



SUBLIME
TARGET

A *DARKSTAR* *MERCENARIES* *NOVELLA*

ANNA CARVEN

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ONE

AS JERIK GARUL, master weaponsmith and former High Commander of the Kordolian Imperial Militaries, strode down the corridor, he ruminated on why he was so irritated.

Maybe it was because he wasn't used to asking for things. He ran the divisions under his command with a Callidum fist and prided himself on getting things done with brutal efficiency.

But there was something he just couldn't attain, even though he'd been trying.

He was restless. Edgy. More short-tempered than usual. Ever since his comrades had started to fall for human mates, he'd been left constantly wondering...

What it would be *like*.

Even Ikriss, that too-clever-for-his-own-good bastard, had gotten himself shackled up with a human female.

If Ikriss could find a mate, then surely so could he.

The problem lay in the execution.

His Kordolian comrades had come across their mates by chance. He'd seen it time and time again with the First Division warriors. They'd go off on some hazardous mission

and return with these perplexing, soft-skinned, outspoken creatures by their sides.

And it had quickly become obvious that they would tear down the stars to protect them.

Kaiin's Hells; even Tarak al Akkadian, the only man the Empire had feared—and for very good reason—had fallen under the spell of a human.

She was one of the main reasons he'd finally gotten off his Callidum-plated ass and brought down the Kordolian Empire.

Wouldn't it be nice to have someone to obsess over like that?

But Jerik was hardly in a position to encounter any human females by chance. Tarak had all but locked up this sector of the Universe. The fleet was in position. The defenses were in place. Security was set to the highest possible level.

He couldn't imagine himself just cruising down to Earth and casually strolling into some human venue—a *bar* or something—and attracting the attention of some human female.

Firstly, most non-Kordolians were afraid of him. It wasn't like he tried to intimidate anybody on purpose. But he looked a certain way and spoke a certain way, and he'd held a position of considerable power from the most feared military in the Nine Galaxies.

Secondly, he had no idea how to talk to humans. He'd had brief encounters and passing interactions with the human mates, but for the most part, humans remained largely a mystery to him.

Short of taking his mate by force, what was he supposed to do?

Well, one could always *ask*.

Jerik gritted his teeth. He didn't like asking for things. Everything he had, he'd earned through hard work. His single-mindedness had served him well, and he'd clawed his way up

through the ranks—from lower division grunt to High Commander.

But... this was a matter of survival of the species and all that, so he supposed he could make an exception.

Besides, the one he was asking was Tarak, his longtime friend and commander—the only one he would ever take orders from.

Tarak wasn't like the other generals Jerik had served under. He didn't command his troops from a remote station, safely away from the crossfire. More often than not, he was on the front lines, in the crossfire with the grunts, hauling their asses out of trouble when needed. Tarak wasn't the sort to let power go to his head, even though he knew how to wield it so very well.

Jerik reached the Qualum doors of the Fleet Station's armory. Registering his biological signature, the doors unraveled to reveal a vast chamber stacked with all kinds of weapons.

There were rows upon rows of plasma guns, illuminated by the soft blue glow of the charge lights. There were cannons and long-range artillery guns and incendiary devices.

And Jerik's favorite...

Blades.

Rows and rows of obsidian Callidum blades, perfectly weighted and calibrated. No two were identical; they were designed for individual anthropometrics and fighting styles. He knew because he'd tested each one himself.

One might wonder why Kordolians were so obsessed with swords when they had much more powerful plasma guns at their disposal, but Callidum swords were the single best weapon for close-quarters on-ship combat.

No point in using a powerful plasma gun when it could blow out the instrument panels or even the side walls of a ship and doom everyone.

Jerik found Tarak standing amidst the blades, icily calm and contemplative.

“The latest forge- batch,” he commented as he came up behind the former general. “I’ve got a division in training, about to go for their final Blade Master trials. Those that pass will get one.”

Tarak offered him a simple nod in greeting. “A fine array of blades. How is the new Callidum forge progressing?”

“Machinery’s all in place. We just need to get the fusion reactor core in place; then it’s good to go. The locals put up some resistance at first, but I offered them a trade, as you suggested. Breeding animals from Earth. *Goats*. The meat is sweet and tender, and they are hardy creatures, easy to rear and well suited to the dry, rocky terrain of Tukora. The Lukkar agreed to a thousand-revolution lease in exchange for *goats*.”

Tukora was a rocky desert planet in Sector Four. Tarak had asked Jerik to set up a new Callidum refinery and forge in a central location—equidistant to both Kythia, where Callidum was mined, and Earth.

