a cup of coffee was not to be trusted.

Harol set down a cup of coffee on the desk by her elbow and sat, watching her with suspicious intensity.

"You don't honestly think I'm going to drink this?" she asked, pushing the cup away. "What's in the tea?"

"A common medication to lower blood pressure. Drink it and report if you feel any lightheadedness. Let me check your pulse so I have a baseline." He scribbled down his observations before reaching for her wrist.

Lenore jerked it away. "What's the magic word?"

"Humans are so superstitious."

"It's *please*, you bossy bastard."

Harol huffed, a sound she came to associate with amusement.

"I will check your pulse. Please."

“You know, informed consent is a thing. It’s unethical to dose me without my permission.” Lenore held out her wrist because of information exchange, blah blah. Not that Harol would get good data. Her pulse rate would be rapid because she was annoyed.

“You are my apprentice. My consent is enough,” he said.

“Wow. That’s wrong on so many counts. You’re lucky I don’t dump that coffee on you.”

“Being observed can change behavior,” Harol said.

There might be truth to that, but the point stood. “I could have an allergic reaction. I could stop breathing. Or develop nausea. I have a sensitive stomach.”

“Hypotheticals.” He pressed two fingers to her wrist and kept his gaze on a timer. Not one single eye was on her.

“No, you’re not hearing me. I’m not your experiment or test subject. If you try to dose me again without my consent, I will throw that cup of coffee back in your face,” she said, which garnered no reaction. Fine. Time to escalate. “You want to fuck around and find out? I will make myself vomit all over your shoes.”

He paused, finally looking at her, surprise on his face. Her threat was gross and childish, but it seemed to reach him. “You would make yourself sick on purpose?”

Lenore held his gaze. She’d worked with asshole doctors for years and wasn’t about to let this one walk all over her. “On purpose. On command. And right on your feet.”

He wrinkled his nose in disgust. “I was a medic in the military. Bodily functions do not frighten me.”

“Your shoes look fancy. Not military grade at all.” She leaned over in an exaggerated manner to get a better look. “Are they waterproof? Want to find out?”

Harol pushed himself up from the chair and took a step back. “You have made your point.”

“Good.” She liked him, outside of him treating her like a test subject. He had a practical way of viewing problems that

appealed to her.

“Name the most common eye disorders and how they are diagnosed,” he said, switching from research mode to professor.

Lenore moved through a memorized list. Reciting facts was another thing Harol enjoyed inflicting on her. She was decent enough when it came to memorization; she’d have never made it through med school otherwise. Still, she felt like a child called to the front of the class. Arcosian eyes were complex; apparently, a thousand things could go wrong, and none of them had straightforward names like nearsightedness or detached retinas.

“These names are silly,” Lenore said in frustration. “It’s all *curse of the red eye sorcerer* and *blooming revenge*. Which, since I know you’re going to ask, is a genetic degenerative blindness. I’ll consult with a specialist.”

Harol was not impressed. “Memorization is not difficult. It is expected of all students. Is this what human medics do? Make jokes when they are confronted with the unknown?”

“We Google symptoms,” she snapped. “You know, I think I’m doing pretty well, considering that I’m reading in a foreign language, which a chip in my brain translates so I can commit it to memory. It’s not surprising there’s some lag in the uptake.”

Harol did not ask what Google was, probably believing it was a curious idiom. She spouted off enough of those that he no longer bothered to ask. “Review the material. We will continue tomorrow. Enjoy the sun. It will snow soon enough.”

A break sounded good. The palace and Royal Academy delivered on the best equipment, latest techniques, and skilled physicians that Baris promised, but it felt suffocating at times.

Lenore gathered her books and tablet into her bag and headed out into the winter night.

BARIS

“Will you have another glass?” Councilor Raelle motioned for the wine to be refilled.

“Thank you for the pleasant evening, but I must decline.” Baris rose from the table. Raelle followed, as did everyone else at the table.

Raelle gave her granddaughter, Nia, a sharp look and a not-so-subtle nudge.

“Can we offer you a drink to keep you warm? The night is bitterly cold,” Nia said.

Dinner with the councilor had been a necessity. Her invitations to dine could not be put off indefinitely, not with her grandson in control of Baris’ schedule. The councilor was in the midst of a campaign to find Baris a new mate, bringing up the subject at every opportunity. She had lists of suitable candidates, complete with medical records. Dossiers on the families and the secrets that could be exploited. Analysis of potential unions, both the benefits and the fallout. She would not relent until Baris surrendered.

He knew he must; he simply did not wish to. It was childish. Selfish, even. Deciding it was better to get the ordeal over with quickly rather than prolong the pain, he agreed to a meal in Raelle’s palace suite.

Instead of charts and lists, he was greeted by Raelle’s granddaughter, Nia. They had met before. Being expected to be seen at social functions was inevitable with a politician for a mother. He did not know her well but recognized her on sight.

Nia was pleasant enough. Attractive. Able to hold a moderately interesting conversation. She met all the qualifications to be a candidate for marriage. Raelle continuously steered the conversation to Nia’s accomplishments. Her karu had chosen her almost the instant she set foot in the temple at Miria. They enjoyed an incredibly

strong bond. She was a fashion designer. The court couldn't get enough of her designs that season. She was the top of her class at the design institute. She spoke several languages without the aid of a translation chip. She could play musical instruments. She had such a charming sense of humor. On and on.

Raelle walked Baris to the small foyer. She took a breath as if to launch into another speech on Nia's virtues.

"I do not appreciate being ambushed by a matchmaking mother," Baris said, stopping her before she started.

Raelle pressed a hand to her chest. "I would never. Nia is visiting. Am I not allowed to have dinner with my child?"

"This subterfuge does not suit you." Baris shrugged on his greatcoat with the help of a servant.

"Very well. My granddaughter is a good match. Uniting the Frostwings and the Shadowmarks is beneficial to us both. I cannot be blamed for putting her in your path."

"And how does she feel about being placed in my path?"

"Honored," Raelle said without a moment's hesitation. "As anyone would be."

He seriously doubted that, but he could not fault her ambition. It was one of the qualities that made her a valuable councilor. The problem was if the other councilors learned that Raelle used a private dinner to campaign for her own granddaughter to be queen, then they would follow. It would be chaos—every well-heeled noble family would trot out their wares, and Baris would drown in a sea of social invitations.

No. It had to stop immediately.

"I appreciate that I must take a mate, but you must cease these tactics," Baris said.

She dipped her head. "I understand."

He seriously doubted she'd give up scheming so readily, but he accepted her statement with grace and left.

The night air was indeed bitter. Winter came swiftly, bringing gray skies. He cut through the gardens to return to his quarters. Wings of the palace wrapped around the gardens, creating a soft rim of golden light at the fringe of manicured darkness. The garden route did not save time, but it saved him the bother of being stopped by a dozen people who wanted a word.

Leaves covered the ground. The summer greenery had long since died back, leaving the hardier autumn and winter plants. The garden was not awash in color, but it was green and alive. Karu perched in the trees, gently calling to one another in the night. Soon enough, the garden would be blanketed with snow. His breath hung in the air.

The guards kept a discreet distance. It was almost quiet enough to imagine he was alone.

A figure emerged from a building, stepping into a puddle of light and then slipping into the darkness. He recognized Lenore at once and called out to her.

Shadows moved across her face, giving the appearance of a smile. That pleased him.

“Good evening,” he said. “It’s a bit late for a walk in the garden.”

“I could say the same,” she replied. Yes, that was a smile. “It’s a shortcut back to my rooms.”

“Then we are heading in the same direction. Walk with me.” They fell into an easy pace, gravel crunching under their feet. Suddenly, he no longer felt the cold. “How are your accommodations?”

“Amazing, but you know that.”

Silence fell between them again. It felt brittle, like he was in danger of making the wrong observation and insulting her again. A lifetime of politics instructed him to stick to safe subjects. “The weather is cold tonight.”

“The cold is kicking my ass,” she replied, arms folded across her chest and hand tucked in for warmth. “It’s embarrassing. I’m from Chicago. I’ve gone soft.” He must have worn a puzzled expression. She quickly added, “Chicago is known for

brutally cold winters. The wind just cuts right through you. Right now? It's not even cold enough to snow. Back home, I wouldn't even bother with a coat. A sweater, maybe a scarf, and I'd be fine. I'm soft."

"I do not think being soft is disgraceful. It is a fine quality."

To his shame, he noticed that she wore a thin coat, one designed for the chill of a spring day, not the deep cold of winter. She had no gloves and no scarf.

"Your garments are insufficient for the weather." He shrugged off his greatcoat and held it out.

"I couldn't. You need to stay warm."

"I will survive. You may not."

Thankfully, she did not protest but took the coat. Baris settled it over her shoulders, the thick woolen material covering her. It pleased him inordinately to see her in his coat. The greatcoat went down to his knees. On her, it swept along the ground.

"I pay your wages," he said. "Why do you not have a coat?"

"No time."

"Order one from the network." The solution seemed obvious to him.

"Sure, if something fits you straight off the rack. I'm an odd size. I need to try things on before buying, maybe get it tailored, and I haven't had a chance to go shopping yet."

"Freezing is not the solution," he said. "Keep my coat until you acquire your own."

Her lips parted, but no sound emerged. Instead, she gave that human nod of agreement. "Okay. Thank you."

As they resumed their walk, an uncomfortable silence fell between them again. Baris itched to replace it.

"How go your studies?" he asked, wincing at the formality in his tone.

"Fine." She stopped, the coat swinging around her. "I wasn't lurking or waiting for you like a creep or anything like that."

“The thought did not occur to me.” He was simply delighted to encounter her. “Is Harol treating you well?”

“You know he isn’t. The man is a tyrant.”

“Fairly?” Because if that medic had harmed Lenore in any way, he would suffer.

“He’s fair. And demanding. And rude. He tried to poison me today,” she said, her tone implying that it was not an executable offense.

“He will suffer for such an offense. Is it acceptable to gift the teeth of your enemies?”

“I don’t know if you’re serious or not,” she said after a long moment. “No. No teeth. He’s testing common medications on a human, which is fine, but he needs to inform me first. We reached an understanding. If he does it again, things will get messy.”

He had been serious. The treasury held a necklace of teeth strung together like pearls. It had been a favorite of his grandmother. He decided to keep that bit of information to himself.

“How are you feeling?” She waved a hand, as if that could erase her question. “Sorry, that makes it sound like you’re just a diagnosis to me. You’re not. I’d like to be your friend. So, how are you?”

“Some days are better than others,” he answered truthfully.

“Harol doesn’t share details about your appointments, if you’re worried. He’s on the up and up with patient confidentiality.”

“I assume that idiom means he is compliant.”

“Basically.”

“Do you take this path every evening, and do you always walk alone in the dark?” he asked.

“Are you implying it’s not safe?” She did not sound frightened, more curious and offended at the implication that she was incapable of keeping herself safe.

“Not at all. This is the kind of situation a friend would be concerned over.”

“Friends? Are we friends now?”

Footsteps crunched on gravel. The karu called to each other in the trees.

“I would be honored to count you as a friend,” he said.

“Okay. Friends. I can do that.”

They arrived at the side door of the wing and entered into the warmth. Baris greeted the guards. A short flight of stairs brought them to a landing. This wing of the palace was reserved for the royal family. Now, it only housed Baris. So many empty rooms for one person. When Vekele and Sarah were in residence, they stayed there. Before, his traitorous aunt Cassana had rooms. Giving Lenore a suite broke tradition, but no one questioned him.

Lenore pointed to the left. “I’m down this way. Thanks for walking with me.”

“My pleasure,” he said with a bow. The gesture was a bit much, but it brought a smile to her face. He did not understand human beauty standards. How could Lenore be considered plain when she was so clearly radiant?

Being merely a friend would be more difficult than he anticipated.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



LENORE

BEING the king's friend came with unexpected benefits.

A knock on the clinic door broke her concentration. Lydia stood in the doorway, holding a massive gift box complete with a red ribbon.

"Found you," she said, letting herself in. "Is this where they've been hiding you?"

"I'm not hiding. I'm working." That morning, she saw her first patient unsupervised. A member of staff slipped on a wet floor and sprained their ankle. Basic stuff. Still, seeing her own patient filled her with a sense of accomplishment.

She didn't even mind when Harol instructed her to write up her notes and then read about the most common karu-symbiote-linked ailments. The winter holidays were coming, which meant the palace denizens would consume everything in excess. An upset stomach and headache became more complicated with a bond that amplified the discomfort. Lenore sequestered herself in the tiny office at the back of the clinic to finish entering her notes and start studying.

"What are you doing here? Not that I'm not happy to see you. I am," Lenore said.

Lydia set the box on the desk, covering the open book and notes. "I'm working too. I landed a gig with a clothing designer. Can you believe it?"

"Oh, that sounds right up your alley."

"Right? Nia wants a human perspective." Lydia's voice shifted, growing more refined, as she pressed a hand to her chest, clearly quoting this Nia. "Humans are hot at the moment, so my job is basically to show up at parties wearing her designs. *Be seen, darling.*"

"That's it?" Parties? Lenore tried to keep her face neutral, but it was hard when Lydia was ecstatic about a career in partying.

"No. Don't be so judgmental."

“I’m not judging.” She was. Lenore was totally judging.

“I’m learning so much about the fashion industry. The parties don’t happen that often, and they’re not that fun. I can’t damage the merchandise. Mostly, I’m an intern. Go there. Fetch this. Like now.” She tapped the box. “For you.”

“I didn’t order anything.”

“That’s why it’s called a gift. Hurry up and open it. I need to take measurements.”

Lenore tugged on the ribbon, letting it fall to the floor, and opened the box. Inside, nestled on white tissue paper that sparkled enough to be fresh snow, was a scarlet wool cape lined with sable. She held the cape up to the light, marveling at how fine the wool felt and the softness of the sable lining. She wanted to bury her face in it.

“Who?” Lenore asked.

Lydia handed her a cream-colored envelope. Lenore recognized the royal seal. Baris. Mystery solved.

“I can’t accept this,” she said.

Lydia rolled her eyes. “It’s a coat. You need a coat. Are you going to go shopping today?”

“No, I don’t have time—”

“Then let’s just skip the part where you protest that it’s *too much* and *what will people think* and try it on,” Lydia said.

Annoyingly, Lydia was right. She needed a coat, which her friend knew. Her friend also knew that she didn’t have time to go shopping, so the shops came to her.

Lenore fumbled with the fasteners at the front, then slung the cape over her shoulders. It swallowed her up, falling down to her knees. Lydia adjusted the front and pulled the hood over Lenore’s head.

“It’s very Little Red Riding Hood,” Lenore said, which was not a bad thing in her opinion. Not everyone got to be a fairytale princess. Some fought wolves.

“It’s not too big? I had to guess at your height. Spin. Let me see the back.”

“It’s marvelous,” Lenore said, following directions. The wool had a good weight to it, like it could withstand the wind.

“Nia got a message this morning from a client that you just don’t refuse,” Lydia explained. “The cape is the best we can do without your measurements. Nia took this off the rack and spent all morning sewing the new hem.”

“The length is perfect.” It fell just below her knees.

“You’re a little taller than me, so we guessed. Okay, let me get your measurements.”

“Why?”

“For your real coat.”

“This is gorgeous and will keep me warm enough,” Lenore said.

“Oh, I don’t think you understand your benefactor. You’re to be dressed like a queen.”

Lenore picked the envelope back up and turned it over in her hands. She couldn’t explain the reluctance she felt at opening the envelope. Baris wanted to be friends. Fine. But a gift like this wasn’t friendship. It was something else. Something that people would talk about.

“Baris said that?” she asked.

“Maybe. I didn’t take the order, but those are the words Nia used.” Lydia pointed to Lenore and snapped her fingers. “Cape. Off. Arms out. Don’t move.”

Lenore held her arms out and stood still while Lydia did a full-body scan with a handheld device.

The king was generous with his gifts. Who was she to argue?

BARIS WAITED for her in the palace gardens that night when she left the clinic. He stood at the cusp of light and shadow near a fountain drained dry for the winter.

“Hello,” she said, her breath steaming in the air. Despite the cold, she was warm and snug in her red cape. “Thanks for the cape. It’s lovely.”

“I was purely motivated by self-interest. Now, I may wear my coat without the crushing obligations of chivalry,” he said in a serious tone. A twitch of his lips told her that he teased her.

She liked it. She liked him. This version of him.

Baris waited for her the next evening. And the next. Soon, their nightly walks became the best part of her day.

The first snowfall of the winter fell in lazy, wet flakes. It clung to the ground but melted away on the gravel. Lenore pushed back the hood of her cape to admire the way the light illuminated the flakes as they drifted through lantern light and then vanished into the dark.

Lenore enthused about the last fact she learned that day. “Did you know humans have more bones than Arcosians? Infants start with two hundred and seventy, but they fuse as we grow older. Kids are like that. Spongy. Bouncy, so they don’t seriously hurt themselves while their motor skills are developing. But adults have two hundred and seven. Arcosians have two hundred.”

Baris’ side eyes narrowed as he considered her words. “You do not have extra digits.”

“It’s our ears. We’ve got teeny little bones to enhance our hearing.”

“Obviously, it is compensation for your limited sight. What is a kid? Context tells me it is a hatchling.”

“A child, but also a baby goat. I have no idea why. Baby goats are rambunctious and adorable, though.”

Baris made an ah-ha sound, as if her rambling explanation made perfect sense.

Yeah, this was definitely the best part of her day.

“LATE NIGHT?” The guard gave a chuckle, like that was a joke, and elbowed the guard standing next to him. They were a cluster of three, congregated in a hallway, just standing around and yammering.

“I was with a friend,” Lenore said, covering a yawn. She stayed up late watching a celebrity singing competition, not that she had any idea who the celebrities were or any interest in the pageantry of it. Lydia arrived with dinner and a bottle of wine. She wanted to watch for the costumes, but her screen was too small. Lenore found it hard to say no to the smell of delicious greasy food, and she had a massive screen that she barely used.

“I bet you were.” The guard winked both eyes on his right side.

Lenore must have looked puzzled—which, to be fair, she was—because the guard continued, “Up all night with your special friend.”

The other guards laughed like it was the funniest thing they ever heard.

It was too early in the morning to decrypt that nonsense. She continued her way down the corridor, clutching her coffee. Three minutes later, her brain came online, and she figured it out.

Sex. They meant sex.

Lenore marched back to the cluster of guards.

“You,” she said, gesturing at the tallest guard with her coffee-holding hand. The liquid sloshed threateningly at the rim. “What’s so damn funny?”

“Nothing.”

Oh, the eloquence.

“Yeah, that’s why you’re all tittering like you found a dirty magazine. What’s so funny?” she repeated.

“Well, you know...the king doesn't have any special friends, then he picks you.”

“And that's funny because?”

Color drained from the guard's face. “Everyone is saying... you know...he favors you. Spends time with you. Gives you presents. Put you in the family wing of the palace.”

This was the family wing? Lenore managed to keep her mouth shut and preserve some air of mystery rather than ask the question that would confirm that she had been rather oblivious. The corridors were empty except for staff and the guards. No one came and went. She never heard voices of conversation as people walked by because she had no neighbors.

“He threatened to pluck out the eyes of the headmaster of the Royal Academy unless they admitted you.”

“I'm a qualified physician on Earth, and I have to pass exams in a year,” she said, but they were not listening.

“He contacted the most exclusive tailor in Farhaven in the middle of the night to make you that red cloak,” a guard said, pointing to the cloak she wore.

“Plus, he makes us lock down the garden every evening for your privacy,” another added. They nodded in agreement.

“It's winter. No one walks in the garden at night in the cold,” she said. As the words left her lips, she realized that she had been naive. Installing her in the family wing. Forcing the academy to give her a place. The nightly walks in a magically secluded garden in an otherwise bustling palace. The red coat.

The evidence, as innocent as she could explain it all, added up to one conclusion.

“I'm his mistress? That's what people are saying?”

The guards all nodded.

“We're pleased for him,” the tall one said. “The king is happier than I've ever seen him.”

“Yes. His Majesty deserves to enjoy himself.”

“He never smiled before.”

How flattering. She made the king smile with her magic cooch.

“Does anyone else know?” she asked.

The guards shuffled their feet as if unsure how they should answer.

“I’m not embarrassed or upset,” she said, which was a lie because she was a solid mix of both. “Baris—His Majesty values his privacy. I’d hate for people to gossip about...I don’t like gossip.”

“Just the guards. We know to keep our eyes open and our mouths shut,” the tall one said.

“Well, thank you. This has been...thanks.” A lot. Informative. Eye-opening. They weren’t having sex—although she had no regrets about the time they did. They were friends. Or attempting to be friends. If this was the kind of scrutiny Baris was under every day, had been for his entire life, she imagined it was a lonely existence. That kind of pressure would send most anyone running. She certainly felt the uncomfortable itch of having her every move watched.

Being the king’s friend came with benefits but also complications, it seemed.

“WHY IS EVERYONE HERE? In the palace, I mean. Traveling to another planet takes no time at all, and you can speak instantly across light-years, so...” Lenore sucked in a breath, the cold air rattling in her chest, “why is everyone at the palace like you need to hold them hostage to centralize power?”

“A less benevolent sovereign might take offense,” Baris replied, good-natured humor in his voice.

“You know what I mean.”

“I do. Communication and travel were not always so easy during the time of conflict, and there have been extended

periods of conflict recently.”

“But they don’t have to be here now.”

“There are benefits to being at court. One must be seen to be influential.”

Lenore made a thoughtful noise. Politics, particularly intricate politics, had never held much interest to her, but now, in the thick of it, she couldn’t avoid it. “What about the family wing? Why is that empty if *one must be seen to be influential*? Isn’t the royal family just packed to the brim with cousins?”

“Vekele and Sarah have rooms. As do you.”

“Yeah, but I’m not family.”

“Extended members of the royal family remain safely fortified within their own compounds,” Baris said, neatly sidestepping the comment about Lenore not being family. “The Shadowmarks have a nasty habit of slaughtering one another.” He spoke with such a casual air about his family’s murderous habits that Lenore laughed at the absurdity.

Apparently, he was serious. He gave her a stern look and said, “It is for everyone’s safety.”

“Sure, sure. But why keep all those rooms ready? That seems a waste.”

His peripheral eyes watched her as they walked through the gardens. “Have you explored any of the rooms?”

“Can’t say that I have. Seems rude to go poking around someone’s house.” That was the truth of it. As curious as she might be, she didn’t want to overstep Baris’ hospitality and find herself tossed in a dungeon.

“The only rooms that are maintained are mine, Vekele’s, and yours. The rest are horribly outdated and in need of renovation. I don’t even think the heating works properly.”

“What about my room? How did you have the time to get it prepared?”

“My aunt Cassana resided in that suite.”

Silence fell between them. Lenore had heard the name before, often whispered in hushed tones. Clearly, Auntie Cassana was a big deal or a sore point, but no one explained why. “She was—”

“My captive,” Baris said bluntly. “She and my uncle murdered my parents when I was twelve, acted as regents due to my age, and went on to commit an impressive amount of treason. *That* aunt.”

There didn’t seem much else to say. Lenore completely understood why the extended royal family elected to stay home.

BARIS

“You need to be seen,” Raelle said.

“I am seen. Daily. Constantly,” Baris replied. Privacy was a luxury.

“In public.”

The morning’s council session ran long. Other members of the council filed out of the chambers to other appointments. Baris made the mistake of not immediately exiting the room. He lingered, scrolling through his messages while the room emptied. Truthfully, he needed to wait until the trembling in his hands subsided. Raelle and Des took the opportunity to cage him, taking the vacant chairs on either side.

“The media covered your injury on Station K-7 extensively. The people need to see their monarch recovered,” Raelle insisted.

There was wisdom to her words. Using the excuse that he needed to rest his shoulder, Baris had withdrawn from several public functions. It was time to put himself back on display.

“Then find some worthy cause and arrange a tour. A home for wounded veterans. A charity that feeds the poor,” he said. He could shake hands and make interesting noises while a stranger nervously explained how they rescued and rehomed unwanted companion animals. There was a sanctuary for karu who outlived their bonded. It happened often enough, as karu were extraordinarily long-lived. Sometimes, they returned to the wild and the sacred temple of Miria. Sometimes, they chose to bond to a surviving family member, often a child or descendant of the original bonded. Sanctuaries existed to care for the karu who were elderly or did not choose a new bond.

Surprisingly, the idea caused no pain. Baris expected to feel a pang of loss. Instead, he found himself warmed by the idea.

“Arrange a visit to the karu sanctuary for those who outlived their bonded,” he said.