“The Lukkar have been struggling with famine for generations,” Tarak said quietly. “Ever since the empire poisoned their lands. This should go some way toward restoring sufficient food supplies for their people.”

“And the reclaimed *istrium* mines should fill their coffers enough that they can import food until they can breed sufficient numbers of goats. You could have kept them, you know. *Istrium*’s always in demand.”

Tarak shrugged, his Callidum exo-suit sucking in the light. He radiated effortless power. “To what end? *Istrium*’s a common enough mineral. It’s found on several other planets in the Fourth Sector. I’d rather the locals were autonomous and content.” He shot Jerik a pointed look. “Unlike our former masters, we do *not* carry out genocide and take what we please.”

“Understood.” Jerik’s lips curved into a wry smile. “Which is precisely why this is a timely meeting. I need your

assistance, boss.”

Tarak turned to him, one eyebrow slightly raised in typical Tarak fashion. “What do you need?”

His expression was as cryptic as always; he didn’t betray any sort of surprise or disdain.

That was why Jerik had sworn loyalty to this man. If there was a problem, he was approachable, unlike some of his former commanders. Superiors from the noble families were the worst. Arrogant and demanding, their ears were closed to reality.

He leaned in and lowered his voice, even though nobody was around. “Tarak, I’m suffocating here. The thought of not knowing, of not *having*, is driving me insane. I want what you have, you fortunate bastard.”

He really could imagine it in his mind’s eye: little younglings—his very *own* offspring—running amok, a human female of his very own, to indulge and pleasure as he wished.

How he would dote upon them.

“You need a mate,” Tarak said matter-of-factly.

“Yeah.” Jerik’s voice became gruff. “I heard you’ve got access to the database of the entire human population. Can you find me one?”

“Yes. But be aware that the process might get complicated. There are genetic considerations,” Tarak added.

“Yeah, I know. The pheromones and the mating fever and the compatibility and all that. Don’t you have access to genetic information on humans, too?”

“Some, but not *all* humans are registered on the database. What we have should be sufficient, however. I’ll ask the medical team to compile a list of potentially compatible matches. Then we’ll see.” Tarak gave him a stern look. “Jerik, you have to be certain. Once the mating fever takes hold...”

Jerik nodded, his impatience bubbling to the surface. “Yeah, I know. I’m fully aware of the implications. I’ve seen

what it's done to *you*. But let's cross that intergalactic space when we get to it."

TWO

JERIK SAT on a high-backed chair in one of the tech labs, sipping a cup of hot, steaming *coffee*—that bitter, aromatic drink humans had introduced to his kind.

It was utterly addictive. Now that he'd experienced the beverage, he didn't know how he could live without it.

He especially enjoyed the small hit of clarity it delivered toward the end. *Caffeine* was a potent thing indeed.

Bit by bit, humans were corrupting them. With their drugs and their fashions and their inane small pleasures. It wouldn't be long before Kordolians started strutting around with all kinds of human affectations—frivolous fashions and the like.

Jerik didn't care for any of that. He saw that some of the younger troops were already fascinated with such things—not to mention the *women*—and some of them were starting to experiment with human styles.

Not him, though. He was old and stuck in his ways. Kordolian through and through. He came from a line of warriors—his family could trace their military roots back to a long-distant ancestor—and although he could look back and understand the evils the empire had wrought, he was proud of being Kordolian.

Not of the old empire, but of what they'd done to defeat it —he, Tarak, and the ex-military soldiers and techs and Kordolian civilians that had chosen to defy their cruel rulers.

Together, they were more powerful than he'd ever realized.

“Have your thoughts slipped into a black hole, Commander?” A familiar figure entered the room. It was Mavrel, one of the techs that worked between Earth, *Silence*, and the Fleet Station. Currently, they were on the Fleet Station, where Jerik was overseeing the Blade Master trials and auditing the weapons stores.

He sipped his coffee as he regarded Mavrel. The tech was tall and slender, with aristocratic, angular features and tousled hair. Almost effeminate, but not at all. Actually, his pretty appearance was deceptive. Jerik had worked with Mavrel on many occasions, and he knew that the tech possessed a sharp mind. He worked hard and was relentless in pursuing solutions.

“What makes you think that?” Jerik set the cup down and turned his chair. “I'm not thinking of warfare and doom if that's what you're saying.”

“I didn't say any such thing. It's just that your expression was deathly serious for a moment there, Sir.”

“You don't have to Sir me anymore. We're free agents now.”

“I'm just used to it. Makes me feel more comfortable, so unless you object, I'll keep on calling you Sir for the foreseeable future.”

“*Tch*. If you insist. But you should know that I'm getting antsy over here. That's what my *thoughts* were about. So get to the point and show me the list.”