Des called up the schedule on his tablet. “I’ll arrange a visit—”

“I was thinking of something more immediate,” Raelle said, speaking over Des. “The Frostwings have a private box at the theater for the opening performance of *Queen Pavele*. Be my guest this evening.”

“The queen who refused to name an heir, causing her children to slaughter each other until she was the only survivor. I’m not in the mood for history,” he said, unimpressed. He’d much prefer to visit a karu sanctuary.

“It’s very popular,” Des added, as if that would sway Baris. “Tickets are impossible to get. People talking about seeing you there will be worth a dozen sanctuaries.”

Baris doubted that. He’d certainly enjoy the sanctuary more than the theater.

“I suppose the tickets are for tonight only,” Baris said. He’d miss his nightly walk in the garden with Lenore, and that distressed him. He didn’t wish to pretend to be entertained by a reenactment of his ancestors slaughtering one another while he felt flush and his hands shook.

“Only tonight,” Raelle said. “If Your Majesty does not wish—”

Baris waved his hand. He relented, knowing that the councilor would not. “Very well.”

He’d send a message to Lenore to apologize for his absence and assign a guard to accompany her that evening.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



LENORE

LYDIA CLUTCHED LENORE'S ARM. "Oh my God, I'm freezing in these shoes."

"You're the one who insisted on open-toed shoes. There's snow on the ground."

"We had to walk like five steps from the curb to the front doors. I expected this place to have heat."

They could have also dressed for the weather, but she kept that to herself. Lydia arrived at the clinic that afternoon with a dress and tickets to the theater. The dress, sewn by Lydia that day, was a classic wrap dress made of pale, blushing pink silk and crepe. It was gorgeous—just more suited for the summer than winter. Lydia wore a similar dress in a rich indigo. She also informed Lenore that she was taking the night off, and they were to be seen by the best and brightest, wearing a one-of-a-kind creation by the hottest designer at the most exclusive show on the planet. As one does.

Lenore's first instinct was to decline, claiming she had reading to catch up on when really she didn't want to miss her nightly stroll in the garden with Baris. However, that afternoon, he sent a message that he was unable to attend. It was fine. Disappointing but understandable. There was probably some function at the palace or an ambassador to wine and dine. Frankly, it was amazing he hadn't canceled on her earlier.

"It's a good dress. I don't mind being a little cold," Lenore said. Her red cloak went a long way to keeping her warm.

The theater was in that over-the-top Arcosian style of gilded everything. She expected nothing less. Lydia seemed to know everyone—at least, it felt that way. From the moment they entered the lobby, she was a bubbling font of gossip about who's-who in Arcosian high society, what they wore, and what people were saying about them. Lenore had to admit it was rather fun, like stepping into a historical drama.

She felt eyes on her, taking her in and judging. It was a familiar sensation but in a new setting. For the last month, she'd been judged for being from Earth, a planet popular opinion had determined was technologically backward. No matter how hard she worked to prove herself at the academy, the doctors and students there treated her like a caveman. Oh, look, the primitive human thinks she's a medic.

Harol didn't treat her that way, and as her mentor, his was the only opinion worth considering. Still, she'd make those snobs eat their words when she passed the exams.

Tonight, though, the looks were different. Judging, yes, in a way that evaluated creatures in a menagerie. She stood out, short and beige and in her Earth-centric dress. Entertainment. She didn't appreciate it. Lydia introduced her to lots of faces, some of whom she might recognize if they met again, including Lydia's boss and the donor of the tickets, Nia Frostwing.

Nia was a tall woman with dark hair that fell in a tumble over one shoulder. She wore a slim-fitted white silk frock coat that cut away from her hips in a cascade of delicate lace. Silver filigree claw caps decorated each finger, attached to her wrist with delicate silver chains. Everything about her was put together and elegant. The soft light of the lanterns sparkled on the gold threads in the lace, making it look like she stepped out of a winter fairytale.

"This must be your friend," Nia said, taking Lenore's hands. "She is so pale. You did not tell me she was so pale, Lydia. The colors are all wrong. They wash her out."

"My color is fine," Lenore said, pulling away.

Lydia nudged her foot ever so gently.

Right. Be nice.

"I wanted to thank you for the cloak," she said. "It's fantastic. I can't tell you how much I love it."

Nia waved a hand, as if dismissing the gratitude. "It is nothing. A rejected piece cluttering up my workshop, but it suits you. Do not trouble yourself."

“I’m excited to experience Arcosian theater. I loved going to the theater back home,” Lydia said, changing the topic.

“And you? Do you enjoy the theater?” Nia kept her gaze fixed on Lenore.

“I’ve never been,” Lenore answered.

Lydia turned to her, shock on her face. “Never?”

“No. One time, my fifth-grade class went to see the Nutcracker.”

“Oh my God, do you have any hobbies at all, or is it all work, work, work?”

Lenore hesitated to answer. Being truthful—that she was indeed all work, work, work—felt like a trap. A sad trap full of sadness because she had no other hobbies or interests.

“I have you, and you’re interested in everything,” she managed to say.

“You’re burying emotional trauma in your work, and that’s not healthy. You need to deal,” Lydia said with the tone of an expert. Lenore gaped in surprise. “What? I took a psych class.”

Nia’s gaze shifted from Lenore to Lydia. “Not everyone is an inquisitive soul.”

That wasn’t true at all. Lenore was plenty curious, just about different things. Lydia had an enthusiasm for new and novel experiences. It was one of the things Lenore liked about her.

Before Lenore could correct Nia’s statement, a bell chimed, and the crowd thinned as people sought their seats. Lydia flashed their tickets, and an usher escorted them to seats on the floor near the stage. Not the best seats, but not the worst.

The audience surrounded the completely round stage. The arrangement reminded Lenore of an amphitheater, just on a smaller scale and indoors. There had to be a proper name for it, but Lenore didn’t know. She wasn’t a theater enthusiast. There were two levels: seats on the ground floor that rose in tiers and a second level of box seats, set apart from the rest of the crowd.

Karu perched on railings and in the rafters. They called to one another, fluffed their down, and fanned tail feathers.

The upper crust filled the box seats, including Baris. He sat alone in the box. A few moments later, Nia joined him. The karu on her shoulder hopped to the back of the chair, then to the railing.

Nia smiled broadly, broadcasting to all that she was so thrilled and delighted. She leaned over the arm of the chair, crowding into his space. Baris' posture, however, was stiff, like this was a trial. Nia fluttered her hands and tossed her head back, laughter drifting above the noise of the crowd.

Disappointment she couldn't understand wedged itself in her chest. Baris was her friend, and he was allowed to do social things, like sitting in a private box at the theater with a pretty woman. He needed a queen. He told her as much: how the council would select suitable candidates for his consideration. This was part of the process. The further along it went, the more she'd see him with other women. She had to accept that fact.

Lenore didn't have a claim on Baris. Too bad her twisting gut didn't get the message. Jealousy burned in her, sour and bitter, and she didn't like it one bit.

The lights dimmed, a hush fell over the crowd, and a figure strode out onto the stage wearing a bedsheet.

Okay, that was harsh. She didn't know anything about fashion, on Earth or Arcos, and this was a historical play, so that was probably a historical costume. Still, it looked like a bedsheet tied around the waist with a golden cord.

Lenore didn't follow the story. People spoke very prettily, but it was flowery and obfuscated the meaning. Context didn't help. The actors stood stock still, only raising their arms to make a dramatic gesture between soliloquies. Then, in an unexpected burst of action, one stabbed another. Scarlet red confetti exploded from the other actor's chest in a glittery cloud.

Lenore laughed. She shouldn't have, but it was so ridiculous. Unfortunately, she was the only one laughing.

“What's the matter with you?” Lydia whispered. “This is classical theater. It's serious.”

Lenore muttered an apology and sank into her seat.

BARIS

Raelle Frostwing was a liar and a meddler. She swore no matchmaking, yet he shared the private box with her eligible granddaughter.

“Mother sends her apologies. She was not able to make it tonight. I hope you don’t mind that I took the ticket,” Nia said, dipping ever so gracefully into a curtsy.

“Not at all.” He was Raelle’s guest, after all. She was the ticket holder.

And the schemer.

He should have made some excuse and stayed in. He ignored the warning signs of a flare-up, an aching head, and trembling hands, and now his entire body ached. He felt like he was burning from the inside. The lights were too bright, and the audience too loud.

Nia prattled on about something, giving her karu an affectionate scratch under its beak as she spoke. He wasn’t listening; instead, he focused on the karu.

Soon, the lights dimmed, providing some relief. He shifted in his seat, trying to get comfortable, but his skin crawled. He felt sweaty, cold, and too hot all at the same time.

He drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair. The play was adequate, he supposed. It was political. This particular play was always political. An egotistical queen making her children fight amongst themselves to be named her heir. In the end, the children killed each other until the queen was the only one left. How could that be anything but political?

It was ancient, written in an archaic form of the language that was nearly indecipherable to a modern speaker. Acting was stiff and wooden, if it existed at all. All ancient plays were delivered in a flat affectation as if a thousand years ago, people were automatons with no sense of humor or inflection. He

couldn't stay, obviously. If he left early, some might read deeper meaning into it.

He hated this. His condition.

Days and days would pass without an incident, sometimes weeks, long enough to convince himself that it was over, and the tremors would return without fail. Sometimes, a headache preceded the episodes, but it was unpredictable if it would be mild or something more serious, more difficult to conceal. The tremors could be minor, a shake in his hand, or they could be whole-body spasms. Fevers came and went, leaving him weak and exhausted. Pain lingered. His body was stiff, battered from constant assault.

Worse, he no longer felt like himself. His body belonged to this dying thing, the symbiote in its death throes determined to drag Baris along with it.

This was a miserable experience from beginning to end, and he had to pretend that he was immune. That he felt no pain and that he was not achingly lonely from the absence of his karu. The death of the symbiote that bonded them was the last insult, dragging out the karu's murder into a never-ending nightmare.

This was intolerable.

"Pardon me," he said as he lurched to his feet, gripping the back of the chair to steady himself.

"Is anything the matter?"

Rather than spout a pleasant lie that he needed air or would return shortly, he exited the box.

Kenth, the captain of his guard, waited in the corridor. "Your Majesty?" she asked, concern in her tone.

"I need—" He pointed to the facilities and stumbled through.

LENORE

Lenore did not miss the way Baris clutched the back of his chair before he stumbled out of the box.

Something was wrong.

Lenore wasn't sure what she could do, having no supplies on her, but she couldn't sit by and do nothing.

She leaned over and whispered to Lydia, "I'm going to the powder room."

"If you're going to hook up, just say so. Don't be so square."

"First, I don't believe for a second that anyone actually says that. Two, with whom? Three, wine makes me have to pee, and I'm trying to be discreet."

Lydia wrinkled her nose. "You're so boring. Go powder your nose."

Lights glowed softly in the corridor outside the theater. She took a staircase up and spotted the familiar uniform of the king's guards. She recognized familiar faces. Good. She wouldn't have to convince them why she needed to see Baris.

Kenth pointed to a restroom door, concern all over her face. "He's in there."

Lenore found Baris hunched over the bowl of a toilet, emptying the contents of his stomach.

He looked dreadful. The harsh overhead lighting washed out his complexion, leaving him ashen rather than his normal lilac gray.

She rushed to his side, helping him ease back and lean against the wall. A hand on his forehead confirmed that he felt hot to the touch, likely a fever. That was as good as she could do without a thermometer.

Cut crystal glasses rested on the counter, along with other useful items. She filled a glass of fresh water and encouraged Baris to rinse before drinking.

“How long has this been going on?” she asked.

“It came suddenly. I would not...have chosen to spend my evening like this.”

“You don’t have to explain yourself to me. How you spend your time is your own concern.”

He huffed with amusement, then frowned, wrapping a protective arm over his stomach. “My time has never been my concern alone. I must always consider others.”

“Well, in my professional opinion, fuck the expectations of others. You’re going home and going to bed.”

“I’m expected back—”

Did her stomach lurch when he insisted on returning to a pretty companion? Yes. She wasn’t made of stone. Was she going to abuse her authority to ruin his date night? No, because she was a professional, and sending Baris home was the medically correct thing to do.

Ruining his date night was just a perk.

“You’re going back to the palace and straight to bed. Doctor’s orders,” she said.

“Yes. You are correct. What are you doing here?”

“I’m assuming here is the theater, not here in the bathroom,” she said. “My friend Lydia had a ticket.”

“How fortunate for me.”

She really didn’t think it was. Nia knew of the connection between Lydia and Lenore. Who else would Lydia drag along for a night out at the last minute? Lenore suspected Nia wanted to be seen with Baris.

There was that jealousy again. No good would come of that. Lenore ignored it and helped Baris to his feet, then over to the sink, where he rinsed with the little bottle of complimentary mouthwash. The fact that he didn’t argue with her alarmed her more than his symptoms. She sent a message to Harol, alerting him to the situation.

Baris splashed water on his face and straightened his clothes. He wobbled, as if dizzy.

He's not going to make it without help, she realized.

"Come on," she said, placing his arm over her shoulders, and left the restroom.

"Your Majesty," Kenth said, instantly on alert. "You need a—"

"Privacy," Lenore said, speaking over the woman. "The king has decided to retire. Now."

"Of course. The driver is on his way," the guard said. She gave Lenore a careful look. "You'll accompany the king to his private rooms."

Not a question. A statement.

"That's the point of leaving early," Lenore answered with an artificially bright smile. She wasn't much of an actor. Sue her.

Kenth didn't take up Baris' other arm to offer support. She walked ahead briskly, clearing the path.

Navigating the stairs proved slow. Baris was a good head taller than her, and if he misstepped or placed a foot badly, she'd never be able to support his weight on her own; they'd fall down the stairs. Still, she persisted, aware of how the scene looked. They didn't have a choice. The king with his arm around her, like two adults enjoying each other, looked far better than the reality of the stricken king too frail to walk without assistance, which is what people would think if anyone saw Baris leaning on his guards.

They made it safely to the street and the waiting car. Baris gripped her hand the entire ride back to the palace.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



LENORE

HAROL PINCHED an image on his tablet and threw it over to the larger screen on the wall.

Grainy security footage played. Even with muted colors, she recognized the lush red carpets and drapes of the theater. Her stomach sank. She recognized Baris as he entered a bathroom. A few seconds later, after a jump in the footage, her image followed. With a glance over her shoulder, she slipped through the same door. Another jump in the editing and Lenore reemerged with Baris.

Well, shit. So much for being careful.

“Care to explain?”

“I did last night, you curmudgeonly old fart. Baris was unwell.”

“Yes, your concern was quite evident given how quickly you arrived at his bathroom.”

“The footage is edited. I waited at least five minutes before I went to check on him,” Lenore said.

“And you did not...violate your ethics? This is all over the media this morning. You were alone with the king for fifteen minutes. There are already rumors that you are his lover.”

“I’ve heard,” Lenore muttered. The guards she confronted swore that only the guards knew. Not that there was anything to know, because there wasn’t, other than that one time.

“This morning, everyone has decided that it is true,” Harol said.

“And we banged in a public bathroom?”

“Not banging. Fucking.”

“Idioms, Harol,” Lenore said. “First, fifteen minutes is insulting to His Majesty. Even if we did, which we didn’t, we’re adults. It’s nobody’s business but our own.”

“Not when you are royalty.”

“Do you really think I’d be so careless? That I’d lie about what we were doing in there?”

“Were you anyone else, perhaps. Baris’ condition is no trifling matter and whatever feelings you have for him would not get in the way of your duty as a medic.”

“I went to check on him because the king barfing his guts up in a public toilet would be fodder for the gossip mill. And why do you care so much?”

“I do not,” Harol said. “My patient is ill, and there is far too much attention on him at the moment for me to properly attend to his needs.”

“Obviously,” Lenore said.

“So you will attend to the king.”

Lenore sat up straighter. “Seriously? You trust me?”

Harol frowned, which wasn’t concerning because that was his default expression. “Trust is not the issue. The media believes that you are the king’s mistress.”

“I could be his friend, you know.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. The king does not have friends,” he said with such certainty, like it was an irrefutable fact.

Which was just sad, in Lenore’s opinion. Sad, but the more she understood the way this particular world worked, the more she recognized it as true.

“You will spend a day or two in his rooms, acting as my eyes and helping His Majesty through the last and worst stage of his condition. No one will question it.”

“The media will just titter about a three-day sexcapade,” she grumbled.

“It is a solid plan. It will work.”

“And will ruin my reputation.”

“Since when do you care what others think?”

The question took her aback because she didn't care. Why was she clutching her pearls like a nineteenth-century mama trying to marry off her five daughters?

"My professional reputation. No one will take me seriously if they think I'm the king's..." She searched for the right word. Not a bit on the side. Eventually, she settled on "Mistress."

"Those people would never take you seriously because you are human."

"Oww." Lenore placed a hand over her heart, acting as if she had been struck. "You're just hitting with the hard truths this morning, aren't you?"

Harol took the footage down. "This must be done quickly and quietly. I would happily masquerade as the king's lover if that had a chance of being believed."

"Fine. Walk me through it," she said.

THE GUARDS LET her in without a word. An unexpected benefit of having a scandalous reputation. Lenore had been prepared to fight and use the emergency medical override to enter Baris' suite, which would have been less than ideal as it would leave an entry in the palace's security logs. Instead, the guards seemed almost grateful to see her arrive with a duffle bag filled with supplies.

Lenore announced herself as she entered.

Baris was in rough shape. He slouched in a chair in front of the open balcony. He wore only a pair of sleep pants. Dark bruises covered his chest and shoulders, turning his gray skin into a mottled purple and black canvas. Light and shadow played across his skin, giving the illusion of movement.

No. Not an illusion. The bruises moved.

"Baris?" She crouched down in front to get a better look. The bruises writhed and twisted under his skin. Not bruises. The dying symbiote.

He mumbled a response.

“May I touch you?”

“Do what you must.”

She reached for his wrist. The symbiote swarmed to where their skin connected, growing darker. He was feverish. She didn't need a thermometer to know that. When she pulled her hand away, her fingers were coated with a gray fluid. The dead symbiote secreted through his pores. Harol told her to expect it, but it was still alarming.

This was definitely worse than what she saw last night.

“Any vomiting?”

“Not since last night.”

“Good.” Her primary goal was to get some calories into him and keep him hydrated. “You should be in bed.”

Baris shook his head. “I can't sleep. My skin itches.”

“Okay. I'm going to take some readings for Harol, then I have some medication for the fever and a shake to wash it all down.”

“Do what you must,” he repeated.

She dutifully took the readings. Harol had given her a crash course in the late stage of this condition. The dying symbiote released toxins. They could only alleviate the symptoms. It would be unpleasant and generally a miserable experience, but not fatal for someone in their middle years and otherwise healthy. She wished she shared Harol's optimism.

The dark circles under Baris' eyes did not give her confidence. Baris was worn thin from too little sleep. His skin was hot to the touch, his eyes glassy.

“This is for the fever.” She tipped a cup to his lips, encouraging him to drink.

He swallowed but turned his head away. “Vile.”

“It's medicine, not candy,” she retorted, harsher than she intended. “I know it's bitter, but it's fast. We'll get your

temperature down.”

She coaxed half a smoothie down his throat before he pushed it away.

“One more sip,” she said. The taste wasn’t fantastic. The package claimed it was a “fruits of the forest” flavor, but it tasted more like strawberry-scented industrial floor cleaner.

“No more.”

“You need food in your stomach for the meds to work.”

“It is foul.”

“If you keep this down, you can have real food after you sleep. Now swallow.”

Baris glared, using all four eyes to maximum effect, but took the glass. He tossed it back, getting more on his chin than in his mouth. “Are you satisfied?”

“Mmm,” she hummed. “All those years of medical school and a hundred thousand dollars in student loans to play nursemaid? *Ecstatic.*”

“Your bedside manner leaves much to be desired.”

Lenore patted his shoulder and took the glass away. “You’ve got enough energy to complain. The meds must be working. Ready for your next round?”

“You shouldn’t be here.”

“I disagree. You’re in need of doctoring, and as it happens, I make house calls for my favorite patient.”

He shook his head slowly from side to side. Or perhaps he was simply too exhausted to sit upright. “I’m not your patient.”

“You’re Harol’s. I know,” she said, pulling another bottle from her bag. Carefully, she measured out the dose. Pills would be easier, but the liquid meds would be absorbed faster. “Don’t worry. Everyone believes we’re having a wild, passionate weekend. No one knows you’re ill, and we won’t be disturbed.”

She handed him a cup of bright green medication. He accepted it, drinking it quickly and coughing once swallowed.

“You said rather a lot in that last statement. Explain it again.”

“There’s a video of us from the theater last night.”

Color drained from his face. “I see.”

“It’s not as bad as all that. Right now, people think we’re having an affair and couldn’t keep our hands off each other,” she said.

“A position encouraged by the palace, I presume.”

“There’s not a whisper of you being ill, and we’re keeping it that way. So you get me, not Harol.”

“You are more pleasant company than Harol,” Baris said.

“I agree. I’m a fucking delight. Can you drink some tea? Water? Juice? Gotta stay hydrated.”

“Water.”

As Lenore went to the small kitchenette area for a glass of water, she heard him mutter that she was nicer to look at, too, and she didn’t mind.

Once she was satisfied that Baris had consumed enough calories and was properly hydrated, she administered a dose of sleeping tonic. Baris initially refused, as he did not wish to sleep. After catching a whiff of the musty, sweat-soaked bed sheets, she couldn’t blame him. Fresh linens would be nice, but it could wait.

“Come on. Lie down.” Lenore patted the spot next to her on the sofa. “You need to sleep, and nothing’s better than napping on the sofa.”

He sat stiffly next to her, hands in his lap.

“Put your head here.” She patted her lap. He gave her a look of pure skepticism. “Traditional Earth remedy.”

He stretched out and settled his head on her lap. Lenore tugged the throw blanket down, arranging it over him. The sleeping

tonic would kick in soon, but until then, she wanted to keep his mind off the pain.

“I’m curious about the karu,” she said, brushing back the hair from his forehead. The fever made his skin clammy. Hopefully, it would break soon. “There’s a lot I’ve picked up from context, but there’s a lot more that I don’t understand. There are gaps that no one talks about because everyone already knows. Does that make sense?”

“You are trying to distract me,” he grumbled.

“Yes, I am,” she said matter-of-factly, “and I’ll keep asking questions, so don’t even think that a little temper tantrum is gonna put me off.”

Baris mumbled a reply.

“What was that?” she asked.

“Nothing about me is little.”

She shouldn’t have laughed. It wasn’t professional, but his delivery was so dry, so confident, that she couldn’t help herself.

“It is gratifying that my suffering amuses you,” he said. “What do you want to know about the karu?”

“Do you want to talk about the karu? It’s okay if you don’t. I’m also curious about Arcosian classical theater because the play last night went right over my head.”

He took a long moment for a thoughtful reply. She liked that. “I would rather discuss karu than that play,” he said.

“First question, how come I only see karu with the aristocrats? It’s all Lord Notorious or Lady Important.”

“Are those real human names?”

“No, I’m being sarcastic to make a point. I never see a karu on the shoulder of an ordinary Joe. Joe is a name, but an ordinary Joe is just a regular person,” she explained, even though Baris probably understood enough to catch her meaning. He relaxed as she spoke, which encouraged her to keep rambling. “Granted, I’m usually in the palace, but when I’m at the

academy, I don't see karu with the staff or patients." Moving on instinct, she combed her fingers through his hair. "It could be selection bias. Like I said, I'm in the palace or the academy most days. I haven't had a chance to really explore the city. Maybe the karu of the ordinary person is out there."

"There is a simple explanation," he said, eyes fluttering closed as if he enjoyed the touch. "Karu are sacred. It is an honor to be the companion of such beings. Many try. Few are chosen. If you are one of the few chosen for a bond, you are elevated to nobility."

"What? An instant title, just like that?"

"It is an ancient tradition. There are those among the oldest houses that dislike having their ranks sullied with someone from humble origins."

"Isn't that how they became nobles?"

"Often. Sometimes, the monarch rewards a notable service to the crown with a title."

"Valiant deeds?"

"The Frostwings loaned a large sum of money to the crown two centuries ago. That is how they rose in rank."

Lenore recognized the name. Lydia's boss was a Frostwing. "Well, that happened in Earth's history, too."

"War is expensive." His breathing slowed as the sleeping pill finally kicked in.

"Truer words. Okay, second question. Why don't the karu have names? The only one I know with a name is Pitch."

"They are ancient. Venerable. Above such petty concerns as names," he said, his words coming slower.

"That's all very high-minded, but everything has a name. Crows—that's a bird on Earth—give names to humans. Imagine that. Not words, but they assign calls to people. So what do the karu call themselves?"

Baris took so long to respond that she thought he had finally succumbed to sleep. "The bond is not like that. We do not

share words, only impressions and emotions. My karu..." His voice grew quiet. "My karu did name me, I believe. He had images of summer berries, ripe in the bushes."

Barry. The situation was far too sincere for her to tease him over a nickname. Instead, she said, "Berries. That's great. Thank you for sharing that."

"He was young when he chose me. I was young. We were young."

"How do the karu choose their people?"

"Affinity. Curiosity." He spoke slower and slower. "The hopeful supplicants make a pilgrimage to Miria, and—" he yawned, obscuring the next words "—you wait."

"Just like that." She had difficulty imagining how a person could go from the bottom of the social ladder all the way to the top by...well, it wasn't exactly fate. More like a lottery, hinging on a karu's mood and if they thought you looked interesting.

She continued to stroke his hair. Free from the tie holding it back, his dark hair spilled over his shoulders in a tangle. She liked how it looked undone, like this was a vulnerable moment meant only for her. Other people—the entire universe, it felt like at times—got the polished version of Baris. She got to see the messy side.

The quiet of the room surrounded them. Through the windows, the lights of Farhaven scattered in every direction like a starfield.

"Baris?" she asked in a hushed tone. He made a murmuring noise. "Why didn't you let go? When the portal collapsed," she added for clarification. The question hadn't kept her up at night, but she never really took the time to sit and ponder it either. She might have made it through the portal. He had no good reason to go to extremes to save her. The logical choice would have been to let go and hope for the best.

"I wanted...to keep you," he murmured, his voice thick with sleep.

Lenore remained still until Baris was well and truly asleep.
“I’m glad you did,” she whispered.

BARIS

Baris woke to the aroma of toast and butter. An alarming gurgle sounded from his stomach. He tensed, unsure if he was about to be sick again. Slowly, he realized this sensation was hunger, not nausea. How strange. He hadn't felt hungry in days.

He sat up on the sofa, his shoulders stiff and the rest of his body generally protesting the need to be vertical.

"Good, you're awake." Lenore appeared, carrying a tray of food, including buttered toast, and wearing nothing but his undershirt.

It sounded far more suggestive than it actually was. The shirt's length nearly reached her knees, and the collar was so wide it slipped off her shoulders. Regardless, the sight set his mouth watering. The only words he could manage were, "You're wearing my shirt."

"I hope you don't mind that I borrowed it. Gotta keep up the debauchery facade." She placed the tray on the low table. "Camouflage for when breakfast was delivered. I needed to look the part."

Now that she mentioned it, he noticed her tousled hair and the rumpled shirt. He said, "You look exactly like the morning after a night of passion."

"Thank you." She dipped her head in acknowledgment and poured out two cups of strong tea. As she bent over, the hem of her shirt rode up. He did not mind.

"I had hoped to see you debauched again. Shame that it is false." He accepted the cup. "The next time won't be."

Her cheeks flushed a pretty pink. "Are you flirting with me, Your Majesty?"

"No title, not between us," he said. "And why shouldn't I? A beautiful female is wearing my shirt and serving me breakfast. I am the envy of every person in the kingdom."

“No need to ask if you’re feeling better.” She took the top piece of toast and bit into it.

“I feel marvelous,” he said truthfully. The world felt brighter, and he felt lighter.

She made that humming noise that indicated doubt. “What you’re feeling is not-crap, and it’s the first time you’ve felt like not-crap in ages, so it seems fantastic, but it’s an illusion. You’ll run out of energy and hit a wall soon, then you’ll be back to feeling like crap.”

“Is that what Harol tells you?”

“That’s what a medical degree, years of experience, and having been a human who’s been sick tells me. Don’t get too ambitious. Your body needs time to recover.”

“I need to return to my duties.” Countless messages would be waiting. Frankly, he was surprised not to find Des waiting for him to wake, ready to go through the day’s agenda. “Where is Des?”

“Your secretary? I told him you’re taking the day off.”

“He would not believe that.”

Lenore gave him an unimpressed look. “I know you and Harol have been doing your best to hide your condition, and you’ve mostly kept it under wraps, but Des sees you every day. He knows something is up.”

“There is too much to do.”

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, considering that I haven’t had a day off in months,” Lenore said, “but you need time off. Bodies aren’t made to go-go-go without rest. The world will manage for a day without you. Now relax and eat.”

“Bah,” he complained, finishing the tea. “I suppose you plan to pour potions down my throat now.”

“Eat. A piece of toast is not breakfast.”

The tray held a plate of eggs and a bowl of oats dressed with berries. He knew he needed the protein, but his stomach

protested. The eggs were too heavy. The oats would be cold and thick as glue.

“You are a tyrant,” he said, selecting the bowl of oats. He disliked the thick texture, but he could manage a few spoonfuls.

“Takes one to know one.” Her lips twitched, as if she fought a smile. That pleased Baris. Several things about the current situation pleased him.

She settled onto a nearby chair, cradling a cup of tea, and folded her legs underneath herself. She faced the window, the soft morning light spilling through the window, illuminating her features, and pooling at her feet. The bottom hem of the shirt rose, exposing a stretch of thigh.

He wondered if she regretted the life she left behind on Earth. She had mentioned her worries about employment and debts. In the aftermath of his first bungled proposal, she referenced a previous mate but offered no further explanation. He wondered about that. Was her mate deceased or had the union been dissolved? He found it difficult to believe that anyone would end a marriage with such a strong-willed, intelligent, and driven female. Yet, for all their conversations, she never spoke much about herself. She said many things, gave many opinions, but never anything too personal. She seemed happy to let Baris ramble on about himself. Yesterday, when he was delirious with fever, she kept up a steady stream of conversation that ultimately told him nothing.

Lenore turned her head to look at him like she sensed him watching her.

“I’m curious about the birds,” she said.

“The birds?” He had to admit he had not been paying attention to her words.

She pointed to the ceiling.

Baris looked up at the pair of golden karu. “It is an old fable.”

“Oh, new lore is about to drop. Tell me everything.” Lenore leaned forward, cradling the cup between her hands.

“I am not a storyteller.”

“Good thing I’m not a literary critic then.”

He considered. “Very well. I will trade you a story for a story. I will tell you of the golden karu, and you will tell me about the mate you left behind on Earth.”

The corners of her mouth pulled down like she had a sour taste in her mouth. “You remembered that.”

He recalled every detail about her. He said, “I’m observant as well as handsome.”

That earned him a small chuckle. “Fine. It’s not exciting, but you have a deal.”

“Before we were one people, before we flew among the stars, we were alone with the shadows,” he started, repeating by rote the traditional words to start an old tale. “The karu were creatures of the sun. When they were cold, they created fire to warm themselves. The specifics are lost to me,” he said, knowing he forgot a large piece of the story. “My brother and I had a book of fables as hatchlings. I’m afraid I don’t remember all of it.”

“It will be the best version of this story that I’ve ever heard.”

“How droll,” he said, and she flashed a satisfied grin. “The shadows are a living entity. It surrounds the people, keeping them ignorant and frightened. The karu see the people struggle and are moved to share their light, but they do not know how. Now, the shadows are tricksters—”

“The shadows are a character now?” Lenore interrupted. “Like with motivation and a character arc?”

Baris waved a hand, unconcerned. “That is the way the story goes. It was not my decision. Now, the shadows convinced the karu that they could not shine bright enough to dispel the darkness. Oh, the shadow said, ‘See. Your light does not harm me. I am too strong.’ Shadow convinces the karu pair to swallow the shadows.” He was getting the story tangled again. “The shadows were strong. They fought with the karu for control of the body. The people had been tricked by the shadow before and knew not to trust it. The people warned the

karu not to swallow the shadow. I should have said that before.”

Lenore sipped her tea, utterly captivated by either the story or his erratic storytelling ability.

“The people know that if the shadow is split in half, it will be weak enough to control. They swallowed half and gained mastery over the shadows.”

“Oh, is that how you can—” She wiggled her fingers. “You know, do the thing?”

“Yes. The karu were not able to save us from the darkness, but they joined us, and together we are stronger than the darkness.”

Lenore sat still, as if absorbing his words. “That’s really lovely. Thank you for sharing. I suppose it’s my turn now.”

“Only if you want. I will not insist.” Though he was curious.

She sighed. “It’s not original or that exciting. I met Brad in college. He was charming and good-looking. We were both studying to be doctors. We wanted the same things, or so I thought. I took some time off from school to work and support him while he finished his residency. I didn’t mind. We were building a life together, you know? When it came time for me to do my residency, suddenly, it became a problem. We argued all the time about housework and cooking meals. He wanted a hausfrau, which is fine, but it’s not me.” She paused to take another sip. “Long story short, he started sleeping with a colleague, and I moved back home to my parents. Three years happily divorced, and I was finally getting my career back on track when the portals happened.”

“If he expected you to tolerate being treated so poorly, he did not know you in any meaningful way,” Baris said.

“That’s kind of you to say.”

“Do you miss him?” he asked.

“Not really. Not anymore. At first, I was too upset, then sad, and I felt like a chump. A huge chump,” she said, stretching out huge for emphasis. “But I don’t miss his lack of respect. I

don't miss the way he talked down to me, like I was a kid playing with one of those pretend doctor kits.”

Baris wished all the worst things for Lenore's former mate and regretted that the male was on the other side of the universe, too far away for Baris to make those terrible things happen.

“My mate was chosen for a political alliance to bring peace between our houses,” he said. “I did not know her well, but I hoped we could grow fond of one another. That did not happen. Her family and traitors within my court orchestrated my abduction, forced a union between us, and brutalized me.” He lifted his right hand to demonstrate. The Starshades had done worse, taking the life of his karu. He wanted Lenore to understand that there had been no affection in his union.

“They forced you? Like they'd—” She drew a finger across her throat.

“What a delightful gesture. I assume it means to decapitate. Yes, they threatened me, thinking pain would beat me.”

“Pain's a pretty strong motivator,” she muttered.

“I am not one to be intimidated. All they accomplished was to give me the motivation to seize their assets, confine them to an outer planet, cut off communication, and execute the conspirators.”

Lenore whistled. “They fucked around and found out.”

“You are not disturbed by my brutality?”

She shifted in her seat, folding her legs in the other direction.

“Was it necessary?”

“Regretfully.”

“Did you enjoy it?”

That was more difficult to answer. “It did not upset me. It also did not bring the satisfaction I craved.”

“You'd be a real monster if it did,” she said.

The moment stretched out between them, comfortable and amiable. Outside, the world hurried on. In this room, they

were still. If he could stay in this moment, carved out from a busy life, he would.

Lenore slapped her thigh and stood up. “Time for a bath. You stink, Your Majesty.”

Baris resisted the urge to sniff himself. He was a king. There were standards to uphold. “I apologize if my...personal aroma is offensive.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Don’t worry about it. Bodies are gross. That’s the default. But a bath will go a long way to making you feel human again. Like yourself again,” she quickly added.

He hadn’t felt like himself in so long, he couldn’t remember what he felt like before, but he saw little point in arguing the finer details with her. Lenore had been right on every account so far.

“Join me,” he said.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



BARIS

HER EYEBROWS ROSE. "FEELING AMBITIOUS?"

Baris grinned, certain it was haughty, arrogant, and full of all his vices. He felt more like himself than he had in ages. "Housekeeping will arrive shortly to change the bedsheets and so on. Consider it as additional camouflage. However, if you wish to remain out here, by all means."

Lenore rolled her eyes. Odd how she could be so expressive with half the usual amount of eyes. "Be that way. I suppose I should be there in case you faint."

"That would be wise." He felt stronger and more clear-headed than he had in some time, but as Lenore had warned him, that was an illusion. He would soon reach the limit of his energy and need to rest. Recovery was a frustratingly slow process.

She pushed herself out of the chair. "Let's do it, but we're keeping it strictly business."

"I'm uncertain what sort of business requires you to be unclothed and wet, but it has my support."

She laughed. It was easy and light, as bright as bells ringing on a cold winter's day.

Baris sent a request to housekeeping to freshen the room and drew himself a bath, liberally adding scented salts and oils. He eased into the hot water, his aching muscles already relaxing in the warmth.

Lenore sat on a stool nearby.

"There's plenty of room," he said.

"That tub is big enough for an entire swim team."

"I could slip under the water and drown. I need you in the water. It's imperative, for the good of the kingdom."

"The kingdom, huh?" she asked in an amused tone.

"The entire quadrant of the galaxy would fall into chaos."

“Wow, the entire quadrant,” she said in a dry tone. “I didn’t realize you were so important.”

“Not me, per se, but the crown. I am but a humble male.”

She laughed again. Just like that, Baris discovered his true passion: amusing the overly serious medic. Giving him a shrewd look, perfectly conveying that she was not buying his nonsense, she stripped off her clothing.

For a moment, he forgot how to breathe.

She was lovely. He knew this. He had seen her, touched her, and tasted her. Those precious memories faded in comparison to the present. A vivid and vibrant female stood before him, more delightful than he deserved.

“Scoot up, and I’ll wash your back,” she said, climbing in behind him.

Despite the bath being large enough to fully recline side by side, he didn’t mind. Her legs were positioned on either side of him, her knees poking out of the water.

True to her word, the bathing remained clinical. She lathered up his back, first going gently over his skin, as if afraid to bruise him, then more aggressively with a scrub cloth. Once she completed that task, she handed him the cloth so that he could clean his front. While he did that, she worked a cleanser into his hair. For such little hands, they held surprising strength.

“Tilt your head back. I’ll rinse out your hair.” Using a vessel, she dipped it into the water. She poured it over his head carefully, using her hand to shield his eyes. “Do you have a conditioner or a moisturizer?”

He pointed to a bottle. She emptied a generous amount into the palm of her hand and worked it into his wet hair.

Baris melted. This was paradise. Not being served. He had people scurrying to do his bidding daily. The care she expressed in her touch was staggering. Humbling.

Using as much care as before, she rinsed his hair again. Satisfied that it was clean, she gathered up the long strands

and pulled it over one shoulder.

Baris fished the cloth from the water. "Your turn."

They traded places.

He took his time lathering and rinsing her body, struggling to keep his touch clinical and dispassionate. It was impossible to feel dispassionate about a female such as her. The cloth glided over her curves, caressing and exploring her. He could spend hours, days, years dedicated to the task of memorizing her luscious form, and it would never be enough. He'd always want more.

"Lean back," he ordered, and she pressed her wet back to his chest. She fit snugly against him. He pulled her wet hair to one side, exposing her neck.

He pressed a kiss to the curve. "There's one bit we missed," he said.

"Hmm?" Her voice had a relaxed, dreamy tone.

"Open your thighs for me."

The heavens must have favored him that day because she did. One arm crossed over her chest, cupping a breast, and the other hand dipped below the water. He found her and stroked her folds, paying attention to that sensitive nerve bundle at the top. She gasped, her body arching as she pressed against his chest. He stroked her, first soft and light, then fast and hard, then long and firm.

He rocked his hips, rubbing himself against her. Both cocks were rigid with desire. The friction made him need her more.

Her hand hovered above the water as if unsure what to do with itself, then it splashed down.

Baris kissed the side of her face, murmuring praise. She was sweet under the prickly exterior. She was a delight the way she came for him. He could never have enough of her. His cocks rubbed against them, caught tightly between the curve of her ass and his stomach.

Her entire body tensed, and she cried out loud enough that the entire palace would hear. He quickly finished himself off,

capturing her lips in a crushing kiss as he came with blinding pleasure.

Sighing, she relaxed and sagged against him. He wrapped his arms around her, determined to hold her until the water cooled.

“We shouldn’t have done that,” she said.

“I am not going to appreciate the rest of that statement.” He brushed her wet hair to one side, once again exposing the curve of her neck. He kissed her there, lightly scraping his fangs. A shiver went through her body.

“You’re ill,” she said.

“I am better today.”

“Not enough. You’ll exhaust yourself, and recovery will be twice as slow because you were thinking with your double eggplants, and I let you.”

“My what?”

She reached behind, placing a hand on his thigh. “You know. Here. The anaconda and the bonus trouser snake.”

“You mean my cocks,” he said, understanding her meaning but baffled at the nonsensical idioms. “You are unable to convince me that was a poor decision.”

“Mmm,” she hummed, sounding amused. “The king of bad ideas.”

Baris laughed. His entire body ached from the effort, but he had no regrets. That part of his anatomy had indeed done all his thinking. “Come. Let us dry off and return to bed.”

“To rest,” she said, a firm tone in her voice.

“Yes, my delicious tyrant.”

LENORE

Two days passed. They ate and slept. In the brief windows they were awake, they watched that crime drama that inexplicably hooked Lenore. Baris occasionally checked his messages, doing the bare minimum to keep his aide happy.

The one thing they didn't do was talk about what happened and whatever this was. Simply a fling? Making hay while the sun shone? Or was it a matter of convenience? Their bodies had urges, and they were essentially confined together until Harol, the more experienced medic, gave Baris the all-clear. Totally casual.

Or, the option that frightened her the most: was this serious?

This felt serious. Baris felt serious. She felt the opposite of casual about him, serious even.

She needed to put a stop to it, but it was hard when he rolled to his back, tucked one arm behind his head, and stroked himself with his free hand, giving her a sinful grin. That particular morning had started with slow touches that turned into lingering caresses. He was an absolute master with his tongue, both vocally and, ahem, otherwise. If every morning started with a mind-blowing orgasm, she'd have no complaints.

Lenore moved to her knees, situating herself to take his cocks in her mouth, first the top and then the bottom. Not both at the same time. She was ambitious, but there was a physical limit to consider. Her mouth simply wasn't big enough. She licked up the length of him, relishing the feel of the ridges under the tongue and the way he groaned. It was too good. She could feel him twitch like he was barely holding on.

He placed a hand on her head, causing her to still. "Wait. I would have you on me."

She climbed onto him and took a moment to position herself. Over the last two days she'd gotten hands-on experience with their different anatomy, but it still took a moment to line

herself up. She sank down on his lower dick, loving the warm burn as it stretched her and filled her up.

Leaning forward, she planted her hands on his shoulders, wedging his top cock between their bodies. Each rock of her hips rubbed his length. He gripped her hips, encouraging her to go faster, then slower. He pumped his hips up, reaching deep inside her. Her fingers curled, scraping her blunt nails across his skin.

Baris' eyes—all four—rolled to the back of his head. “Do that again. Get your claws into me,” he demanded.

Lenore dug her nails in, grazing them across his chest. His body tensed, and his grip tightened on her hips. Hot, sticky seed sprayed across her stomach.

She dragged her finger into the mess and brought it to her lips, aware that he watched intently as she licked her finger clean. Salt burst on her tongue, and she sighed with pleasure.

Baris lunged upward, wrapping his arms around her and rolling her onto her back. He pushed into her, his arms planted on either side of her head, and her knees were pressed against her chest. His hips moved with determination, snapping in and out of her. He had her pinned to the mattress, slamming hard and making her breasts jiggle from the force.

She dragged her nails along his back. He went harder, growling with pleasure, and she felt the vibration in her chest. She kept them short out of habit because scrubbing under long nails was a pain, but she'd grow them out if this was the response.

Yes, please.

Suddenly, she was there, right at the precipice of another climax. It curled inside her, going tighter and tighter. She couldn't move. She just couldn't. She wanted to drag it out, to enjoy the tension and the bliss, and any movement would end it too soon. Then it was upon her—every nerve sang in rapture. It was too much. It was perfect.

Baris pumped twice more. Slowed. Then again, groaning as he released.

He rolled to the side, cradling her to him.

“I’m sticky,” she said, wriggling away.

His arms tightened. He wasn’t letting her go. “A moment more.”

The moment stretched into five. Her eyes grew heavy, and she could feel herself slipping away into a nap. She pushed away, successfully breaking free this time. “We need to eat a proper meal. Like adults. With clothes.”

Baris groaned, throwing an arm over his face. “So many rules.”

The computer sounded an alert. Someone was at the door. Only a handful of people would have been able to get through security to knock on his chamber door, and none of them could be ignored.

“Time to get back to real life,” she said.

“You. Remain here.” He kissed her forehead before leisurely strolling to the bathroom, returning with a damp cloth, delivered with another kiss. “Take your time. I’ll deal with the intrusion.”

He grabbed a sheet, wrapped it around his waist, and ambled to the door, his pace unbothered.

“Consider wearing pants!” she called after him.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



LENORE

THE WORLD DESCENDED ON LENORE. The media was filled with reports on the king's human mistress, complete with wildly out-of-context photos that either made Lenore out to be some kind of glamorous maneater or a wild, barely civilized monster that threatened to destroy the monarchy, depending on the spin of the news cycle.

Exclusive pictures inside the royal lovenest!

“How do you even know she's looking at you? Those two eyes just stare straight ahead. It's unnatural.”

Get the insider dirt on the king's pet human!

It was all rubbish, a nonstop deluge of utter garbage.

Appointments at the clinic tripled. Lenore went from being the last choice to having her schedule packed with people who wanted to take a gander at the infamous human doctor. The front desk did a decent enough job of screening that out, but enough slipped through. Messages flooded her personal communicator, forcing her to block all incoming calls.

She was scrutinized, examined under the microscope of public opinion. Her past was for anyone to discuss. Her every choice was criticized, from her clothes right down to how she smiled. Not enough, obviously bad. Smiled too much, surprisingly terrible. Apparently, fangless human teeth were weird, and it was a faux pas to smile too broadly. Who knew?

Also, she had a new bestie, Kenth, who followed her everywhere. Even the toilet. Well, she waited discreetly outside the bathroom while Lenore splashed water on her face and screamed into a paper towel.

Lenore opened the door just wide enough to speak to Kenth. “The palace is secure, right? Do you have to hover?”

“The king's orders,” the guard said.

Lenore's instinct wanted to argue that nothing had changed, but that simply wasn't true. Lots had changed in the way the

world perceived her. Before, she had been a novelty—that human doctor—but otherwise unremarkable. Now, the world had all the remarks.

She understood the need for her own security detail. She just didn't enjoy the situation.

It was exhausting.

Lenore would like to say she took heart in the Oscar Wilde quote about the only thing worse than being talked about was not being talked about, but that would imply she was witty and well-read. She was neither. What first came to mind was the *Pirates of the Caribbean* quip when a character told Captain Jack Sparrow that he was the worst pirate they had ever heard of.

Yes, but people had heard of her.

Cold comfort, really.

Lenore had thick skin. It was a requirement for her profession. Doctors were notoriously egotistical assholes, did not make for the best work environment, and she knew she was just as bad as anyone. The gossip shouldn't bother her. It didn't bother her. People could say what they wanted to say. They could book appointments and clutter up the clinic's waiting room to gawk at her. Whatever. She knew it wasn't personal. She was simply the flavor of the month.

What bothered her was Baris.

She certainly had no complaints regarding sex. That wasn't the issue. Well, it was a symptom of the issue. Their first time on K-7 Station was frantic, two people reaching for each other with the expectation that it was a one-time thing. Now, it was slow and tender. Meaningful, like every touch and every kiss was building something larger than themselves together, and it made her want to pull her hair out.

He acted like they were building a future together. She liked him a lot, maybe even loved him, but they had no future together. It was cruel to pretend otherwise. Baris' queen would be chosen by committee for strategic political value. Sentiment

had nothing to do with it. Lenore understood. They had an expiration date.

Being the king's mistress was fine, but when Baris picked his queen, she'd end it. She didn't care if it was accepted that the king would keep a mistress or the queen would tolerate it. Lenore would not sleep with a married man. That was a line she refused to cross.

The situation might have been tolerable if she had actually seen him in the last four days. The first few days after he emerged from his sickbed, she stayed close in case he had a relapse. His schedule was kept light, and she was freed from other responsibilities. They spent the days lounging in bed, dragging themselves out long enough to be seen having dinner in the city, and then back to bed.

It couldn't last.

Baris' schedule caught up with him and that was that. He had to play catchup. She understood. He was as much of a workaholic as she was. Unfortunately, that meant she got all the ill effects of being entangled with the king and none of the benefits.

She needed a break. Or a day off from being watched and judged. Even an afternoon to catch her breath would be great.

"I'm done for the day," Lenore said, tossing her white coat onto her desk. Harol made a grunting noise that had better have been acknowledgment, because she wasn't asking for permission.

She—and Kenth a respectful two paces behind—headed to the garden, her normal destination to unwind. Now that winter was well and truly arrived, the gardens were normally deserted.

Not today.

People strolled the gravel paths, lingered on icy cold benches, leaned against railings, and generally worked Lenore's last nerve. Some guard or another palace denizen blabbed about Baris and Lenore's nightly strolls, and now the garden was the place to be seen.

Vultures.

Lenore stayed away from the public areas of the palace: the throne room for obvious reasons, the banquet hall, the ballroom, drawing rooms, and reception rooms filled with courtiers waiting for an audience, and the library. Every room was opulent in a way that should make aristocrats worry the peasants would revolt soon. The areas dedicated to the business of running the palace and managing the kingdom, various offices and meeting rooms, were closed to the public.

The aviary was more practical, an enormous conservatory filled with lush green plants, food and water for karu, and humid air despite the snow covering the glass roof. Transom windows were opened, allowing karu to come and go. Karu roosted in the warmth on perches of wood carved to look like tree branches. A few people milled about the aviary, having quiet conversations on benches, but Lenore couldn't stay. She felt the karu watching her. All those eyes spying on her, possibly reporting her to their bonded.

It sounded paranoid, but Baris said he shared images and emotions with his karu. She had no idea who these birds were bonded with or what that person could do with such information.

One karu in particular, a massive karu with white feathers on its breast, took an interest in her. It stood apart from the other karu, who were all inky black. It hopped down to a lower branch and called to her, its voice surprisingly high and thin for such a large creature. When she ignored it, it followed her, massive wings beating against the air for short flights.

Lenore kept walking, going farther into the palace grounds than she had before. The karu followed, alternating between flying from perch to perch and walking along the ground.

“Go away,” she hissed.

It chirped back.

“I don't know what you want.”

The feathers on its chest fluffed up, and Lenore had no idea what that meant. She didn't speak bird.

“If you’re a spy, you’re terrible at it.”

Its head bobbed back and forth like an amused chuckle.

“Help me out,” she said to Kenth, who only held up her hands in a helpless gesture.

Right. Sacred creatures. It could basically do whatever it wanted.

Unsure how to make it stop following her, she continued on. It’d get bored. The karu—and Kenth—diligently followed as Lenore wandered, stubbornly not growing bored.

Eventually, she found herself in a long, narrow gallery filled with portraits and various statues. The gallery had a high arched ceiling held up with stone columns. The architectural style seemed older than the bits of the palace she was more familiar with. Less refined. The windows were narrow, for one, and did not allow in much natural light. Shadows gathered in pools on the ceiling where the soft lighting did not reach.

The portraits were all stern-faced Arcosians in fine clothing. Presumably, this was a gallery of past kings, queens, and other members of the royal family. Occasionally, a large canvas featuring a bloody battle scene broke up the cluster of portraits.

Lydia’s gently teasing words about Lenore not having any hobbies came back to her. She didn’t have hobbies because between school and work, she didn’t have time, but she had interests. She liked...things, just not theater or parties or fashion like Lydia. There was a medical museum in Chicago filled with medical artifacts that she found fascinating. She liked history, like looking at the mess of the past and seeing improvement. Some old surgical instruments looked like implements of torture, but those crude tools helped people.

The karu hopped onto a statue, making it eye level with her.

“I don’t think you’re supposed to perch on the art,” she said, keeping her voice quiet for no particular reason other than the gallery felt like the kind of place that demanded silence.

The karu could not be fussed.

“You’re a difficult female to find.”

An older Arcosian woman using a cane entered the gallery. A karu perched on her shoulder. Her white hair was pulled back from her face, giving her a severe look. The clothes she wore struck Lenore as old-fashioned with an overly stiff, starched collar.

“Do you enjoy art? I myself am a great admirer of the arts,” the older woman said, joining Lenore at a large painting depicting a deep space battle. A ship burned among the stars, dominating the scene.

“I’m afraid I don’t know much about art,” Lenore said. “I am interested in history, though.”

“You’ll find plenty of that in here.”

Lenore scanned the room for Kenth. The guard had blended into the shadows, giving the illusion of privacy.

“I don’t believe we’ve met,” Lenore said.

“Lady Raelle Frostwing, councilor to the king.”

The name she recognized. Baris spoke of his councilors often, particularly of Raelle.

The woman’s gaze swept over Lenore, critical and frowning like she found fault. She said, “You must know why I’ve hunted you down.”

“I’m afraid you have me at a disadvantage.”

The disapproval intensified. “I am not to be trifled with. You may wish to play games, but I am celebrated for my frankness.”

“Please, enlighten me.”

This conversation was odd.

“I heard a rumor that you plan to make yourself queen.” Raelle drew her shoulders back, standing several inches taller than Lenore. “I know this is impossible, as His Majesty is far too sensible to make such a foolish match. He would never neglect his duty and abandon what is best for the kingdom for...for...”

“For me? A no-account human?”

Queen? That was new. The media must have grown bored with the gossip about the sex-crazed human and turned her into a gold digger.

Gossip Lenore was ambitious.

“Precisely,” Raelle said. “I cleared my schedule to speak with you at once and let my and the council’s position be known. We would never support such a match.”

“I’m afraid you’ve wasted your time, as you’ve clearly said you know it’s impossible. Baris would never abandon his duty.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Do not speak so freely of the king, like you’re—”

“Friendly?” Lenore desperately wanted to inform this woman that Baris asked her not to use his title—that was the kind of terms they were on. She’d love to see that smug look melt away into shock and indignation. It’d be so sweet, but she held her tongue. What she and Baris did and said in their own time was no one’s business, let alone this nosy busybody.

“Like you have an understanding,” Raelle said. “Do you have an understanding with His Majesty?”

“Lady Frostwing, please do not make me remind you that we both agreed it was an impossibility.”

Oh, that made her mad, which delighted Lenore, who was feeling a touch miffed herself. Raelle stamped her cane against the floor, the noise echoing on the stone walls.

“Infuriating female. The king’s mother, Queen Annan, was my dearest friend. I’ve dedicated myself to serving him for decades. I deserve to know the nature of his intentions with you. I demand to know!”

“I would not presume to answer for His Majesty.”

Color rose in her cheeks, turning her face a bright violet. “He has an understanding with my youngest granddaughter, Lady Nia Frostwing. She’s infinitely more suitable than a grasping upstart.”

Lenore ignored the insult. It was no worse than what literally every talking head in the media was saying. “It is easy to attack my character. I offer nothing of value as a queen. I bring no wealth, no connections, or political alliance. As you rightly pointed out, the king would be foolish to make such a match.”

It was tempting to lash out and criticize Lady Nia, but none of this was her fault. Lenore had seen this situation before—women fighting each other rather than the man that put them in a terrible situation. Somehow a philandering dick always managed to escape the blame.

The jealousy Lenore felt when she saw Baris with Nia at the theater stirred from its nap. She had doubts. Of course she had doubts. Raelle’s list of Lenore’s many flaws only reinforced those doubts. The situation with Baris was new, and while they hadn’t made each other promises, Lenore refused to believe Baris would toy with her like that.

“If Baris does indeed have an understanding with your granddaughter, his behavior is appalling to treat her so badly by cavorting with me. I am not the one to answer for his offenses. You need to take it up with Baris,” Lenore said.

Raelle took a long moment before answering. “It’s not a conventional engagement. Queen Annan and I arranged the match when Nia and Baris were hatchlings. They were always intended for one another, but it was never formalized. Baris required an alliance with the Starshades to make peace. I understood and kept quiet on the arrangement.”

“But no longer,” Lenore said.

“No longer,” Raelle agreed. “Now tell me, are you engaged to him?”

“I am not.”

The older woman’s posture relaxed. “Will you swear to never enter into such an engagement?”

Lenore’s patience was thin, and she was tired of holding her tongue. “Why? Seems like a waste of time,” she said.

“Pardon me?”

“You’ve repeatedly told me it’s impossible. I’m unsuitable. He would never. This secret engagement is apparently so secret that even Baris doesn’t know about it. Why should I waste my breath and promise to never do a thing that you’ve so firmly told me will never happen?”

“Because that is what decorum demands.” Raelle’s cane thumped against the floor again.

“Fuck decorum. I will not be bullied,” Lenore said.

“If you continue your pursuit of the king, you’ll only bring shame to his house.”

And that was the moment Lenore nearly committed an act of treason. Snatching that cane and thumping Raelle with it seemed like a really dumb, really satisfying idea.

“What a curious turn of phrase,” Lenore said, a chill settling over her entire body. “*I* would bring shame to *his* house, even though he’s the one in a position of power and can abuse that power. His actions shame himself, but by all means, blame me. Let’s pretend that I am the one at fault—that I can make the king do anything, even go against his better judgment. What a strange power I possess, a nobody who can bend the king to her whims.”

Lenore did not believe a word she uttered. Their relationship had a gigantic power imbalance, and it would have been an issue if Baris weren’t, well, Baris. If he pushed her or abused that power...instead, he respected her wishes every time she said no.

She had no desire to share this insight with Raelle, however. Let the old lady stew.

“You have your influence,” Raelle said.

“My human wiles? With the power of my coochie?” Lenore laughed because that was ridiculous. The sex was good, but it wasn’t turn-you-into-a-minion good. “Are you implying that the king is so easily led astray? Is she even allowed to say something like that?” Lenore searched for Kenth, still in the shadows, to confirm.

“Insolent female.” Raelle raised the cane.

Lenore didn't believe Raelle meant to strike her, but the karu with the white-feathered breast launched himself from the statue. It squawked harshly, beating its wings in Raelle's face.

The karu on the woman's shoulder dove for the other karu. There was a flurry of wings and squawks, and Raelle was caught in the middle. When the feathered fury subsided, Raelle had scratches on her arms.

Lenore guided the woman to a bench and inspected the injuries. Kenth magically appeared with an antiseptic wipe and a packet of gauze. She tore open the wipes and cleaned away the blood.

"The scratches are superficial, but you should clean them with soap and water," Lenore said, covering the injury with gauze.

Raelle pulled her arm away. "How did you lure that karu here?"

"Now I seduce karu as well as kings?" Lenore asked, which was the opposite of what she should have said to de-escalate the situation.

"I would not put it past you."

"It followed me here. I had nothing to do with it."

"He."

"Pardon?"

"That karu is male," Raelle said.

"I'll take your word for it."

Raelle's karu was standing on a nearby statue, tail fanned and on alert for the return of the feathered fiend.

The older woman pushed herself to her feet, leaning on her cane. "Think on what I have said."

"I'll be sure to do that," Lenore answered, and it wasn't a lie because of the obvious sarcasm.

BARIS

Baris paid for his brief holiday with endless meetings and audiences. Not a single councilor, administrator, or governor in the kingdom could make a decision without his approval, apparently. There were layers and layers of regulations and paperwork that kept him from the one person he wanted: Lenore.

Baris leaned back in the chair as his thoughts drifted during meetings. Meetings and briefings had always been tedious, but Baris had been able to focus on the work at hand. He felt well. His head was clear, his body did not ache, and exhaustion did not drag on his tail feathers. A brief exam by Harol confirmed that his body had cleared the dying symbiote and resulting toxins.

The first day back left him utterly exhausted. While he wanted nothing more than to walk with Lenore in the garden, he slept. Alone. The next day, he woke feeling restored, but his energy quickly flagged. By the evening, he dragged himself back to his chambers in a repeat of the previous day. He asked too much of his body too quickly, as Lenore warned. Now, several days into his recovery and feeling stronger, he did not trust it.

Not yet. This window of wellness felt like a gift, open for a brief time and in danger of rapidly closing. He wanted to spend that time with Lenore, not listening to the complaints of inner planet governors, jealous of the increase in the transportation budget to the districts in the outer planets.

“I understand the need for additional protection on trade routes, but the amount is staggering. Why can they not afford their own fleet? The governor built a lavish new sports complex complete with an anti-gravity arena. Anti-gravity? My district is taxed heavily, and we receive very little in return, but this ball of mud in the middle of nothing has plenty of money to spend on useless sports—”

“Enough,” Baris said, muting the speaker. The governor’s image wavered on the screen. His mouth continued to move,

unaware that he had been muted. Other meeting members on the screen were clearly not paying attention, either speaking with someone off-camera, reading from another device, or missing altogether.

This meeting was tedious, a waste of all of their time, and could have been handled by an administrator. Unfortunately, his schedule had mysteriously been filled with tedious, time-wasting meetings that did not require his presence.

Fortunately, Baris was the king, and he could cancel meetings as he saw fit.

“I believe we’ve gathered all we can from your feedback. The funding structure will not be changed,” Baris said.

The governor continued to flap his mouth, unaware that such effort was useless.

“How districts choose to spend their own funds is not your concern. What should be your concern is the safety of commercial routes. An increased fleet presence to decrease bandit and pirate activity in the outer districts means more cargo ships safely transporting taxable wares from your district,” Baris said in a patient tone that was anything but. “I am surprised that you require the obvious benefits to be spelled out. You have several years’ experience as governor. We are a unified kingdom, not an amalgamation of petty states competing for limited resources. We work together because we benefit together.”

It was a pretty sentiment but entirely true. Arcos was a kingdom that spanned several star systems. Noble houses held power, especially in the outer districts where the royal forces were stretched thin. Fighting between noble houses and planets was common. Baris could preach unity and mutual support, inspiring compliance with pretty words, but often, the will of the crown had to be enforced with a blunt instrument.

Baris terminated the meeting, the last of the day. He spun his chair to face Des. “Explain why you waste my time with these petty squabbles.”

“The governors requested an audience, as is their right—”

Baris waved a hand, signaling for Des to cease speaking. “You have packed my schedule with similar meetings. I have people to handle the daily business of the kingdom.”

Des’ eyes went wide and he swallowed loudly, as if he were nervous. “Your Majesty’s health required a lighter workload. Perhaps you’ve forgotten what a full schedule entails.”

Irritation flared in Baris. “Perhaps you’ve forgotten how to speak to your monarch.”

“Apologies, Your Majesty.” Des dipped his head in a short bow but Baris did not mistake the resentment burning in the male’s eyes.

“We are done for the day. Whatever is left can wait until tomorrow.”

Baris left the meeting room, determined to find Lenore. By the time he reached the royal family’s residential wing, his energy had vanished. Slumping into a chair was all he could manage. His call did not connect. Thick stone walls could interfere with network connections on the best of days. He sent a message, but the system indicated that delivery had failed.

Technology was too unreliable. He needed to simply walk to Lenore’s rooms, yet the distance seemed insurmountable. Her rooms were down a floor and at the far end of the wing. Years ago, those quarters were chosen for his aunt because they were the furthest away from his rooms. Distance seemed prudent.

He never imagined he would regret that choice.

Tomorrow. His energy would be restored in the morning, and he’d seek Lenore out. No distractions.

DISTRACTIONS WERE UNAVOIDABLE. Meetings filled the following day. Baris found his attention drifting and his energy failing.

“What is next on the agenda?” he asked as they left the meeting room. It was a misleading question because there was

no next item. Baris was finished, despite whatever task Des found.

“Finalizing details for Councilor Raelle’s retirement gala next month. I’ve arranged musicians—”

“Adding her name to the crystal monument is not enough?”

Des’ face remained neutral, but Baris could tell that no, engraving Lady Raelle Frostwing’s name onto the monument honoring the most dedicated and notable servants of the kingdom was not enough. “Councilor Raelle’s name will be added, but entertainment has already been arranged. Invitations issued. The guests are expecting more than a speech and presentation of a garland.”

Baris opened his messages and scrolled through, half-listening to Des. The portal project engineer sent a final report. Individual components were examined. None were found to be defective or substandard. Wear on the equipment that caused the failure could have been due to the extraordinary strain the individual components underwent. However, there was a two-minute gap in the security footage, which would be ample time for a saboteur to finish their work. This was concerning.

“Sire? The wine merchant’s estimate is expensive, but when you account for the caliber of the product, I believe it will be credit well spent,” Des said, interrupting Baris’ thoughts.

“What you have seems acceptable. You are more than capable of picking a wine list.” He swiped his hand to one side, dismissing the report and summoning the next issue. “The winter ceremony at Miria tomorrow. Has Lenore responded to my invitation?”

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty, but her messages, if she responded, haven’t gone through. A problem with security,” Des said.

Baris’ attention snapped up from the screen to his aide. Whatever Des saw on his face, it made the color drain from the male’s face until he was a dusty gray.

“The increase in digital traffic on the palace’s network and intrusions...” The male stumbled over his words. “It was

decided to limit internal communications until the network could be secured.”

“How long?”

“Four days.”

Four days.

Baris slapped the tablet down on the table. “And you did not think to inform me.”

With the lack of response from Lenore, he assumed that she regretted the development in their relationship or the new scrutiny. Either way, the result was the same: she would distance herself from him.

Des muttered some reason to explain away this failure. Baris did not care. He walked out of the conference room, absolutely finished with excuses. He would find out one way or another where he stood with Lenore.

LENORE

At the end of the day, Lenore retreated to her rooms and curled up on the couch to watch soap operas. She didn't really understand what was happening. It was about a nightclub filled with pretty people who stabbed each other in the back to climb the ranks of...nightclubbing? Also, the club owner might have been a demon. There was a necklace coated in a toxin that poisoned the wearer.

Maybe it wasn't a soap opera but a crime drama. That made more sense.

Dinner arrived on a cart. It resembled a stir-fry with bite-sized pieces of meat and vegetables in a savory sauce, served over noodles. She poked at her plate, half-heartedly watching the bizarre show unfold. It wasn't bad, but it wasn't familiar. She wanted a cozy show about solving murders in quaint English villages or wildly inaccurate historical dramas. She'd been looking forward to the new season of that show based on Regency romance novels, and now she'd never get to watch. It made her sad and frustrated all at once. Homesick was probably the right way to describe the feeling that lodged itself in her chest.

What did it matter anyway? Netflix probably canceled all her favorite shows.

Lenore pushed her plate away. She was feeling glum because she hadn't seen Baris in nearly a week. Her messages were intercepted by his aide, Des. Showing up at his rooms was impossible as the royal guards wouldn't admit her. Baris was forever in meetings or the classic *indisposed*.

Wheedling an answer out of Kenth was impossible. Straight-up guilt also failed, not that Lenore put much effort into guilt-tripping Kenth. The woman had glare like daggers and probably real daggers hidden all over.

Honestly, Lenore was surprised no one packed up her bags and moved her to new rooms while she was working in the clinic

that day.

The reason why wasn't a mystery. Lenore defied Lady Raelle, an influential councilor and grandmother to the person in charge of access to Baris, and now she faced the consequences of her wrath. Honestly, Lenore was surprised Lady Raelle hadn't found a way to kick her out of the palace.

Yet, Lady Raelle seemed the stubborn sort.

Maybe it was worth attempting another chat with Kenth just to make sure her security clearance wasn't quietly revoked.

The only silver lining was maybe the media would lose interest in her if she and Baris weren't spotted having dinner or walking in the parks. Fine, that was wishful thinking. More likely, the story would shift away from *scandalous human mistress* to *human lover on the outs*.

A tapping came from the balcony.

Lenore froze. Once she decided to spend the evening vegging out in front of a show, Kenth's babysitting shift ended. Other than the guards normally stationed in this part of the palace, she was alone.

The tapping sounded again.

So, what was it? Earlier, she closed the drapes for privacy. As much as she loved the view of the open water and Kenth assured her that no camera drones could make it onto the palace grounds, those same drones had exceptionally good lenses. She'd be keeping the drapes closed, thank you very much. No one needed to see her in pajamas, shoveling food in her face.

Lenore pulled the drapes open a crack.

The karu with a white-feathered breast tapped the glass with his beak, then stared at Lenore. Snow coated his head and body, giving him a very annoyed look.

"You're a troublemaker," she said, sliding the balcony door open. The karu hopped inside, fluttering his feathers and scattering snow.

He chirped, totally unconcerned, and immediately honed in on Lenore's abandoned dinner plate.

"Please, make yourself at home," she said as the karu helped himself to a partially eaten roll. He swallowed it whole before moving on to a piece of leftover meat. "You don't have to eat leftovers. I can get you a fresh plate."

The karu ignored her, tearing into a piece of meat as he held it down with one talon.

"Yeah, well, I won't tell Lady Raelle if you don't," she said.

She settled back down on the sofa, now watching the karu and ignoring the program on the screen. Despite the four eyes, the resemblance to a raven was undeniable: inky dark feathers with an iridescent sheen, a large beak, and intelligence burning in its gaze.

"Why are you here?" she asked. "I know you're not hungry or cold. The aviary has everything you need."

The karu gave no answer.

She reached for a slice of fruit on the small plate off to the side. The karu reached over and nipped at her fingers. She jerked her hand back in alarm. "Fine. You don't share."

The karu tilted his head and Lenore had the distinct impression that she misunderstood all their encounters.

The door chimed.

"Aren't I popular tonight?" Lenore pushed herself to her feet. "That'd better not be the palace guard to arrest me for keeping you captive. You came to me. Right? Let's keep our story straight."

The karu chirped, then bit a noodle in half like it was a worm.

"You have not responded to my messages," Baris said, pushing his way into her room when she answered the door. He wore a thunderous expression, all doom and royal fury. "I am here for your answer."

"Hello. So good to see you," she said, her tone flat.

His expression softened as he reached for her, pulling her into an embrace. He kissed her forehead. “Apologies. It does my eyes good to see you. I have missed you.”

This was more like it.

“What messages? I haven’t gotten any messages from you,” Lenore said.

“Impossible.” Baris pulled out his tablet and frowned at the screen. He showed her the sent messages, all with green check marks to indicate that they had been delivered and read. “Internal communications are currently limited, but you did receive my invitation.”

“Nope.” Lenore grabbed her own tablet and showed him the empty mailbox. “Des told me that my outgoing messages are being screened for security, but he didn’t mention incoming.”

Baris made a displeased sound. “That is what he told me, but that is clearly not the case. I will have words with the male.”

“Maybe it’s a glitch?” Yeah, she realized how naive that sounded as soon as the words left her mouth.

“This has been going on for many days. It is deliberate.” Baris finally noticed her pajamas. “What are you wearing?”

“Honestly, I have no idea, but they’re cute.” Lenore gestured to the bright, cartoony print pajama bottoms featuring a chubby raccoon-like character running away with comically oversized snacks. “Lydia gave them to me. They’re so comfy.”

“Lydia is your friend from the theater?”

“That’s the one. You’re not trying to shame me about the pizza raccoon, are you? He’s got a family to feed.”

Baris looked as if he were about to ask for an explanation, but a caw snagged his attention. He immediately went to the karu. “Who is this?”

“Trouble. He’s been following me for a few days.”

The karu fluttered to the back of the sofa and looked ever so regal, not at all like he had been stealing Lenore’s dinner.

“We are honored by your presence, elder.” Baris dipped his head and extended his hand for the karu’s consideration.

“Careful. He’s a biter,” she warned.

Baris’ entire posture changed, moved by urgency. “Lenore, did he bite you?”

“Oh, he nipped at my hand. I wasn’t thinking and stuck my hand in while he was eating.”

“No. That’s not...show me your hands.” He grabbed her hands, holding them to the light for inspection. He scowled, somehow displeased. In an unsettling moment of clarity, she knew exactly how her patients felt.

“I’m fine. Not a scratch,” Lenore said.

He dropped her hands, sighing heavily as if disappointed.

Sorry for not getting mauled.

“What’s this invitation you mentioned?” she asked.

“Tomorrow, I wish you to accompany me to Miria for the winter ceremony.”

“A ceremony? Like a religious ceremony?” She wasn’t sure how she felt about that.

He displayed both hands, palm up, in a gesture she knew meant uncertainty. “Karu are honored with offerings during the darkest days of the year. It is one of the few times the sacred temples of Miria are opened to all,” Baris said.

“Tomorrow? I have appointments.”

“Clearing your schedule will not be an issue.”

“I’m delighted you asked, but I wish you’d have told me ahead of time. Last-minute changes to my schedule aren’t fair to my patients.” The looky-loos booking appointments at the clinic had dropped off, easing the burden on her schedule and allowing her to spend time with actual patients. Rescheduling wasn’t respectful of their time.

That frown reappeared. “I will have words with Des. You were invited some days ago.”

“Another undelivered message,” she said.

“So it seems,” he responded, his voice rather cold. Lenore thoroughly expected his next words to be *off with his head*. She really didn’t envy Des at the moment.

Instead, Baris surprised them both by saying, “I would like to have you with me. Since I lost my bonded...” He cleared his throat before continuing. “A king shouldn’t admit when he feels vulnerable. It isn’t done. My karu was my companion since I was ten years old. I miss him.”

Lenore reached for his nearest hand. Too late did she realize it was his right hand. She tried to drop it, but he held on tight.

“I want someone by my side who I trust. I want you,” he said.

Clearly, this meant a lot to him. She was happy to accompany him. “How can I say no?”

CHAPTER TWENTY



BARIS

THE DAY WAS clear and bright, good weather for the winter ceremony.

The temple complex of Miria was a short flight from the palace. Lenore remained silent as she watched the snow-covered landscape melt away into the dull brown of dying foliage.

Baris disliked the silence. He did not trust it. Lenore was always so full of questions—to remain silent had to be a sign that she was unhappy.

“Are you warm enough?” he asked. The temperature in the flyer was comfortable, but humans had a higher body temperature.

“Very. Thank you,” she answered.

“Did you not like your gift?”

“I love my gift,” she said, touching the black gem-studded hair comb. It was a simple design. The royal collection had far more elaborate pieces, but this was suitable for the somber mood of the day.

Baris took a great deal of pleasure in seeing Lenore wear his jewels. He wanted to cover her in jewels and precious metals until they dripped off her.

“Is your outfit satisfactory?” he asked.

“It’s lovely.” Lenore ran a hand down the front of her blouse. It was an unadorned black silk, an inappropriate material for the cold palace but suitable for the warmer climate of Miria. He had no great love or understanding of fashion. He wore what the tailor made him. He did, however, understand the need for presentation and drama during public events, and the current garments she wore were rather humble.

“If you are concerned that it is too plain, this is a somber occasion. It is suitable,” he said. He himself wore simple black and a black feather mantle.

“Baris.” Lenore reached for his hand and squeezed. “I’m just nervous. I don’t want to mess up today.”

“Impossible.”

A tired smile tugged at her lips. “Oh, you’d be amazed at the way I could fuck up. I could trip over my own feet. Sneeze when we’re supposed to be all quiet and respectful. My stomach could start growling.”

“I can remedy hunger.” Baris extended his hand to the nearest guard, who immediately handed him a ration bar. “This will keep your stomach from complaining.”

“I seriously doubt that.” Lenore accepted the bar and sniffed the unopened package, frowning as if disgusted. “I’m not *that* hungry.”

“We sit and admire the show as the priests ring bells and light candles. There is nothing to mishandle,” he said, keeping his tone reassuring. “I am thankful you are with me. It would be difficult to be alone today.”

She rewarded his little truth with a smile. It lit up her entire being and made her eyes sparkle. “I’m glad to be here.”

“We are nearing Miria,” Baris said, pointing out the window.

The temple complex of Miria sprawled over a large area, all protected as royal land. A portion was open to the public, but the large majority was off-limits, as it was a nesting habitat for karu. Only a select few outside the royal family were given permission to enter the private reserve.

As the flyer approached, Baris spotted the temple where, when he was ten years old, he presented himself to the karu. He sliced the palm of his hand to indicate willingness for a bond and waited to be chosen. His karu arrived almost immediately, as if he had been waiting for Baris.

Just beyond the temple was a clear patch used as a landing pad. That was the location where, two years later, when Baris was twelve, his parents were assassinated while his younger brother completed the same ritual. Vekele waited all night in the temple before his karu arrived. He once admitted that as the night wore on, he feared he would be rejected. Baris

suspected that his karu, an unusually old and wise creature, was aware of the danger. If Vekele left the temple too early, he would have been slaughtered too.

Today's proceedings would not be held in that ill-fated place. The public temple was of newer construction, built by his grandmother, and free of such memories. Queen Taras had a talent for financing grand works that would endear her to her subjects.

The flyer descended on the edge of a crowded plaza. A grand temple, all light and shadow, white stone against the blue sky, and dark doorways, dominated the plaza. Smaller buildings clustered around the temple, like hatchlings sheltering under a wing.

The flyer landed in a secured area behind one of the smaller buildings. Guards were waiting, as well as members of the council.

"So it's true," Raelle said, approaching Baris. A winter wind ruffled the heavy mantle of black feathers the older female wore. Strands of white hair escaped its neat coiffeur. "The human is your guest today."

The way Lenore's posture stiffened at the sight of the councilor told him all he needed to know.

"Let us have a word," he said, drawing Raelle away. A guard turned over the flyer's engine, creating enough noise to mask their conversation.

"I am disappointed at your thoughtless actions. The media has grown tired of its fascination with that female, and the broadcasts barely mention her, but now you bring her here! For all to see," Raelle scolded.

"You know I hold you in deep regard, but you are not my parent. Mind your tongue when you speak to your king," Baris said, taking offense. He did not relish dragging out his title, but it was necessary. "And mind how you speak of Lenore."

Raelle lifted her chin as if she would argue. Instead, she dipped her head in a sign of acknowledgment. "People will think that human is important."

“She is important.” Paramount, even.

“You are willfully misunderstanding me. The attention you give this human can make the council’s search for a queen more difficult,” she said. Then added, “Your Majesty.”

“How is the search going? Have you considered anyone else besides your granddaughter?”

He enjoyed watching Raelle’s face flush in frustration. It was petty, but he was not above pettiness. Eventually, she said, “Nia is a viable candidate, more so than that infuriating female. It is what your mother wished.”

“Do not speak to me of my mother in this place of all places,” he snapped. “I’m fairly certain my mother’s wish was not to be murdered. I doubt she was much concerned with dynastic matchmaking.”

“You were a child. You did not know.”

“I was a child,” he said, his voice angrier than he intended. The guards sensed the shift in mood and stood alert. He took a moment to calm himself. “I was a child, and I am grateful for the guidance you’ve given me, but cease this interference.”

“If you are planning to make the human your queen, this unsuitable match will fail. Whatever...fancy...you are following at the moment will not last, despite how she has her claws in you.”

Des caught Baris’ attention and pointed to the tablet he held in his hand in a gesture that meant they were running behind schedule.

Right. Baris needed this over with.

“I will not argue with you,” he said, “but answer me this. When Princess Sarah arrived, you insisted that she join the royal family immediately. Why was Sarah acceptable and Lenore is not?”

Raelle did not hesitate to answer. “She was bonded with her void beast, therefore noble. She had the royal crest emblazoned on her skin, therefore potentially divine.”

“That is superstition, and you are not a superstitious person.”

Raelle hesitated before speaking. “Princess Sarah was a better choice than Joie Starshade,” she admitted.

“You would have rather I bound myself to an unknown human than make peace with the Starshades? The council supported the match. It was necessary.”

Raelle made a disgusted noise. “The council was not unanimous. I was a dissenting vote. I said we could not trust them, and I was right.”

Baris knew that Raelle would not be persuaded and wondered why she was so determined to oppose the one person who brought him peace. She must have spoken with Lenore. Given the way Lenore’s posture went from relaxed to wary when Raelle arrived, the conversation had not been congenial.

Pieces slid together in his mind, filling the gaps between what was known and what likely occurred. It was a satisfying feeling, one he had not known for some time, like stretching out seldom-used wings. Raelle was direct and to the point. She had ambitions for her granddaughter. Whether she directly threatened Lenore or attempted to frighten her, he could not say. Regardless, the outcome displeased Raelle, which gave Baris hope.

His feelings for Lenore had not changed since his disastrous proposal on K-7 Station. If anything, they had grown stronger. At the time, his words had been arrogant and poorly chosen, even if the sentiment was sincere. He tried to explain the conflict he felt in indulging a whim.

No, not a *whim*. He could not seem to stop choosing the wrong words, even with himself. Lenore was not a whim. She was a necessity that called to him. If anything, his feelings had only grown stronger.

Baris told Raelle, “You do not speak to Lenore. You do not send your flock of minions to speak to her. Whatever game you think you are playing by having Des block our messages will not work. Cease your meddling before I decide it has strayed from being merely bothersome to treasonous.”

Her eyes went wide. “I have not—Yes, Your Majesty. I understand.”

LENORE

Lenore wasn't sure what Baris and Raelle spoke about, but it grew heated. She wasn't able to hear their conversation over the noise of the flyer's engine. When they finished, neither looked happy. Raelle threw Lenore a particularly harsh glare, which made her suspect the conversation was about her.

She knew coming was a bad idea. It was too much attention. It was one thing to be seen walking in the palace gardens or having dinner together, but this was a thing. A proper thing. There were people out in the plaza waiting to catch a glimpse of the king. They didn't need to see his...whatever she was. *Girlfriend* didn't feel right, but *mistress* was all wrong. Companion? Friend felt right, but also more than simple friendship. She cared for Baris. More than she should.

The ceremony went as Baris described. They climbed the steps of the temple—which, personal beef, why were temples always at the top of steep stairs? No one was interested in wheelchair-accessible temples? Once inside the temple, there were bells and candles and some pretty words. Karu perched in the rafters.

Once that was finished, Baris wanted to visit the roof for the sunset, which meant a very steep set of stairs.

The last of the day's warmth vanished with the sun. Lenore jammed her hands into the coat pockets, wishing she had brought a scarf. Her old Midwestern self would be appalled. It was barely chilly, and here she was, shivering like someone had dropped an ice cube down the back of her shirt. She'd gone soft.

The temple roof held a garden, lush with potted plants, a trellis covered in a thick flowering vine, and even a fountain. Seating was both hidden in nooks for a peaceful treat and designed to take in the view. A table laden with food and drinks waited for them. Baris fixed her a plate, insisting she sample everything.

Lenore had to admit, the view was stunning and the food tasty. They were surrounded by dense vegetation. In the distance was another temple, dark against the fading light and quickly consumed by the shadows. Lanterns glowed below in the plaza.

Automatic lights switched on, bathing the rooftop retreat in a gentle glow.

“You are quiet. Normally, you have a dozen questions,” Baris said. “I do not like this silence. If someone has troubled you, I will not hesitate to smash their fingers.”

“Nothing like that,” she answered. “Today seemed like the right time to be quiet and respectful.”

He made a noise that sounded like agreement.

“Tell me this: what’s with the black feather capes? Lots of people are wearing them today,” she said.

Baris lightly touched the clasp at the front of his own cape. It appeared to be feathers sewn onto silk with onyx beading. “It is a mantle traditionally worn by those with a karu bond. It is ancient in function, to prevent the karu’s talon from digging into our shoulders; now, it is only worn when one needs to make an impression. Old houses pass down their mantles, adding new feathers with each generation. Mine is quite old, as you see.” He stood, spreading his arms to fan out the cape that fell to his knees.

“Impressive,” she said. The black feathers and onyx beads caught the light, giving it a blue-black sheen. “Not gonna lie, it looks like something a villain would wear.”

“This one is too heavy for anything but ceremony. I have a lighter one.”

“For casual, everyday villainy.”

Baris snickered, sitting next to her on the bench. Her tension unwound and she leaned against his shoulder. He appreciated her snarking humor and that warmed her. Whatever weirdness happened today, they’d be all right.

The noise and music of the crowd drifted up from below. Lights moved in the distance as people traveled into the dark with lanterns.

A caw broke the quiet. A very familiar karu with white feathers landed on the railing, joined by another with solid black coloring.

This couldn't be her troublemaker. The distance was too great to fly. This had to be another karu with similar markings. Then, he flew the short distance to the bench and helped himself to a plate of sliced veggies on the table, so it could only be him.

"Hello, troublemaker," Lenore said. "You've come a long way."

The karu chirped in agreement, then swallowed an enormous chunk of something orange and carrot-y.

"Is this your visitor?" Baris leaned forward, studying the karu as they demolished the veggies.

"I think so. I don't know who his friend is, though."

"I believe they are a mated pair," he said. He poured water into a shallow dish, offering it to the karu. They made clicking noises, then drank.

Once their hunger and thirst were satisfied, Trouble turned his attention to Lenore. He flew the short distance to stand in front of her, his head lowered. When Lenore didn't respond the way he wanted, he pecked at her feet.

"What do you want? The dessert course not good enough for you?" Lenore tucked her feet under herself, out of beak range.

"Lenore, I believe you should let him bite you," Baris said.

"What? Don't be ridiculous. No one is biting anyone."

Trouble cawed rather loudly, as if in protest.

Baris produced a dagger—why he had one and where he was hiding it, that was a question for another time—and handed it to her, hilt forward. "Offer him a drop of blood. He has chosen you for a bond."

That seemed unlikely, but the karu had flown a long way. He wasn't there for the hors d'oeuvres.

"Isn't there supposed to be a ritual?" Lenore took the dagger. This was...weird. A pushy bird stalked her at the palace and now followed her who knows how far because he wanted to bond with her.

"I do not think he is overly concerned with ritual."

"He doesn't seem the fussy sort," she agreed.

While she contemplated her avian stalker, Baris kneeled on the floor before the other karu. He produced a second dagger—seriously, how many of those did he have?—and sliced his palm. He extended his hand and waited.

"Is that a good idea? Isn't there a minimum wait between symbiotes?" she asked. Baris did not answer, which really was all the answer she needed. There most certainly were guidelines regarding the minimum amount of time to wait before safely attempting a new bond, and King Baris ignored those guidelines. "I'm totally squealing to Harol about this, you know."

"No one likes a snitch."

The absurdity of Baris using human slang caught her by surprise. A loud laugh rang out. The troublemaker was not amused. He pecked at her feet, forcing attention back on himself.

"Hold your horses," she muttered.

The other karu fluttered down from the table and hopped closer to Baris, patiently waiting with his palm out. It dipped its head and fluffed its feathers, then lowered its beak in the pooling blood in the palm of his hand.

Huh.

Lenore looked at the dagger, then her palm. Why was it always the palm? There were so many nerve endings there, and that stretch of muscle worked all the time. Cuts there were a bitch to heal.

She lowered herself to the ground, wincing at the hard stone under her knees, and pricked her index finger.

“I hope this is good enough,” she said, extending her hand to Trouble.

If the gesture was good enough, she’d never know. Trouble clamped his beak around her finger, breaking the skin.

She jerked her hand away. “Was that necessary?” She hissed in pain, cradling her hand to her chest.

Baris laughed, now sitting cross-legged and most unregal-like with a karu in his lap. The bird cooed happily, looking quite the pleased little miss as Baris scratched behind her head. “Congratulations. You’ve been chosen for a bond. We’ve been chosen,” he said. “She’s marvelous, isn’t she? Quite old, judging by the size.”

Trouble bumped Lenore’s hand like he wanted head scratches, too. Lenore eyed Trouble, uncertain if she could trust the biter.

“Now what?” she asked.

“Now you wait for the bond to develop. The symbiote was transferred in the karu’s saliva. It requires a few days to take root.”

“For the infection to take place. You infected me,” she said to Trouble, who was completely unbothered. He launched himself in the air, perching on the trellis. His companion, Baris’ newly bonded karu, joined him.

The breeze picked up, bringing cool, crisp winter air. Lenore shivered. Baris removed his cloak and placed it over her shoulders.

She pulled it tight, the fabric warm from his body. She buried her nose, enjoying the scent that was equal parts clean soap and woody. “Am I even allowed to touch this? I thought this was reserved for the special few.”

He tilted his head, waiting.

“Does this mean I’ve been elevated? I’m Lady Dr. Kelley? Ugh, that’s terrible,” she said, giddiness sweeping through her. The situation was not funny or amusing, but she felt light,

filled with excitement. Or that could be the symbiote spreading through her body. “Dr. Lady Kelley. I’ll have calling cards made. When will I get my superpower? Sarah and Ghost do this really amazing thing where they can grab and drag you with shadow tentacles. Will I be able to do that?”

The karu nestled together in the trellis overhead, chirping and making their opinions known. They sounded tired. She didn’t need a bond to know. They had flown a very long way that day just to meet her and Baris on the temple roof.

“It is difficult to say. Some are common, like summoning wings, but abilities are unique to the individual, and they develop on their own schedule,” Baris said.

He reached up and plucked a strand of still-green vine. He reached for her hand, clasping her wrist, binding them with the vine, and pressing his bleeding palm to hers.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



LENORE

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” Lenore tugged her hand away, which only tightened the vine. He was bleeding, smearing blood everywhere, including her injured thumb. Bloodborne pathogens aside, it was gross. “This is so unhygienic. You’ll get an infection.”

“Remain still,” he said, not releasing his hold on her. “My feelings for you have not changed since my first confession of love. Quite the opposite, I find that I have grown ever more devoted to you. I adore you. You are my last thought before sleep and my first thought on waking. I love you more than is reasonable. More than is advisable.”

His words made her pause. Love. That was a dangerous word for a king.

She felt his love. It was in the way he sought her out in every room, like she was the brightest star in the sky. She felt treasured. He had such patience for her endless questions, answering them thoughtfully. He gave her so much, not just gifts or strong-arming her way into the Royal Academy, but time, a resource more valuable than all the jewels in the crown.

He continued, “My initial proposal was worded poorly.”

“It was insulting.”

He dipped his head in acknowledgment. “I have always known that I was destined to wear the crown. From my earliest days, I was shaped and prepared for this. The needs of the kingdom are greater than my own. I was made to lead but also made to be sacrificed.” He paused, searching for the correct words. “I am not seeking pity. I only wish to clarify. I have always placed the needs of the crown above my own. I have never chosen for myself.”

She couldn’t tell where he was going with this. “I’m listening.”

He clasped his other hand over their joined hands. “You are the first thing I have chosen for myself, just for Baris Shadowmark, and I will always choose you.”

“Those flaws you mentioned before, they haven’t changed. I’m still unconnected, no money, and all that. I’m as bad of a choice now as I was then.” Probably worse. “I’m not diplomatic at all.”

“I do not need my queen for diplomacy. I have an entire office of trained diplomats.”

“I don’t know much about your culture. I’ll make blunders and cause, I don’t know, a diplomatic incident.”

“No more than I. We’ll keep the public relations team busy. It was time they earned their keep.” He grinned. When she didn’t return the smile, his expression grew serious. “If this is unwanted, I apologize. I will respect your decision and never mention it again.”

“I...I don’t know,” she said, which sounded so tepid and indifferent that she was angry with herself on his behalf. “I do care for you. Tremendously.”

“But you do not love me.” His shoulders slumped.

“I didn’t say that,” she said quickly. This was horrible, like kicking a puppy. “I guess I haven’t allowed myself to consider it. You’re a king, for crying out loud. We’re from two different worlds, and I can’t even believe I’m about to say this, *literally*. Literally two different worlds. Everyone assumes I was your plaything, and I assumed that too.”

His grip tightened and he brought his forehead to hers. His eyes fluttered shut. “Never.”

“Why me? I don’t understand that.” She wasn’t fishing for compliments; her self-esteem was robust enough to verge on egotistical. She wanted to know his reasoning for ignoring his duty and all the expectations placed upon him.

“You trust me,” he said simply. “You should not, but you do. Even when we could not communicate, when I found you in the jungle, you trusted me.”

“Of course I trust you,” Lenore said, remembering their first encounter. “You wore *silk* in a jungle. You were so out of place, and you clearly didn’t want to be there. I thought, stick with that guy; he knows how to get hot water and clean clothes.”

He huffed with amusement. “You did not.”

“Prove it,” she said. For a moment, the seriousness of the conversation was forgotten, turning to banter between friends.

Foreheads still together, his eyes opened. Vivid blue eyes bore down on her. He said, “The day we met, I was fresh from the funeral of my first queen.”

“I didn’t realize.” She knew he was a widower but did not know the timing of it. Now, her quip seemed crude and insensitive. “Did you love her?”

“No. I did not know her, and I did not grieve for her. That day, the day fate gave you to me, I slaughtered her family.”

Lenore pulled away, stepping back as far as she could with their hands tied. “What?”

“I delivered justice to the people who conspired against me, maimed me, and killed my karu. They left me alone and friendless. They deserved worse,” he said, his voice growing hard. “And that is another reason you should not trust me. I do not regret the blood on my hands.”

Glancing down at their joined hands, very much covered in real blood, seemed a little too on-the-nose for that to be a metaphor. He meant real blood, then and now.

And she didn’t care. She should be appalled. Baris was the perfect embodiment of a horribly elegant and violent world.

“You want to know why I love you? Because you are my friend, my first true friend in this life,” he said.

Oh, that was a dirty trick. How could she not swoon after that? A rooftop garden, sunset, romantic music in the air, and he gave her his family-heirloom feather cloak to keep her warm. He wasn’t playing fair.

“Why now?” she asked, barely refraining from a swoon. “Is it because of Troublemaker? Because I’m in the nobility now?”

“No,” he said in a definitive tone. “Raelle has taken up against you. She demanded you cease your association with me. I can only speculate as to your response, but whatever it was, it displeased her.”

“To put it politely. You know, she plans to marry you off to her granddaughter.”

“I am aware, and I reason that Raelle is against you because she knows that plan has no hope.”

“Nia would be a better match in every possible way,” she said.

“Except my heart is against her. My heart desires only you.”

See? Swoon.

“Tell me there is some small chance of hope.” He tugged, drawing her closer.

“More than a chance,” she answered. “I do love you, Baris. You’re insufferably proud but also thoughtful and kind. And you’re my friend, too. I don’t have a lot of those. My personality is too prickly, I think.”

“Is that a yes? Will you be my queen?”

She should ask for more time. The situation was too complex to rush to an answer. She wouldn’t be marrying just Baris Shadow, a man she admittedly loved; she’d be marrying Baris the King. His proposal had been impulsive. If she answered impulsively in return, she’d only doubt her decision.

His eyes shone with adoration.

Fuck it. Impulsive was the theme of the day.

“Yes,” she answered.

His mouth crashed down over hers in a hard, claiming kiss. His free arm wrapped around her waist, pulling her against him. There was so much to consider, so many questions about what this engagement meant, but all thoughts left her. On that winter’s night, in that moment, there was only them. No

kingdom. No responsibilities. Just two souls who found each other against improbable odds and liked what they found.

A portal took Lenore from Earth and landed her in a world as glorious, violent, dark, and marvelous as a fairytale, and this was her happily ever after.

Nothing was ever as easy as that.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



LENORE

FIRST CAME THE HEADACHE. By the time they returned to the palace, Lenore's head pounded. She took two tablets in an effort to stop her head hurting long enough to sleep and collapsed into bed.

By the morning, she had chills and a low-grade fever. A glass of water and two tablets waited on the nightstand. Grateful, she chugged them down.

She stumbled out of the bedroom to find Baris enjoying a morning coffee by the balcony, the drapes open to let in the sunlight. The table had been set with a service for four. The two karu sat in chairs on either side of Baris, their heads bobbing up to sneak a piece of fruit or meat from their plate and then vanishing below the table once more.

"You're looking far too chipper," she grumbled, slouching into a chair. Baris poured a cup and pushed it across the table. Grudgingly, she stirred in sugar and cream because sugar and cream made everything better. The first warm sip soothed her grouchiness but not the headache or chills. She felt achy all over, like her immune system was putting up a valiant fight, but could not avoid the inevitable full-body slam of a horrible cold.

"Shouldn't you be having an adverse reaction to the symbiote?" she asked, only a little jealous that Baris appeared to be hale and hearty.

"My physiology is more welcoming to the symbiote than yours."

"You don't have to rub it in."

He loaded a plate with buttered toast and a spoonful of gruel. Well, porridge or whatever. He set the plate down in front of her, and the porridge spread across the plate in the most unappetizing blob.

"Eat," he said. "Your body needs the fuel."

Lenore gnawed on the toast, trying not to be resentful. She was a terrible patient, absolutely the biggest baby when it came to feeling sick. There was that old truism that doctors make the worst patients, and it was true in her case.

Part of it was believing she knew better and she could just mind-over-matter her way through a virus. The other part was a Midwestern stubbornness that she got from her parents. She was made of stronger stuff than a common cold. A little case of the sniffles wasn't going to slow her down. Her father prided himself in never taking a sick day. Not once.

Right up until he had a massive heart attack that forced him into earlier retirement.

Lenore knew she was heading down the same path. She worked too much, didn't have the most heart-healthy diet, never exercised, and couldn't even be bothered to get her cholesterol checked.

She added butter and a spoonful of sugar to the porridge, suddenly missing her father. He grumbled about oatmeal, too, but dutifully choked down a bowl every morning after his heart surgery.

Fine. Maybe taking a day to sleep and rest wouldn't be the worst idea.

"I assume Harol already knows about—" She waved her spoon at Trouble, who was in the process of happily dragging a piece of toast across the table, smearing butter on the tablecloth.

"Indeed. He sends his congratulations. Although that may change if he knew about this one's atrocious table manners," Baris said. He took the beleaguered piece of toast, placed it on a plate, and set it down on the chair next to Trouble.

Trouble promptly pushed it off the plate onto the chair, irritated at the feel of porcelain against his beak.

"Oh." Lenore dropped her spoon.

"Are you well? I will call Harol." Baris stood abruptly from the table, knocking the chair back.

“No, it’s not that. I’m fine. I mean, I feel like I’ve been hit by a bus, but he doesn’t like his beak hitting the plate,” she said, amazed at her own words. “It’s too clicky-clacky.” She wiggled her fingers like that helped explain how she felt Trouble in her mind, not entirely separate from herself but also not her.

Baris grinned as if proud. “You have a strong bond to share senses already.”

“It’s weird,” she said, then quickly added so as not to offend Trouble, “but a good weird. How are you and Little Miss over there doing?”

The other karu was far more regal as she ate. Baris fed her bite-sized pieces of toast, which she calmly accepted as if being hand-fed was her due.

“She is very level-headed. Patient. She will be good for me, I think,” Baris said. His eyes unfocused for a moment. “She waited for us to be ready. That one,” he pointed to Trouble, “was her spy.”

“A conspiracy.” Lenore wanted to chuckle, but she didn’t have the energy, and it’d only set her head pounding again. Right now, the pain had receded just enough that being alive was a tolerable experience.

“I find I do not mind.” Baris grinned, and the pure sunshine of his happiness chased away her doom and gloom.

This was nice. Breakfast. Nothing fancy, just coffee and a bowl of gruel—fine, porridge—and she wanted this every day for always with Baris.

Trouble moved to the back of her chair, burying his buttery beak in her hair. She reached over her shoulder to scratch his head.

And with Trouble and Little Miss.

“I hope you’re taking it easy today. Your body may be better suited for this, but you are recovering from a major illness,” she said. Yesterday, she had asked if there was a waiting period between symbiotes, and he danced around the subject, which basically meant yes, and he had no intention of waiting.

“I have a light schedule today, which I should start before Des starts messaging me.”

As if on cue, his tablet chimed with an incoming message.

Baris finished his drink, dabbed the napkin to his mouth, gave her a kiss on the forehead, and scooped up his karu. He cradled her in his arms like an infant, and the karu cooed with contentment as they left.

“Looks like it’s you and me today. Let’s catch up on our show.” Somehow, over the last two weeks when Trouble invited himself into her suite, they fell into the habit of watching episodes of that nightclub-owning demon crime drama show. It was addictive. The characters were terrible people who made terrible decisions, and she couldn’t take her eyes off the train wreck of all their bad choices crashing down on them.

Harol arrived halfway through, grumbling that he disliked making house calls, but here he was, so could she please tell the king to stop messaging him constantly? After a brief exam, he declared she was not dying and left her a packet of pills to reduce her fever and headache, this planet’s equivalent of ibuprofen.

Dutifully, Lenore took the pills and cuddled up on the sofa to be mindless in front of a screen. When the program ended, Lenore made the mistake of switching over to a live broadcast. Surprise, surprise, the news was all about her. Somehow, the media got wind that she bonded with a karu, and no one was happy about it. At least this station wasn’t thrilled.

Should humans be allowed to bond?

Are humans the right choice?

Footage of Lenore, wearing Baris’ feather cape that swallowed her and Trouble on her shoulder, played on repeat.

Six humans are known to have bonded with karu. What does this mean for Arcosians? Bonds are at an all-time low.

Cue some pundit to talk about declined bond rates and why humans were taking a limited resource, and everything was terrible. Then another guest would say this was an exciting

development and why karu sought out humans for a bond should be studied.

“Six is hardly a staggering amount,” Lenore said, talking out loud to the screen and to Trouble. “I really don’t think it’s some great indication that karu are throwing over Arcosians for humans. Unless you are?”

Trouble didn’t seem to think much of the program either. The show presented itself as a discussion of current events, but really, it was two—sometimes more—people shouting at each other.

Bonds happen infrequently, and humans just drop in from the sky, taking those bonds away from Arcosians...

She turned off the screen, having heard enough. It was all vitriol.

“It’s just fear-mongering,” she said out loud, speaking to Trouble. “You chose me. I don’t think there’s anything in the universe that could force you to do anything against your will.”

Trouble flexed his wings, fluffed his feathers, and then closed his eyes as he tucked his beak against his chest. She got the impression of stubbornness, which she totally identified with, and also a sleepy contentedness.

“Yeah, a nap sounds good,” she responded. The world didn’t know about the engagement yet. She should enjoy a lazy day while she could; life would get busy soon.

BARIS

“May I offer you my congratulations, Your Majesty?” Des said.

“Thank you,” Baris said. They walked through the corridors, heading for his office. “The proposal was not planned, but the moment seemed correct. Lady Lenore will make an excellent queen. The council will protest, but they shouldn’t take too much convincing.”

He paused and turned around, aware that Des no longer followed him.

The male’s mouth hung open in shock.

“You meant the karu,” Baris said. The karu on his shoulder provided a reassuring weight, but the bond was too faint to feel a connection. He raised his hand to assure himself that she was real. She butted her head against his hand. Real. Present. Comfort.

“Yes, the karu. I...I had no idea,” Des sputtered. Color rose in his cheeks as if embarrassed by such a misunderstanding. If the male took flight from the wrong branch, he corrected himself quickly. “Many happy congratulations, Your Majesty. That information is not known yet. May I suggest we keep it that way—”

Baris and the karu both disliked that suggestion.

“At least until after Councilor Raelle’s retirement party in three weeks. Once the announcement is made, it will overshadow the councilor’s career and contributions to the kingdom—”

Baris waved a hand to silence the male. Once the official announcement was made, a series of events would be set in motion that could not be stopped. A royal wedding was a long, complicated process, at least when the monarch was involved. Vekele’s marriage to Sarah had been done with trickery and enough planning to make it look spontaneous. He would not

be able to get away with such antics again. He said, “You have a point. It would be rude to steal attention away from Raelle. The official announcement can wait.”

Des fell in step beside Baris, consulting his tablet. “I will consult the plans from the last royal wedding.”

An elaborate affair had been planned for his union with Joie Starshade, but it never came to fruition. Everything had been in place with the ceremony days away, then the abduction happened. The actual mating ceremony was a simple affair, held at gunpoint, with an off-planet officiant on a Starshade ship. Once liberated by his brother, Baris could have had the union dissolved. No court would consider it legal, but he rather enjoyed the fact that the Starshades attached a collar to him, thinking they had him chained and defeated.

They gave him the chain to control them. First, he took the life of the leader of the house, which made Joie the new leader as the highest-ranking member of the family. What was his mate’s was his, legally, allowing him to take their property and their wealth. He took their ships, confining them to a far planet. He could—*should* have done worse. The House of Starshade was weak, but it still existed, a blight on the system. For the moment, it was contained, but...

The karu nipped at his ear, breaking through his spiraling thoughts.

As satisfying as it had been to dismantle the Starshades one legal maneuver at a time, he wanted nothing of the ceremony designed for them to touch Lenore.

“Use it as a starting point, but I’d prefer to not reuse elements. What was suitable for a union with the Starshades is not suitable for Lady Lenore,” Baris said. He wanted nothing of the Starshades to taint his happiness.

“Lenore will need an etiquette tutor, a cultural tutor, as well as a stylist. Elocution lessons wouldn’t go amiss. Her accent is... rustic.”

“Lady Lenore,” Baris said.

“Pardon?”

“Refer to my intended as Lady Lenore.”

“She is not a noble. I understand she has a professional title from Earth. *Doctor*.” He suppressed the last syllable like the human word was particularly difficult to pronounce. “Should I use that?”

“She is noble. She has bonded with a karu.”

Des fell behind again. “I see.”

“The mate to this one, actually,” Baris said, giving the karu another scratch. He felt a flood of comforting affection, as warm as stepping in from the cold.

“A mated pair. How auspicious.”

“You understand the inspiration behind my impulsivity.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

Des remained silent until they reached Baris’ place of business. It was more than a suite of rooms for administrative tasks. It was an annex built for purpose by his grandmother, Queen Taras, and unfortunately, was showing its age. Des’ desk dominated the space when one entered. The aide was the first managerial layer. Meeting rooms were to one side. Undersecretaries were to the other. The archives were up. The treasury was down another level still. Clerks were scattered where a desk could fit in. Space that had once been a closet or storage had been converted for their use. Soon, they would have to expand again or move a department to another part of the palace.

Baris had his own chamber at the end of a long corridor, dominated by a desk kept tidy by the efforts of several undersecretaries. They moved documents onto his desk and off in a constant rotation, stressing what needed his attention now and what should wait.

The administrative center was a flurry of activity at all hours. The kingdom spanned star systems. It did not keep conventional hours.

Council chambers were kept in an entirely different section of the palace for security reasons.

“I wish for Lady Lenore to accompany me to Councilor Raelle’s celebration. Please see that she is suitably outfitted,” Baris said, settling behind his desk. The morning light reached across the floor, creating puddles of light and shadow. The karu found a perch on the back of his chair.

Des nodded, taking notes. “I’ll send an urgent request to the tailor. I’ll also arrange for fresh supplies for your karu.”

The rest of the day was consumed with mundane tasks. For the first time in longer than he cared to remember, the work was not a trial. The world was moving forward, and he was optimistic about the direction.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



LENORE

TIME BOTH CRAWLED and flew by. Lenore's already full schedule was not packed to the brim. While no official engagement announcement had been made—Baris explained the various reasons for the delay—there was still work to be done. Once the engagement was announced and was official, things would be set in motion. Right now, it was the calm before the storm. If being poked by the tailor, told she spoke like a country peasant during elocution lessons, and informed she generally behaved like a barbarian by the etiquette instructor counted as *calm*.

And now this.

She and Harol waited in a corridor at the Royal Academy outside the heavy wooden doors of the board meeting room. At the very end of the corridor, her guard waited discreetly. This part of the academy was used for administration. While the academy was older than the palace and its style more reserved, the building's luxurious roots showed. The wooden floor had a parquet design inlaid with white marble. The century's worth of hurried footsteps to and fro and a thick layer of dingy floor wax could not disguise the quality craftsmanship. Dark wood panels clad the walls. The ceiling was timber and plaster. A large window sat at the end of the hall, taking up the entire wall with stained amber glass. Morning light filtered in, warm and nearly comforting.

Lenore didn't feel particularly warm or comforted. At least this part of the building didn't get much traffic. Occasionally, a person walked by, their shoes squeaking on the floor and doing nothing to disguise their blatant curiosity. She felt very much like a naughty student waiting to be reprimanded by the school principal.

"I was told I'd have a year to prepare for the exam," Lenore said. She sat on an uncomfortable wooden bench, the kind aggressively designed to make the occupant repent for the sin of sitting. Her feet didn't quite touch the floor, but the waxed

wooden seat had a slight tilt, subtly sliding her forward until she had to use her toes to stop from sliding off altogether.

Trouble stood on the bench next to her, his talons digging into the wood. He flapped his wings at anyone passing by who stared too long in her direction. Lenore was discovering that her karu was a bit of an overprotective dick, and she loved that about him.

Harol must have known about the slippery bench because he stood. "This is a review."

"No one told me there would be reviews."

He hesitated before answering. "It is unusual."

The heavy doors opened. A grim-faced man informed her that the board would now speak with her.

She was going to be expelled. That was what this had to be. There had been a patient with an allergic reaction. Perhaps they filed a complaint. Or she wrote a script that conflicted with medication the patient was already taking...so many things could have gone wrong. Too many things. Lenore wasn't reckless and diligently researched all medication before prescribing. Besides, she couldn't actually prescribe anything. She didn't have a medical license. Harol was the one to actually sign the scripts, which had to be the reason he was here.

"I'm sorry I dragged you into this," she said, sliding off the bench to her feet. Trouble hopped onto her shoulder, his sharp talons piercing the thin layer of fabric. She needed to invest in shoulder pads or something.

The lights were kept low inside the chamber, whether for dramatic effect or a medical reason, she couldn't say. Shades were drawn over the windows, allowing only a sliver of light to leak through. A long table stretched the width of the room, raised on a dais. Six figures sat on the far side, all dressed in black and blending in with the shadow. She heard the clacking of beaks and the rustling of feathers but did not see any karu.

Lenore's eyes adjusted to the dim lighting. This had to be an intimidation tactic.

“Be seated,” a faceless figure said, voice ringing out in the still room.

Wonderful. This situation had a full-blown inquisition feel to it. She knew they were trying to make her nervous, to put her off her game, and it was working, dammit.

Trouble butted his head against her ear. He trilled softly, three reassuring notes that eased the ratcheting anxiety inside her chest.

“We got this,” she muttered, shuffling forward until her shins bumped into another bench. Using her hands as a guide in the dark, she sat. Harol settled on the bench next to her.

“Lady Kelley, you know why we’ve summoned you today,” the same voice said.

“Actually, I don’t,” she said, more than a little weirded out at being referred to as *Lady Kelley*. It was accurate, thanks to her new bond with Trouble, but still felt like people were talking about someone else.

“Pardon?”

“I don’t know why I’m here,” she repeated. The board agreed to honor her medical licensure if she passed an exam in a year’s time. Every instinct screamed at her to speculate as to what they wanted. An update on her progress? Had there been a patient complaint? A pop quiz? What? She managed to keep her mouth shut, expecting they would hope she would fill the silence with self-incriminating babble.

She waited.

The board waited.

Harol sighed dramatically.

So far, this was going *great*.

“The board has concerns,” the voice finally said.

Another long pause. If they expected Lenore to incriminate herself, they were headed for disappointment. For one, she totally saw the mind game they were trying to play. For another, she hadn’t done anything. Every interaction with a

patient had been above board, well-documented, and discussed with her mentor.

“This is ridiculous. Stop wasting our time,” Harol snapped.

A murmur went through the board members. Finally, a new voice with a kinder tone spoke. “We have concerns that Lady Kelley’s personal life is a distraction to the academy.”

“I don’t see how,” Lenore said, instantly regretting her words. She should have kept her mouth shut.

“Don’t you? Your clinic appointments have been canceled or rescheduled with alarming frequency. The media lurks outside the academy and the clinic, hoping to encounter you. Reporters sneak into lectures. The number of karu has increased threefold on academy grounds, all no doubt wanting to catch a glimpse of you. The academic environment has been disrupted, patients can no longer enjoy privacy regarding their medical matters, and this is all down to you.”

Anger flared in her stomach. “I can hardly be blamed for people’s curiosity. I’ve done my best to keep my personal life private. I’m not giving interviews or inviting the media to a press conference,” Lenore said.

“No,” the first voice spoke. “You cannot be blamed for that, but we can question your priorities.”

“There was an incident with an allergic reaction, I believe,” a new voice added.

“The patient did not inform me of any allergies, and they were not listed in the chart,” Lenore replied. She knew they’d bring up that incident. It had been unfortunate, but how could she have avoided it when the patient wasn’t even aware of their allergies?

“The patient was hospitalized.”

Lenore ground her teeth in frustration. They weren’t going to let her do it, were they? They had a whole list of reasons and excuses to deny her. There was a terrible soap opera she used to watch with her mother over summer breaks. One of the characters—probably a horribly racist depiction now that she thought of it—complained in a thick accent, “*In my country, I*

was a doctor. Here, I clean the floors.” She thought it so improbable at the time, but here she was, a doctor on her planet and barely qualified to clean floors.

Harol laid a hand on her arm as if to calm her, then rose to his feet. “I understand the board’s concerns, but I question why the board feels it had the right to pry into the personal life of my apprentice.”

“What right? We can’t avoid the human’s personal life. What right does her personal life have to push its way into our institution?”

“The same right as any other student to have a personal life. Does the board question every student? Scrutinize their schedules? Question their dedication to medicine?”

“Don’t be absurd—”

“Dr. Kelley,” Harol said, using the English word and not letting the translator chip choose the closest approximation, “is a skilled and dedicated physician. This institution would be honored to include her as a member.”

“That’s all well and good, but—”

Harol continued to speak, completely unbothered by the blustering protests from the shadowy figures seated at the table. “Let us be frank. Dr. Kelley is the personal physician to Princess Sarah, who counts her as a friend. She is also a particular friend of the king. Do you think it is in the academy’s interest to spoil a partnership that has such connections?”

“How dare you threaten this board?” a new voice piped up.

“How dare you waste my time?!” Harol retorted. If he kept going, he’d get them both kicked out of the academy.

Lenore kicked his foot, not subtly either. Harol turned to glare at her, his tirade paused. She whispered, “You’re not helping.”

The board members murmured among themselves. Eventually, one spoke, “Perhaps it would be best for Lady Kelley to step down until things have settled.”

“No. Absolutely not,” Lenore said. “I have no intention of stepping down. I appreciate that the board has concerns, but my commitment remains the same.”

“Yes, well, it’s a lot for you, isn’t it?” The second person spoke, the one with the kind voice. Right now, that kind voice was being condescending as fuck. “Earth is primitive, and we’re asking you to demonstrate competency with technology that your kind is simply unfamiliar with. I hate to see you struggle.”

Lenore clenched her hands, forcing herself to hold her tongue. Giving this board a piece of her mind would only make a bad situation worse. She wanted to...she didn’t know. Make a big show. Demonstrate that they didn’t frighten her, despite all the drama and theatrics, sitting in a gloomy room with shadows cloaking their faces.

Big deal. She could do that.

Lenore wasn’t sure where that idea came from, perhaps Trouble. Her skin itched, like something inside her was trying really hard to manifest. She flexed her fingers like she could pull strands of darkness toward her.

Nothing came of it, and nothing would come of this farce of a *review*. Her shoulders slumped, done trying to do the impossible.

“I’m doing the work, and I’ll pass the exam,” she said.

More whispers. “We’ll review your case again in three months. You are dismissed.”

Lenore burst out of the room and flew down the steps, her feet barely touching the treads.

“Slow down. My damn hip wasn’t made for running all over creation. I retired for medical reasons, you know, not just because I’m old as fuck,” Harol grumbled. He took the steps at a more cautious pace, moving stiffly and holding onto the railing.

Lenore wanted to scream. If this was the pushback she got now, it’d only get worse once the engagement was announced. It was made absolutely clear that Baris had applied unobvious

amounts of pressure to make the academy admit her. They didn't want her. They resented her. They were itching to kick her out. Any reason would do.

“First, I'm a distraction. I mean, fair. Then I'm too primitive to understand your super complex technology.” Lenore wanted to throttle the kind-but-condescending board member but settled for tossing her hands in the air; murder was generally not the way to demonstrate that you were a skilled and dedicated physician.

“They're not going to let me do it, are they?” she asked when Harol reached the bottom step.

“They can't stop you from doing a damn thing.”

Yes, they could. She had to pick: Baris or her career.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



LENORE

THE STYLIST TOSSED out all her clothes, declaring that Lenore's complexion was better suited for cool spring colors, not the sad, unflattering palette that she cobbled together. It was rather insulting, if accurate. She could admit that she didn't have an eye for style. She liked comfy and colorful. Nothing coordinated in the basic wardrobe she managed to acquire in the last two years, other than the simple black pants that went with everything. Not that she had a ton of clothes to toss.

She put her foot down and managed to hold onto the cardigans. They were practical. She was often cold. Even so, new cardigans and thick, cuddly sweaters arrived in the colors approved for her complexion.

When she arrived back in her rooms to prepare for Councilor Raelle's retirement party, she thought nothing of the outfit and accessories laid out neatly on her bed. She showered off the smell of disinfectant from her skin, did her hair, and put on her party face, her party face being moisturizer and lip gloss. Lenore had never been big on makeup. She had a bad habit of rubbing her eyes during the day, and that spelled disaster for mascara. Better to avoid the whole thing.

Not that she was thrilled about the party. Dread was a better way to describe it. She didn't even understand why she was invited. She was hardly Raelle's favorite person. Presumably, Raelle felt compelled to invite Lenore because she was now an aristocrat. Was that what she could expect now that she was a member of high society? Invited to parties she didn't want to attend by people who didn't want her there?

Satisfied with her hair piled on top of her head and no longer concerned that she smelled of the clinic, she looked at the gorgeous outfit the tailor left for her.

The statement piece was a deep blue velvet coat embroidered with silver and crystal beads. Lace dripped from the cuffs, weighed down with tiny crystal beads that shimmered in the

light. The coat fit snugly across the shoulders and chest, cutting away from the front in a fall of excess fabric that hung full around her hips. Under that, Lenore wore an icy blue silk gown. The pale color flashed with every movement. It was a remarkably simple outfit in terms of court fashion. Hardly itchy at all.

Lenore shrugged on the coat, adjusting the lapels and tugging the lace cuffs to fall just right. Once, she had been baffled as to why coats were such a fashion staple on Arcos. Everyone wore a coat, and not the thick wintery kind. This was more akin to the tight-fitting old-fashioned coats worn at Versailles, a touch more substantial than a jacket. Now she understood, as Trouble landed on her shoulder. The thick fabric and extra padding in the shoulders protected her from his talons.

Balancing Trouble on one shoulder, Lenore sat on the edge of the bed and opened the last box, a flat leather jewelry box, about the size to hold a necklace. Baris kept giving her jewelry. She didn't know how they managed to keep the engagement quiet, with Baris insisting she wore half the treasury. A minor miracle, she supposed. Not to sound ungrateful. She never thought of herself as a jewelry kind of person, and no one had ever given her any beyond the occasional silver-plated necklace at Christmas. Nothing of value and certainly nothing with precious stones.

Lenore brushed her fingers over the leather case. Baris' gifts were flattering. She secretly adored them.

She opened the case. Inside, nestled on velvet, were two bracelets with delicate silver chains that attached filigree claws to the cuff. She had seen the elaborate claw caps worn around the palace, so they were not totally foreign to her.

While removing a bracelet, she pricked her finger on the tip of a cap. They were surprisingly sharp. She'd have to take care not to ruin her outfit. Carefully, she slipped on the caps, arranged the chains to rest along the back of her hand, and fastened the bracelet.

“What do you think?” She displayed her adorned hands to Trouble and flexed, getting used to the feel of metal covering

her fingertips. They weren't something she'd wear every day, but for tonight, she'd tolerate it.

"Ready?" she asked. Feeling a bit warm, her hand drifted to the coat to undo the buttons, then remembered the sharp caps at the last moment. How did people function with these things? Maybe it was meant for the kind of person who had staff to unbutton coats and do all those fiddly things that involved fingers. So basically everything.

Councilor Raelle's retirement party was in the grand ballroom. Lenore left the residential wing of the palace and basically followed the noise. The corridors grew crowded. The guest list, it seemed, included everyone who worked for the government, all the councilors, their staff, and personal friends. That was to be expected. Society—meaning the upper crust—showed up as well. Lenore didn't know why that surprised her. Councilor Raelle was also Lady Frostwing, a significant society figure herself.

The ballroom was circular in design, with an upper gallery and a dome. Soft lighting caught on gilded surfaces. Honestly, it reminded Lenore of the theater with the round stage, upper levels, and karu perches. The same aesthetic seemed to be in play here. A fair number of karu had already settled on the railings, watching the scene below.

At the ballroom's entrance was a small sculpture on a stand. Guests paused to admire and comment on it. It was a female figure holding a sword, dragging it along the ground, and holding a karu aloft with the other arm. Lenore took a moment to study the piece. The woman looked weary.

Musicians were set up at the far end of the ballroom with space cleared for dancing, though no one danced. Refreshments were to one side. People sat at tables. Others mingled, the crowd churning slowly. At the center of it was Raelle.

Lenore drifted through the crowd. Baris asked to meet her at the party rather than drawing attention if they arrived together. Fine. That made sense, even if it meant she'd be on her own for a time. She smiled and thanked people when they

congratulated her on her recent bond with Trouble. Everyone, it seemed, wanted to get a gander at the notorious human the media couldn't stop talking about. Rather than feed that notoriety, Lenore kept the conversation dull, sticking to the weather. *Snow. How magical!*

Smiling and being blandly pleasant to strangers was tedious and exhausting. Nothing in her life had prepared her for this, and she couldn't say she wasn't a fan. Thankfully, her etiquette lesson covered *how to not embarrass the king in social situations*.

Too bad it wasn't how to enjoy yourself.

Was this what she had to look forward to? More tedious social events stretching out from here until the end of time? Baris didn't enjoy these things. He had confessed as much to her. Surely, she'd be able to direct her own schedule and avoid these things once she was queen. If she was queen. The concept still didn't feel real.

She got the overwhelming impression that while Trouble didn't particularly care for these things, he did enjoy spying on people.

"You're such a nosy parker," she muttered, feeding him a bit of fruit. He really enjoyed the food. The spread was impressive. There was a refreshment table stacked high with confections. Waiters circulated with trays, each bearing a delicacy more tempting than the last. "No offense, but you're getting heavy."

Trouble launched himself upward, heading for a perch under the dome.

"That wasn't a weight jab," she said. He was an extra five or six pounds that strained her back and left her shoulders sore. She'd have to figure out what to do about that. Most Arcosians carried their karu around on their shoulders, but Lenore didn't think that was practical for her.

Through the bond, Lenore understood that he had not been offended. He wanted a better vantage to watch people. Like she said, nosy.

Lenore spotted Nia and did her best to disappear into the crowd. It should have been easy, considering that everyone was a good foot taller than her. There had to be some advantage to being little, but no. Nia spotted Lenore immediately. A frosty smile spread across her face as she made her way across the ballroom to Lenore.

Fantastic.

“Congratulations on your bond,” Nia said. Her gaze swept over Lenore, pausing on her hands. A small smirk played at the corners of her mouth.

“Thank you,” Lenore replied cautiously. She had not been impressed with the woman’s haughty attitude at their last encounter. Or this time, for that matter.

“Where is your karu? I understand that the newly bonded are seldom apart.”

Lenore glanced up to Trouble. Nia followed her gaze. “Impressive,” she said. “And how are you finding the bond?”

“At first, I thought it’d be weird, like talking to myself, but it’s not like that at all.”

“How fascinating. Pardon me, I must speak with someone,” Nia said, her false smile never faltering, even as she walked away.

Lenore got a very strong impression from Trouble of a tree snake.

I totally agree.

Not long after, Baris found her, sidling up alongside her. “I am pleased to see you. I hope you are enjoying yourself.”

Lenore tossed him a sharp look. She wasn’t sure if he was joking or not. “I understand why Prince Vekele and Princess Sarah are rarely at court.”

His gaze swept over her outfit, and the warmth drained away from his expression, leaving a blankness that startled her.

“What’s wrong?”

Without answering, Baris held her elbow and steered her out of the ballroom and down a corridor. He moved stiffly, like he was holding back anger. She didn't understand, but she didn't fight him, allowing herself to be guided. With every step, the light grew dimmer and shadows gathered.

“Are you doing that?” she asked. He did not answer.

When they were alone and cloaked in shadows, he roughly grabbed her wrist and held up her hand, displaying the claw caps. The silver chains jingled with the motion.

“What is wrong is that you thought it a good idea to wear this vulgarity!”

BARIS

“Excuse me?” Lenore snatched her arm away. “I’m wearing the jewelry you sent me.”

“I did no such thing. I would remember if I sent you that.”

Hidden by shadows, voices still carried. They kept their voices low, but the angry tones could not be disguised.

Lenore took a step back, her eyes wide. It pained him that she would move away from him like that. It mortified him that she should be frightened. This situation was wrong.

“We are misunderstanding one another,” he said. “The sharpened claw caps you wear are for intimacy.”

“Intimacy,” she repeated.

“Female Arcosians have claws. Males do not,” he quickly explained. She bobbed her head in understanding. “When a female is pleased by her partner, she loses control and marks them. It is a mark worn with pride. Sometimes claws are brittle or broken, requiring an aid.”

“Is that why you get all—” she rolled her eyes and made a moaning noise, “when I scratch you with my fingernails?”

“It is pleasurable for the male, as well.”

“And these are—” She held up a hand and wiggled her fingers. Then, the color drained from her face, leaving her a pale beige instead of her normal peachy warmth. “Oh my God, these are sex toys. Why would you send me a sex toy along with this outfit? I thought these were meant to be worn together. Baris!”

He nearly laughed at the absurdity of the situation. He had been awfully forward with his desire for Lenore, but he had not been that forward. Though he could not deny imagining what it would be like to wear her mark.

“I did not send you the sharpened claw caps,” he said.

Lenore pressed her lips together. He recognized it as her thinking expression. “These are too nice to be a mix-up.

Someone sent me these.”

He reached for her hand. She flinched away. He ignored the hurt because it was deserved. His words had been harsh, and his reaction unwarranted.

There was some truth to Vekele’s comment that he acted rashly.

“I apologize for my words,” he said. “I want to believe that I am a patient and considerate male, but my actions prove me otherwise. I act rashly when I am upset.” That was not adequate. It was merely a start. “I would very much like for you to wear these for me, to leave your mark on me. Nothing would give me greater pleasure to bear the evidence that I am your male, yours alone. When I saw you wearing them in public, for anyone to see...I am not proud of myself.”

She studied his face for a long moment, like she could read the truth in his heart. She could. It was right there, laid bare and exposed for her.

“So you *do* know how to apologize,” she said.

“I am not very skilled. I have not had much practice.”

“Oh, I have a feeling you’ll get plenty of practice.” Warmth returned to her voice. She placed her hand in his.

Baris examined the claw caps. He had not sent them, but if he had, this was very near what he would have selected. “These are superb quality. This was not an inexpensive mistake.”

“Deliberate?” she asked. “Someone sent it hoping I wouldn’t recognize them and embarrass you. That’s like the one thing I was meant not to do tonight.”

He turned her hand over, exposing her wrist, and placed a kiss there. “That’s not true. You are meant to bring me joy.”

“Happy to help,” she replied, her tone dry in the way that meant she was amused. “It’s always about you, huh?”

“The burden of the crown.” He disliked that someone knew him well enough to anticipate how he would react to the claw caps—badly—and knew to have them delivered alongside other items so that Lenore would not think twice about them.

The situation had been engineered to cause a scene for whatever reason.

He had a few candidates in mind.

“Let us remove these,” he said, unclasping the band around her wrist and removing the caps one by one. “And save them for later.”

LENORE

The party was a mistake. She shouldn't have come. Once they returned from their conversation in the corridor, Baris went to speak with some guest, then another, and Lenore was on her own. She didn't have a single friend at the party, and the people she did know, well, she was fairly certain they despised her.

It was fine. Well, not fine. It was awkward. Strangers made chit-chat, but Lenore couldn't relax. She had already made one huge blunder that night with the claw caps, and people noticed. Nia noticed, if the smirk was anything to go by.

This was intolerable. She had lived nearly two and a half years completely submersed in another culture, and she still made such basic blunders. She wore a sex toy to a palace soiree, for crying out loud. And it wasn't *that* kind of party. Not that she had experience with those. Not that she had to explain herself.

She was out of sorts. Off-balance. She wanted to go home. She wanted the familiar reassurance of the coffee machine gurgling away on the counter, her father muttering about the cost of gas, and her mother listening to the radio for weather reports. It was a scene she hadn't experienced since she started university, but she swore it felt like only yesterday.

She always liked the potential of mornings. Some days were calm and leisurely, measured with cups of coffee rather than minutes. On other days, she felt herself winding up, ready to launch into the fray and get shit done. Anything could happen. She liked mornings with Baris. Somehow, between groaning as he rolled out of bed and arriving at the breakfast table, he transformed from a groggy sleeping mess to annoyingly chipper. She liked it even more when his hair was messy.

Baris felt like home. He never filled the quiet with idle chatter, instead focusing on preparing her coffee just the way she liked it with three sugars—don't judge—and no milk. If she particularly liked a dish, that item had a way of reappearing. He paid attention, and she had to admit that having the most

influential person in this sector of the galaxy pay attention to you went to a girl's head.

Enough to kid herself that she could be a queen? She couldn't even manage this party. It'd only get worse once the engagement was announced, which would be soon. The realization of that made her queasy. Once the engagement was public, there was no going back. She had to be certain. When she was alone with Baris, when it was just them—no cameras, no politics—there was no question that he was the one. She loved him. Dreaded imagining a life without him.

It was just everything else that came with him that made her stomach ache.

Lenore sat at a table near the entrance, overlooked as people entered and forgotten by the waitstaff, which suited her. Baris would give a speech about Raelle's years of invaluable service, blah blah blah, she'd clap, and then go home.

"You're not having a good time." Lydia slung herself down into the chair next to Lenore. "I don't know why people invite you to these things."

"I assure you, I have no idea. How did you swing an invitation?"

"I," Lydia said, pressing a hand to her chest and speaking with authority, "am fun at parties."

"Your boss made you come to mingle," Lenore said.

"To liven up the place, I think. The general audience seems to have a lot of gray and silver going on up top."

The crowd was older but not that old, in Lenore's opinion.

"Oh, you're a baby. Everyone looks old to you."

"Have you taken a look at that sculpture? I haven't been able to get close."

"It's a gift from the king," Lenore said. Baris had mentioned that he selected a piece from the royal collection to give to Raelle.

"Is it famous?"

“You’re the one who’s into arts and culture. You tell me.”

“You don’t have a drink. Come on.” Lydia pulled Lenore to her feet and headed for the nearest drinks tray.

Lenore didn’t put up any resistance and accepted a tall, fluted glass. The taste was cool and tart, meant to be sipped at a slow pace. She was grateful to have a friend at the party. It didn’t take long for Lenore to notice how Lydia swayed on her feet and her words slurred.

“How much have you had to drink?” she asked.

“Just this and another.” Lydia drained her glass and tried to set it down on a collection tray, missing the tray entirely. She giggled, trying again but not getting better results.

“Two of these?” Lenore tapped her glass to avoid confusion. Lydia confirmed.

This wasn’t right. Something was wrong. Lydia was acting way too drunk for only two glasses. Actually, she had been fairly sober until a minute ago.

Lenore took another sip of her wine, finding it mild and not strong enough to get Lydia drunk that quickly. “Let’s get you some water.”

“Look at those feathers,” Lydia said, rushing to a woman who wore a vivid green gown and white plumes in her hair.

Lenore grabbed Lydia, but not before she snatched a feather from the woman’s hair. Lydia clutched her prize, utterly pleased with herself.

“Sorry. This was stuck on your dress,” Lenore apologized, taking the feather and holding it out as a peace offering. Lydia gave a cry of disappointment. The woman accepted the errant feather with a confused expression. Lenore apologized again. When she turned around, Lydia was gone.

No. Not gone. Lydia cut through the crowd with purpose as she headed to the sculpture.

Stumbling...

Lenore stood paralyzed with confusion, watching Lydia stagger forward, tripping over her own feet, and also watching from a higher vantage. Trouble's point of view. Information flowed at a dizzying rate. She held out her arms like that could stabilize her or freeze time. Her skin itched and burned like there was something inside her that needed to come out to put a stop to this.

But nothing could stop this disaster.

A figure bumped into Lydia, sending her forward as her limbs flailed. She fell forward, crashing into the sculpture.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



LENORE

“YOU KNOW, alien jail isn’t too different from Earth jail,” Lenore said, desperate to calm Lydia. Currently, her friend hung on the cell bars, wailing and demanding her phone call and a lawyer. Telling her to quiet down only made her shout that she knew her rights. Being forcibly escorted out of the ballroom by very unfriendly, grim-faced guards and tossed into a holding cell had that effect on her. Go figure.

Lydia fell silent, which was a miracle. Her eyes went wide. Wider. Her pupils were pretty damn wide already. Now, her mouth hung open. “No way.”

“Way.”

“Professor Lenore Macintosh McCoy von Leonardstein—”

“That is not even close to my name.”

“What secrets are you keeping from me? Are you secretly a badass?” Excitement crept into her voice, the sorrow of their detention completely forgotten.

“I’ll tell you if you come and sit down.” Lenore patted the bench next to her.

Lydia gave her a skeptical look like her offer was a trap—spoilers, it was—and pushed away from the bars and sat next to Lenore. Trouble immediately climbed into her lap.

“Who’s a pretty boy? You,” she cooed.

Lenore let them be, feeling Trouble’s sense of smug satisfaction as he basked in Lydia’s adoration. The distraction didn’t last for long. “What do you think she did? Probably something boring like didn’t pay a parking ticket and got a bench warrant issued. Jury duty? Yeah, that makes sense. You didn’t call that number on the card, and the county had to send the sheriff after you.”

“Breaking and entering, if you must know.”

Lydia gasped in pure delight. “No! Were you part of a gang of international art thieves? Is that how you paid for college? It is, isn’t it? Did you have a cool name? The Doctor. Oh, no! Your professor had a system to count cards and recruited his students. Then it went wrong, and you had to break in to steal video footage and...”

“I was a kid,” Lenore said, speaking over Lydia. She could never hope to be as interesting as Lydia’s imagination.

“You all were, honey. Just babies.”

“I was nine. It was summer, and my friends weren’t the best influence. Looking back, yeah, they were future delinquents, but they were cool.” And they liked her for some reason. Well, her Nintendo back in the days when not everyone had a console had a lot to do with it. “Anyway, there was a house on the street that sat empty for a long time. The old lady who lived there went into a nursing facility, and I think she died. Maybe. It was empty and we were bored. So we climbed in through a window.”

“Wow. What did you find?” Lydia’s posture slumped and she leaned against Lenore’s shoulder.

“Mostly stacks and stacks of magazines. No one had been there in a long time. A neighbor saw us and called the cops.”

“The snitch. That busybody ruined your career as a professional cat burglar.”

“Alas,” Lenore said dryly. “Anyway, the cop took us all to the station, let us sit in a cell for an hour to put the fear of God in us, and it worked. I’ve been a law-abiding citizen ever since.”

“You’re so square.” Lydia yawned, her eyes fluttering closed. Within minutes, she was asleep.

Unable to move, Lenore waited. She suspected that Lydia’s drink had been spiked. A drug was the only thing that explained Lydia’s rapid change in behavior. She needed to collect a sample, but she couldn’t do that on her own. Until a medic showed up, all she could do was wait.

And think. From what she saw, Lydia tripped, either over someone’s foot or her own. From Trouble’s vantage, she was

pushed.

This was bad.

Lydia's blunder—accidental or not—was a scandal in the making. No one would care if Lydia's drink had been spiked. She destroyed a priceless work of art, and Lenore was right there, caught on camera with her delinquent friend. Lenore groaned, realizing that she totally had a friend type. Fun and reckless. She made the same bad decisions now that she made when she was nine. She learned nothing from her stint in the clink.

Lenore might have laughed at the absurdity of the situation, but she knew Raelle would use this as leverage to keep her away from Baris. Even if it was an accident, she was right there next to Lydia. Her unsavory connections would reflect poorly on the crown, and Lenore brought more trouble than she was worth.

Maybe she had a point.

Finally, a guard passed by the cell. "We need a medic," she called out.

A guard ambled closer. She didn't recognize the man. "Are you in medical distress?"

"She's been drugged," Lenore said. Lydia still slept on her shoulder.

"She's drunk."

"Drugged," Lenore repeated, "and we need to collect a blood sample."

The guard snorted, clearly unmoved. "Is she in medical distress?"

Lenore felt so tempted to pull the *do you know who I am* card. She'd be an absolute asshole if she did, but it might work. Or name drop. Kenth could take care of this if Lenore asked. Being friendly with the captain of the royal guards had some benefits.

Or it might make the situation worse. The guard scanned her ID chip, so he knew who she was. Obviously, he didn't care.

Also, there was no way Kenth didn't know she was being detained. The fact that the captain hadn't shown up spoke to the seriousness of the situation. Lydia vandalized a priceless piece of art.

Fear tactics it was.

"She could have an allergic reaction to whatever was in her drink," Lenore said. "Do you know what happens to humans when we have an allergic reaction? It's not pretty. Our throats swell closed. We turn red and then purple and we die. Horribly. Clawing at our throats. Are you going to explain to Kenth that a human prisoner died under your care because you wouldn't call for a damn medic?"

The guard rolled all his eyes as he left, and Lenore had no idea if her gambit worked.

BARIS

Silence had fallen over the crowd. Guards escorted Lenore and her friend out of the ballroom. Everything in Baris demanded that he wrap her in his wings and shield her from critical eyes, but he had to deal with the cause of the problem.

The culprit had not been subtle. Baris would have spotted the pattern earlier, but his illness prevented him from thinking clearly and piecing it together.

“Find Des. We need to speak. Bring Lady Nia along as well,” Baris said to Kenth. He wasn’t sure how involved Nia was, but he wouldn’t be surprised.

“Go with her,” he said to his karu. Then, to Raelle, he said, “We should discuss this elsewhere.”

Noise returned. Guards cleared a space, pushing back curious onlookers. Music covered the murmurs of the crowd. The curator of the royal collection arrived to clean up the broken sculpture. Hopefully, it could be salvaged.

Outside the ballroom, Baris found a quiet receiving room.

“Have a seat. This may take some time,” he said, escorting Raelle to a chair. They did not have to wait long before Kenth returned with the Frostwing siblings, Des and Nia, his karu, and a compliment of guards. Des wore an expression of confusion and Nia simply looked annoyed.

“I don’t understand what is happening,” Raelle said.

“Perhaps Des would care to explain before he is taken into custody for treason,” Baris said.

The confused expression remained. “Pardon, Your Majesty?”

Kenth seized Des, twisting his arms behind his back and securing them with a cuff.

“There’s been some sort of misunderstanding,” Des said.

“Unhand him,” Raelle demanded. “What is he accused of? What proof do you have?”

Baris stood before his aide, the male he had trusted with the most intimate details of his life. “Your grandson was a busy hatchling today. He sent these to Lenore, knowing she would not recognize their significance. I can only assume it was to cause embarrassment.” Baris removed the sharpened claw caps from an inner pocket.

“I never,” Des said, shaking his head in denial.

“You knew the outfit would be delivered for the party. You arranged it.”

“A coincidence is hardly treason,” Des replied.

“Considering that you drugged the human female, then shoved her when she was unstable, causing her to damage a unique piece of art from the royal collection, yes.”

The pleading expression dropped from Des’ face. “Prove it.”

“My karu saw it.” Baris gestured to the karu perched above the door. It was more difficult to say how he knew the human female had been drugged. His karu did not see the act but it was knowledge passed between the mated karu.

Des did not deny the act, merely the evidence. “Impossible. Your bond is too new. It cannot be strong enough.”

That might be true of another, but Baris had decades of experience with the bond. While his previous symbiote had done its best to destroy him as it died, his body remembered the symbiotic relationship. This was as easy as breathing.

Baris rolled his shoulders and unleashed his wings. The familiar burning sensation spread from the center of his back and along his shoulder blades. Despite not having summoned his wings in more than two years, his body acted on instinct. The wings flexed. The construct was not as substantial as his previous pair had been, he could tell from the lighter weight, but they were solid enough to move the air.

Raelle gasped. “They’re lovely, Your Majesty.”

Wings stretched, spreading wide and gathering the shadows. The symbiote swam to the surface of his skin, gathering in his

cupped hands. He felt the darkness pool there, like a pliable material that would gain solidity once he shaped it.

So he did.

Working on instinct, as this had never happened to him before, he placed his hand over the darkness and pulled. The shadows stretched, becoming solid, as he shaped the mass. There was a limit. Baris felt his energy rapidly deplete as he forged a dagger made of shadow. A surge of power came from a new source, not overwhelming but steady. His karu. Little Miss, as Lenore called her. He got the distinct impression that she approved of the moniker.

The dagger solidified with Little Miss' support. This new ability was unexpected. Abilities varied from person to person, from symbiote to symbiote. He hadn't expected to gain an entirely new ability. While it drained him now, he knew it would become easier with practice.

"Do you think this is sharp enough to slice your traitorous throat?" Baris pressed the blade to Des' neck. It might not be solid enough to cut, but it'd hurt.

Raelle protested, but Kenth placed a hand on the female, keeping her from rushing to her grandson's aid. Nia remained silent.

"Y-yes," the male answered.

"Now, explain why you sabotaged the portal to Earth."

"It was an accident," Des said quickly. "I didn't mean to hurt anyone. I wanted the machine to fail at the end."

"Why would you want that?" Baris already knew, but he wanted Des to say it out loud. Having reached the limit of his energy reserves, the wings dissolved. The dagger lasted for a moment longer before dissolving like wisps of smoke.

"To poison the relationship with the Khargals," Des said as if it were obvious. "You were too willing to accept a queen that would bring a trade agreement. I applied a little stress to the situation, and you act rather rashly when stressed, Your Majesty. The ambassador was a particularly annoying male, don't you agree? Once you lost patience, talks would end, and

you'd be forced to accept an Arcosian queen. All I had to do was wait."

That was an accurate, if unflattering, assessment of his personality. Vekele had been correct in that Baris' rashness would haunt him. "Yes, your methods were effective," Baris said.

"Why, Des?" Raelle asked. "Why would you do such a thing?"

The male's eyes flashed, his true nature coming through. "You've given your life in service to the crown, and for what? A party and some trinkets? Your name carved on a wall. For years, he's relied on you, and now he's tossing you aside. He couldn't even be bothered to select a gift. It's insulting."

It was a good story, but Baris wasn't convinced. "All this because you felt I insulted your grandmother's honor."

"Your house is an insult," Des snapped, then laughed. "Frostwing is as old and noble as Shadowmark. Older. You know, it's ill fortune that you have the crown. Frostwings have always been cursed with shit luck."

Baris knew the legend. Mariol Frostwing, the three-day king. Crowned under conditions that were suspicious at best, Mariol defended his claim against two rival houses. He successfully faced one opponent and would have repelled the second, the Shadowmark, if not for a series of broken equipment, bad weather, and illness. "That was centuries ago."

"So my family must always beg for scraps from House Shadowmark?" Des asked.

There was no reasoning with him. Baris had heard enough.

"I want to retire," Raelle said, her voice patient. "I'm tired. I deserve to rest."

"You deserve to be queen!"

"That would never happen."

"It would if he mated Nia, which he would have if it wasn't for that human," Des said, his voice full of contempt. "They're engaged, you know."

Raelle gasped in surprise. “Your Majesty, that’s—”

“A phenomenally bad choice,” Des said.

“Enough,” Baris said, cutting off the male. “Take him into custody.”

Raelle tugged on Baris’ arm. “What will happen to him?”

“He’s lucky no one was killed, but he must stand trial for the sabotage. The courts will decide his fate.”

An eternity later, Baris completed the necessary tasks. Des was escorted into a holding cell. Video footage from attending media was seized. Palace security footage was erased. Reporters who expected to chronicle the details of a society event—who attended, what they wore, and so on—got a far more exciting story.

Baris issued a brief statement—an unfortunate accident—to quell reports of rampaging humans ruining the councilor’s party. The truth, in this instance, was unnecessary, and he wished to avoid shaming the Frostwing house. Raelle returned to the party, supporting the fiction that the incident was an accident.

Nia’s communications and messages would have to be examined in case she had colluded with her brother, but that was a task for tomorrow.

Finally, after an eternity, Baris went to Lenore.

LENORE

An eternity later, Lenore was still in jail, and Lydia snoozed and drooled on her shoulder. Fun times.

The longer she sat, the more she worried. Not that she expected Baris to ride in and save the day but come on. She felt ignored. Out of sight, out of mind. And the longer she sat out of Baris' sight, the more he might realize how much easier his life would be if she stayed out of sight. Not that she feared he'd lock her away like some fairytale villain, but...

No buts. Absolutely no one was getting locked in a tower.

Forgotten in a jail cell, though, that seemed more and more likely.

Trouble sent assuring calm, wordless and soothing.

"I don't know why you're so chill. You'll be locked in a tower, too," she muttered. Still, knowing she wasn't alone helped. Her baseless fears were just that, baseless, but stress weighed on her. Work kept her too busy to worry, which was a terribly unhealthy way to cope, and now that she couldn't keep busy, she had nothing. The constant media coverage, the academy board's not-so-subtle suggestion that she quit, the open dislike from Lady Raelle, and now this. Anyone would be freaking out.

Doors opened at the end of the corridor, and voices drifted down. Lenore couldn't see what was happening, but it sounded big. Lots of footsteps and voices.

Lenore shook Lydia awake. "Leave me alone," she complained.

"We've got company."

Guards marched a man past their cell. Lenore recognized him as Baris' assistant, Des. The man sneered at Lenore as he passed, malice written all over his face.

Soon, Baris was at the cell door with Harol and Kenth. Baris looked furious.

This was it. The rebuking. An important cultural treasure was destroyed. Scandal. Demands for her head, locking her in a tower, and so on. Basically, the whammy.

Lenore stood, blocking Lydia from view with her body, and prepared for the worst. “It wasn’t Lydia’s fault. Someone drugged her.”

“Are you well?” Baris asked, pulling her into an embrace.

She stiffened, not expecting that, then melted with relief.

“You should not be here, but it was safest to remove you from the situation. The culprit has already confessed,” Baris said.

“That man—”

“Yes,” Baris confirmed. “Des was also responsible for the failure of the portal.”

Wow. That was a big deal. Major. “You don’t sound terribly upset.”

“It was my greatest wish to keep you. Fate answered. Foolishly, I did not specify how,” Baris said. Well, now she was blushing. “Will you allow Harol to do his job since I rudely dragged him away from dinner?”

Lenore stepped aside. Harol was already on the job, unpacking the med kit and snapping on gloves. “What makes you believe she was drugged?”

“Hello,” Lydia said, her voice pitched low and sultry. She batted her lashes.

“Did she injure her eyes? Why is she blinking rapidly?” Harol asked, glancing at Lenore like she had a clue.

“Stop flirting with my boss,” Lenore said, poking Lydia in the shoulder.

“You didn’t tell me your boss was a silver fox.” She growled playfully and raked imaginary claws in the air.

Harol looked terrified, like he wanted to bolt, but only a strong sense of his ethical duty as a physician kept him in the cell. At least, that was what Lenore deduced from the way he visibly gulped, and all his eyes went wide.

“So erratic behavior. Lowered inhibitions. That makes me suspect her drink was spiked,” Lenore said, breaking the silence. “It happened very quickly.”

Using a lancet, Harol pricked Lydia’s finger for a blood sample. He nodded as the results appeared on the tablet’s screen. “A common enough drug. I can neutralize it.” From the med kit, he produced a nasal spray.

Lydia sputtered as it was administered, trying to bat his hands away.

“You do not have to remain for this,” Harol said. “I will return this one to her residence.”

“We have matters to discuss,” Baris said, steering Lenore out of the cell.

There it was, the whammy.

The holding cell was on the other side of the palace from the private residence. “You are not dressed for the cold. We will take the tunnels,” Baris said, leading her down a stairwell and into a service tunnel.

“I had no idea these were here.”

“Few do, other than maintenance and the guards.”

Silence fell between them. This was not the companionable silence during their walks in the garden. Tension hung thick in the air. The longer they went without speaking, the more Lenore became convinced whatever Baris wanted to discuss was not good.

Trouble kept sending tendrils of comfort, which had the opposite effect. When she didn’t respond with her own soothing vibes, he just got louder. Her head felt crowded and loud.

The tunnels emptied into another stairwell, which brought them into the wing reserved for the royal family.

“We should call off the wedding,” she blurted out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



LENORE

BARIS STOOD STRAIGHTER, like he was preparing for a fight.

“We will discuss that when we are alone,” he said, marching down the corridor. He held open the door to her room and clenched his jaw hard enough that she heard teeth grinding as she passed by.

Yeah. Lenore wanted to claw back the words, to say she didn’t mean it, but the damage was done. Baris was pissed, and they were totally going to fight.

Lenore sank onto the sofa, pulling a throw blanket over her. Trouble settled on her lap, butting his head against her hands. She felt his distress. His unhappiness was sharp with a strange echo that wasn’t quite him but also was. It was lighter, laced with concern. That had to be Little Miss. Beyond that was another voice, thick with alarm and exhaustion. Baris. All those voices, wanting her to calm down, expressing sympathy, and demanding answers, spoke in a jumble, the feedback amplifying itself until she couldn’t hear anything else.

It was overwhelming.

“I’m sorry,” Lenore said to Trouble. “It’s too crowded in my head. I can’t think. Could you and Little Miss go hang out in the aviary?”

Concern and affirmation came through the bond.

“A new bond can be deafening,” Baris said, understanding in his voice. He opened the balcony doors for Trouble and Little Miss.

The noise in her head eased.

“Thank fuck,” she muttered, closing her eyes and tilting her head backward to rest on the back of the sofa. She felt the sofa cushion dip as Baris sat next to her. “I should explain.”

“I would appreciate that.”

Her eyes remained closed. It was easier to speak that way. “My feelings for you haven’t changed. I love you.”

“I am pleased to hear that.”

“Being with you is easy. Fantastic. It’s everything else that is hard. A lot has changed so quickly, and the stress is getting to me. There’s a spotlight on you, and now it’s on me. The media is always in my face. I can’t even open the drapes because I’m worried a camera drone will take pictures.” She raised a hand to prevent him from protesting that the palace security net would never allow a drone to get too close. “Don’t tell me it can’t happen. There are photos of me in the clinic, in the city, just doing everyday things. I’m not paranoid.”

“You are not.”

“I wore a sex toy to a society event,” she said, still mortified.

“A misunderstanding.”

“It’ll keep happening. There’s so much I don’t know, and I don’t know where the gaps are. I’ll keep making blunders, keep embarrassing the crown, you and—”

“Impossible,” he said.

“Lady Raelle hates me, which means all the politicians won’t like me.”

“The approval of a politician is not as important as you believe.”

Lenore frowned, sitting up straight, and turning to Baris. “Be serious. This impacts the mood of the court. You have big plans, *expensive* plans, which means you’ll need the support of those politicians and the members of the court to make it happen. You need a queen who can help you. I’ll just make your job harder. Our engagement isn’t public yet. If we break it off now, we can save face. Do you even have that concept, avoiding embarrassment?”

Baris cupped the side of her face with his right hand and wore the sweetest expression of concern. His two front eyes bore down on her, a vivid blue and reassuring. “No.”

“Baris—” She wasn’t sure what she hoped to accomplish with that.

“My duties are already difficult. The court is fickle. What charms them today bores them tomorrow. There is nothing to be gained by trying to please them. I am certain, however, that my life without you would be a misery.”

He had a smooth reply for every one of her concerns. He wasn’t listening to her at all.

“The academy threatened to kick me out,” she said.

He pulled back, the sweet expression gone. “Explain.”

“I was reviewed by a panel. They said I wasn’t serious, and they had *concerns*, and maybe the academy wasn’t the best place for me.” Hurt crept into her voice. She hadn’t spoken of the review with anyone since it happened, and now it all came tumbling out. “All I’ve ever wanted to be was a doctor. My first memory is wrapping my dolls up with gauze bandages. All my knowledge and experience didn’t vanish when that portal grabbed me, but my medical license sure did. How dare those stuffed shirts tell me I’m not committed, that my personal life is interfering with my practice. And I know the only reason they agreed to let me take the exam was because you twisted their arm.”

“I plucked a few tail feathers to get my way,” Baris agreed. “I will speak with them and make it clear—”

“No. That’d only make it worse,” she said quickly. The review board’s contempt for her primitive human medicine had been obvious. Siccing Baris on them wouldn’t win her any allies.

“I had no idea you had such troubles.”

Silence fell between them. It was prickly and contentious, ready to turn into an explosive argument with the wrong word. Best to remain quiet then.

“Why did you fail to share your struggles with me?” Baris asked.

“I didn’t want to bother you.” It was a lame excuse, but ultimately true. The person who should have supported Lenore

in the past hadn't. Her ex started screwing around the moment she couldn't be a full-service housewife.

Oh no. This was that emotional baggage Lydia kept talking about. She could bury it down deep— her first impulse— or deal with it like an adult.

Fine, even though it felt like eating a giant plate of overcooked broccoli.

"That's not entirely true," she said. "My ex left when things got difficult. I guess I'm worried you'll do the same, so I've been keeping all this to myself."

Baris' brows pulled together in a scowl. "It is fortunate Earth is so far away, or I would have a conversation with that male."

"A murderous conversation?"

"Is there another kind?"

Lenore laughed, the tension easing in her chest. Talking about problems like an adult actually helped. Amazing.

"Perhaps it would be prudent to pause your studies until after the wedding," Baris said.

"Absolutely not. I did that once, and I won't do it again." She wouldn't back down on that.

"Yes, your former mate did not honor his half of your bargain. Another reason for a conversation."

"You remember that?" Lenore was impressed. He had a fever at the time when she shared that tidbit.

"I remember everything," he replied smoothly.

"I might not be able to give you an heir. There hasn't been a human-Arcosian pregnancy yet. Heaven knows people are trying. What if it's not possible?"

"It is. Humans are known to be compatible with other species."

That much was true. Lenore read a report that claimed some Khargals had been on Earth for centuries and bred with humans. There were human-alien hybrids on Earth, and no one

knew. She said, “But what if we’re not? I’m thirty-six. Pregnancy might not be so easy for me.”

“Fortunately, I happen to know a very skilled human physician.” He grinned like that was a joke to him.

“Be serious, Baris,” she said.

“The royal family contains a plethora of cousins. Someone very wise suggested I pick the least horrible one and make them my heir.”

Well, that might actually work.

“I know I won’t be able to have a medical practice after the wedding. I’m not naive,” she said, and that’s where her imagination failed. “I don’t like parties. Tonight was terrible, even before the brouhaha. I’m not a social butterfly. I won’t be that sort of queen. I’m not sure what sort I will be.”

“What do you want?”

That was the first time anyone had asked her.

“I want you, but it’s not just you, is it? I have to take the whole royal package.” She sighed. “Your proposal was impulsive. I accepted before I really thought it through. Maybe it would be smart to call the whole thing off.”

“No.” His tone was firm and brooked no argument. He cradled her face in his hands and pressed his forehead to hers. “It does not matter how many times you suggest it; the answer will always be no.”

“Baris—”

“It is my turn to speak. I was impulsive, and I have no regrets. I do not care if it is difficult or uncomfortable. I refuse to let you go.”

“But—”

“No,” he repeated. “You are my queen. You are *mine*. I adore you. I will not let you go.”

“I believe you.” She did. She really did.

“I am impulsive. It is a character flaw. You will have to learn to accept me as I am,” he said.

She couldn't tell if he was teasing her or not, so she opened her eyes.

The full force of those blue eyes stared down at her.

Not teasing. Utterly serious.

“A long engagement,” he said. “Royal weddings are a spectacle and take time to coordinate. I will also need to hire new staff as my aide has been arrested.”

“Rather rude of Des to get himself arrested.”

“You will finish your studies and pass this exam.”

“I'll crush it.” She would.

“Would bribery or strategic imprisonment help? I'm not above abusing my position if it pleases you.”

Now, he definitely was teasing.

“Threatening to be a tyrant is very sweet, but I need to do this on my own,” she said, pressing a kiss on his lips.

“The royal motto: when in doubt, tyranny.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



LENORE

SIX MONTHS Later

HALF A YEAR WAS BARELY enough time to prepare for a royal wedding. The first thing was to hire a wedding planner and new aides. Des' former job was split into three positions: one to handle the public relations; one to manage the social schedule; and the other to handle the administration. More work was delegated instead of being filtered through one person. The more Lenore learned of how Des ran the office, the more she was reminded of a spider in the center of a web.

Lenore got her own assistant, a cheery woman who handled the social calendar—*Lady Lenore sends her regrets that she is unable to attend*—and clued Lenore in when she was about to make a blunder. *That color is associated with the dead and perhaps not the best choice for photos with the media.* Invaluable.

While communications between Nia and her brother to coordinate social encounters with Baris were found, no evidence of sabotage or treason was found. She was released from custody but remained under surveillance.

Lady Raelle retired from court life but remained in Farhaven. The scandal regarding Des' arrest and subsequent trial gave her a new social luster, transforming her from a stuffy retired politician into someone worth gossiping about. Her dinner parties were the most sought-after invitation in the city, a gathering of upcoming political movers and shakers. And the gossips, of course.

Lydia lost her job with Nia. These things happen, especially when your boss is spiteful. Fortunately, a competitor scooped Lydia up for a higher salary. Being a close confidant to the queen-to-be had its benefits.

Lenore crushed her medical exams—of course she did—and earned her medical license. She was now Doctor Kelley on

Earth and on Arcos. She was herself once more.

The official announcement of the engagement started the ball rolling on the wedding, and it did not stop until now. Right now. Under a marquee on the lawn of a grand country house, Gracemeadow, owned by Baris.

The crowd waiting to witness the ceremony was formidable—nobility, extended members of the royal family, influential members of court, administrators, generals, planetary governors, delegates from neighboring kingdoms, and even the Khargal ambassador. There might have been more karu present than people. Prince Vekele and Princess Sarah were present, of course, as were Lydia and Harol. What was a wedding celebration without friends?

Sarah did her best to keep Lenore from losing her breakfast.

Lenore's hands shook. She desperately wanted to wipe her sweaty palms, but the only cloth nearby was the silk gown she wore. Even she knew that was a bad idea.

Sarah handed Lenore a tissue.

"Thank you," she whispered. At least the rain had stopped.

"It is as hot as donkey balls, thanks to the humidity," Sarah said.

"I shouldn't be nervous. I've been married before." No matter how many times Lenore repeated it, it would never be true. Her courthouse ceremony simply did not compare to a lavish spectacle.

An attendant announced that it was time.

BARIS

Baris met his queen under an archway covered in fragrant blossoms.

The rest of the galaxy fell away. His queen was stunning. She was always stunning, but especially today. Her eyes shined, fine and luminous. Her complexion was a soft peach, perhaps a bit pinker due to the heat, but marvelous, nonetheless. She wore a feather mantle, kept short and thin for the summer, black feathers covering her neck and shoulders. Her gown was a pale cream that faded into pale pinks at the hem. When she moved, it was like watching the blossoms dance in a summer breeze.

Little Miss felt the same, proud and happy. Excited. There was something else. He couldn't tell through the bond; it was murky, as if she deliberately kept that bit of information hidden. His previous karu had been open, a constant flood of emotion and impression. No secret could survive that onslaught. Little Miss was perceptive and shrewd. Age and experience made her an interesting companion but not forthright.

A mystery for another time. He had more pleasant matters.

Music played. The crowd held its breath as they approached the officiant at the far end of the aisle, arm in arm. His wings were out, as were Lenore's. Hers were softer, more delicate than his, but twice as lovely. A thick layer of flower petals created a fragrant carpet. Each step stirred up the sweet scent of fresh blossoms.

The officiant tied a black ribbon around their joined hands. There were pledges of devotion and fidelity. He meant every word.

Lenore repeated the pledge. His queen. His friend.

The ceremony neared the end. Lenore insisted on adding a piece from the human custom.

“My treasure,” he whispered, claiming her lips with his own. She melted into him. When they parted, he pressed his forehead to hers. They held the embrace, tied together by ribbon and by devotion. He was a fortunate male.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



LENORE

THE RECEPTION WAS STILL GOING strong when Lenore and Baris made their escape. The evening had been chaotic and joyous, filled with laughter, music, and dancing.

Finally alone in their suite, Baris pulled Lenore to him. The black ribbon still tied their hands together. Tradition dictated that it remain until they completed the mating.

They undressed each other. This was familiar, but the ribbon made it a challenge. Lenore wore a strapless dress specifically for that reason. Baris removed each item with wonder, kissing and licking the newly exposed flesh until fabric pooled around her ankles. When only her panties remained, he kneeled before sliding them down.

With a groan, Baris parted her curls with his free hand and pressed his mouth to her. His tongue did *things*. Fantastic things. Things that made her legs wobble and brought her climax far too quickly.

“Show me again,” he said, rising to his feet.

Lenore closed her eyes and rolled her shoulders. Wings sprouted from her shoulder blades. They were wispy and insubstantial, little more than smoke. She felt more exposed with her mediocre wings on display than being completely nude.

“They’re not that impressive, not like yours,” she said.

“They’re lovely.” Baris ran a hand over the wings. The feathers dispersed, briefly losing their shape before reforming. “Having a defined shape in the first year is an impressive achievement.”

She made a murmuring noise, reaching for him. She wrapped her bound hand around both his cocks. Even with the ridges locking them together, he was massive. His hand covered hers, guiding her.

Her concentration slipped and her wings dissolved. “Sorry. I can’t maintain them for long.”

“Do not stress yourself.”

“I want to see your wings,” she said, stroking him.

They unfurled behind him with a snap and swept forward, surrounding them in a feathery embrace. She moved her free arm behind his neck, digging her fingers into the base of the wings. She loved the feel of them, silky soft and firm at the same time. She particularly loved the fact that he was so sensitive at the wings’ joints.

Baris moaned, leaning into her as she rubbed and scratched. Encouraged, she dug as hard as she could with her fingernails.

“Do you think we could use the—” she started to ask before Baris interrupted with an affirmative.

“The claw caps are by the bed. Come.” He pulled her to the bed. Carefully, he placed each cap on her fingers, kissing her palms as he went. Putting the claw caps on her bound hand was slower going, but he managed.

Lenore flexed her fingers. “Will this hurt you?”

“Only a little,” he said.

“Where should I—” She clawed the air.

“Anywhere. I am proud to wear your mark.”

She tugged on the ribbon, pulling him close. She ran her hands over his chest and down his abdomen, the sharpened tips scraping along his skin. He shivered and growled, pushing her down onto her back.

With his arms planted on either side of her, he stretched above her. Inky black wings obscured the light. The pull of the ribbon forced her right arm above her head. Their fingers laced together. He wouldn’t let her go.

“You will take all of me,” he said.

“Yes. God, yes. I’m ready.” They’d spent plenty of quality time in bed, exploring each other, celebrating the pleasure they

could give each other, but that was the one thing they hadn't done yet.

Using his unbound hand, Baris worked her open with his fingers. She was already wet and needy from his tongue—the fingers were an added bonus. First one, then two, and then three. Satisfied that she was prepared enough, he moved to settle between her thighs.

He sank into her. The stretch was slow and initially uncomfortable. He kept his gaze on her, studying her reaction.

“It's good. You're so good,” she said. She lifted her hips, encouraging him to sink all the way in. She felt full like she might burst, not just from his double cocks, but the unexpected emotions threatening to choke her. This man, this improbable man, reordered his world for her and didn't let her go. Wouldn't let her go.

His hips snapped forward, plunging into her. Her body arched, demanding more and more. They moved together, desire and pleasure spiraling higher. She cried out, her climax finally breaking, and raked the claws down his arm. Blood beaded on his silvery gray skin.

That sent him over. He pulled her up until she was astride his lap. Both hands were on her hips, raising her and lowering her, fucking hard. His wings beat the air in time with his strokes. He pressed his mouth to the curve of her neck and bit.

The pain was brief, followed by another fierce climax. Her fingers curled, digging into his chest, as ecstasy surged through her. It overwhelmed her, making her tremble and cry before the drifting numbness at the site of the bite spread. He had warned her about the mating bite and the effects of his saliva, but wow.

Baris lowered her to the bed and untied the ribbon. She lay there, content and relaxed. When she finally opened her eyes, he wore a huge smile as he examined the claw mark on his chest.

“Look how I pleased you,” he said, kissing her forehead and stretching out alongside her.

“No complaints,” she mumbled.

“Rest, my queen,” he said, pulling her to him. “I have plans for you.”

EPILOGUE



LENORE

THE EGGS WERE HATCHING.

“It’s time. Hurry, hurry, hurry,” Lenore called, hustling into the conservatory.

Little Miss and Trouble had laid a clutch before the wedding. As it was not advisable to move a nest, the karu had to remain at Gracemeadow, which meant Baris and Lenore had to remain at the country house. As it was advisable not to disturb the karu and maintain a peaceful environment, the cogs of government had been banished. All work was handled by appropriate personnel. What could not be delegated was done remotely. What could not be done remotely did not need to be done at all.

The karu had given Baris and Lenore a three-month vacation, and it was marvelous. Even better, they’d likely have to remain for a year until the baby chicks were old enough to fly.

Thankfully, Gracemeadow was recently renovated and comfortable. Sarah told her horror stories of Summerhall, the tumbledown palace where Baris and Vekele spent part of their childhood.

The estate had been chosen as the wedding venue for its stunning gardens, natural landscapes, and proximity to a karu sanctuary. Currently, the sanctuary was private, available only to the royal family and guests. Next month, when Baris and Lenore were free to leave the estate for brief journeys without upsetting the karu and their hatchlings, it would be opened to the public. Soon, the average person would have the opportunity to meet and possibly bond with a karu of their own.

The Royal Academy invited Lenore to teach a course on human medicine. They proposed an overview of common human ailments, treatments, and significant differences in anatomy that an Arcosian physician would need to know when treating a human. Basically, *How Not to Kill Your Human*. The

information would be useful and help save lives. She was inclined to accept once it was feasible to leave the estate. For the immediate future, she was bound there and would maybe take the time to write a class syllabus.

Lenore pushed her way through the onlookers into the conservatory. Excitement buzzed through the entire household. Bonded karu rarely breed. The birth rate for karu was low, which was not so alarming considering their long lifespans. Unbonded karu kept the population stable.

Two eggs. Could you even imagine such an embarrassment of riches?

Trouble called to her, his voice guiding her to the nest hidden among the garden beds. She sat on the paving stones, not giving a fuck about dirt on her pants. Baris joined her. She reached for his hand, like that black ribbon still tied them together, and waited.

Excitement bubbled over into bliss when the first egg cracked. A beak poked through the shell, making the hole large enough for its beak to open and close with a small croak. It was the best noise she had ever heard. Tears of joy rolled down her face.

“My treasure,” Baris whispered, wiping away her tears. “Our family is growing.”

The second egg wobbled back and forth, eventually tipping on its side. Cracks appeared in the shell just as the first chick emerged.

The chick was pale yellow and covered in wet feathers. With eyes open, it tumbled out of the shell. The second chick had a touch more grace, managing to free itself from the shell and walk away.

“Both hatchlings are healthy,” Baris said.

“They’re perfect,” she breathed. Trouble agreed, his pride and devotion radiating through their bond.

“I suggest we give the new family some privacy.”

“Actually,” Lenore said, placing her hand on his chest, over the mark she made, “I want to discuss growing our family even more.”

He raised his brows, waiting for her to continue.

That was where her game fell apart. She tried to be smooth but failed. Every time. “Oh, just come to bed.”

“Yes, my queen.”

AFTERWORD



Thank you for reading Baris and Lenore's story. I hope you enjoyed it. After what I did to Baris in *Splintered Shadow*, I knew I owed him a happily ever after, so I had a gentle, soft story planned.

Oops.

Poor Baris. I really gave him a hard time. I think I have issues with authority figures.

Before I started, I knew *Shadow Mark* would be heavily influenced by *Pride and Prejudice*. It's one of my favorite books, and the 1995 TV series is my comfort show. The 2005 movie is solid, don't get me wrong, but I really enjoy the long-form storytelling you get with a TV series. You can totally see the Jane Austen roots with Baris' first bungled proposal and Lady Raelle's nosiness. Lydia is even named Lydia. No Wickham subplot, though. I believe in Lydia's ability to get herself into trouble. She doesn't need a man for that.

Now, about Baris' long-term illness, that snuck up on me. If you follow me on social media or subscribe to my newsletter, you've probably read that I've been dealing with Long COVID this year. It's been rough. While the initial COVID wasn't terrible—don't get me wrong, I was sick and miserable for two weeks—it wrecked my immune system. Subsequent complications led to pneumonia and hospitalization. Plus, the loss of taste and smell, memory impairment, brain fog, scarring in my lungs, and having zero energy. Like I said, it's been rough.

Baris' experiences and his frustrations are my own. I'm not speaking for every person with a long-term illness, chronic illness, and certainly not a disability. Some days are better than others. Some days I don't feel like crap. Some days, I do. Some days, I have a fever and have to nap. Other days, I have energy, and I want to do all the things, but then I invariably push too much, and I'm exhausted again. It's unpredictable and frustrating.

Baris' illness had an endpoint. The symbiote would eventually die completely and leave his body. I'm still waiting for my body to heal from the damage done by COVID. Until then, I'm trying to remember to be kind to myself.

I've got a lot of people to thank for helping me get Shadow Mark out the door.

First, the other writers in this season of Shattered Galaxies: Poppy Rhys, Jade Waltz, and Harpie Alexa. They were super understanding when I kept saying, "I want to do this, but I need more time," and pushed back our publishing dates multiple times. You guys are awesome.

Secondly, I need to thank Regine Abel and Stephanie West, who do writing sprints with me and helpfully mock me when appropriate. I have a bad habit of dicking when I should be working, and public mockery motivates me. Who knew? Abigail Myst is magic when it comes to helping me work out plot problems.

Finally, my readers. You're awesome. Thanks for sticking with me and allowing me to tell stories for a living. It's the thing I've always wanted and never imagined possible.

SHATTERED GALAXIES

Be sure to read all the books in Season Two!

1. Shadow Mark - Nancey Cummings
2. Wilted Verdure - Jade Waltz
3. Damaged Goos - Poppy Rhys
4. TBA - Harpie Alexa

Did you catch all the books in season one?

1. Splintered Shadow - Nancey Cummings
2. Ravaged World - Ava Ross
3. Scattered Petals – Jade Waltz
4. Fractured Waves – Samantha Rose
5. Crushed Dominion – Poppy Rhys
6. Broken Song – Harpie Alexa
7. Destroyed Desire – Liz Paffel
8. Jagged Honor – Erin Raegan

WANT AN ALIEN OF YOUR OWN?

Did you know I have an Etsy shop? Yup. It's full of signed books, stickers, and art prints. Check out the super adorable stickers and the spicy NSFW art prints! Each order will come with a bonus bookmark and sticker.

[Alien Book Boyfriend](#)

Nancey is a *USA Today* bestselling author. She writes fast-paced, low-angst books about kissing aliens, because that's how she rolls.

She once had an argument with her husband about being married in space. He claimed that marriage was a legal contract and ended when a person left orbit. Nancey said the vows were "till death do us part" not "until the spaceship departs."

She has written twenty books about being married in space just to prove him wrong.

Let's stay in touch! Join Nancey's newsletter and get a FREE copy of *Claimed by the Alien Prince*.

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