“The list...” Mavrel's expression was as dry as atmospheric dust as he sat himself in front of the holo-console. “Well, I *do* have a list of humans that would be suitably matched to your biological signature. As in, an encounter with any one of them would be enough to trigger your mating fever. Hmm, where to start? What are you looking for in a female,

Sir? It might help me narrow it down if you provide me with a set of criteria. Do you have a preference for a certain phenotype? A certain temperament? Age? We can filter by occupation or personality. Likes and dislikes.” He let out a soft snort. “Humans really do collect a *lot* of data on their people. They’re nearly as bad as the old empire was.”

Jerik gulped down his coffee and carefully masked the fact that his heart was beating faster than usual. He, who was normally in control—who was used to rushing in and taking charge—for the first time in a very long time, he felt out of his depth.

“I don’t have a *type*,” he growled. It wasn’t as if he spent his idle *sivs* ogling random human females and picking out the ones that were attractive to him. He didn’t have time for that, and Jerik knew very well that appearances could be deceiving. Shallow. Sentient beings were complicated. All he wanted was a willing and eager female who would be content to receive his affection and return it.

A good character. That was what was important to him. Honest, not fearful of Kordolians, and not malicious or duplicitous.

Someone who would put up with an irascible rogue like him. Who had the ability to see through beyond the fact that he was Kordolian.

How in the Nine Hells was he supposed to find someone like that?

How had those First Division bastards—the most lethal and feared unit in the entire galaxy—managed to secure their mates so quickly and effortlessly?

And to add to Jerik’s astonishment, they weren’t vicious war queens or brutal killers. The human females that had brought each of the First Division warriors to their knees were, by human standards, *ordinary*.

And that made them extraordinary.

For they could now count themselves among the most powerful beings in the Universe because they had the singular

ability to influence the course of a First Division warrior's intentions.

"Mavrel," he said slowly, placing the cup on the table in front of him with military precision. "Here are my criteria. She must be unmated. If she is to get to know me, then she should probably be resilient as well, and possess some sort of capacity to accept a Kordolian as a partner. Some humans can't, you know. They can be inflexible, too. Then, there are the obvious things. Of breeding age. Desiring to have children. That is all."

"Th-that is all?" Mavrel's tone was uneasy.

Jerik shrugged. "You gotta trust the process."

The First Division guys were more extreme than him, and *they'd* secured mates, so what was stopping him?

"Just a thought," the tech said quietly. "What happens if... you meet her, and she triggers your mating fever, and then... you decide that you can't stand one another?"

"I'll figure that out if and when it happens. There's always the drugs, and... I'd just have to try and find someone else. But I'm not worried about it. You always overthink things, Mav. I've given you my criteria, so give me a name and a location. Just one."

On this occasion, Jerik was more than willing to entrust his fate to chance. He'd done that before, all the infernal time, and it had always seemed to work out.

What else could he do?

"Er, sure." Mavrel gave him an uncertain look and turned to rapidly input data into the *Sylth*. He wore those weird little finger-nodes that helped him mesh with and spatially control the machine. Some Kordolians were better at engaging with the *Sylth* than others. Mavrel was one of those.

Jerik, on the other hand, was *not* a tech guy. He understood the principles well enough—he *was* in command, after all—but he didn't like engaging with the sentient AI.

If he was honest, dealing with a replicant of some ancient slave's entire consciousness gave him the creeps. He was

much more comfortable around solid, physical things that *couldn't* talk back. Like his blades, for example.

Mavrel looked up from the glowing blue holo-display. “You want a potential candidate? I’ve found one.” He cycled through a mass of information and brought up a holo-recording. “We obtained this information from the Federation, including this biodata recording.”

Jerik stiffened, anticipation coursing through him.

It was *her*.

The woman he was supposed to meet and win over.

She stared back at him, perfectly realistic and yet intangible, for he knew she was just a projection.

Her expression was the most discouraging thing.

The holo-recording showed a woman who was cool and disinterested. Her glossy black hair was tied up in a neat bun, and her face was made up with the various paints and pigments some humans used to enhance their appearance. She wore a simple suit of plain colors—grey, black, white.

Wherever she was when this was taken, she clearly did *not* want to be there.

He couldn't read anything else from her. She was like a stone wall, cold and impossible to breach.

She was beautiful, though.

This was the one Mavrel had narrowed it down to? How was he supposed to convince this impenetrable female that he was the best possible mate for her?

For he *knew* that he could make any woman happy. He would indulge her and protect her and give her immense pleasure.

“Could always abduct her, I suppose,” he muttered softly.

“Er, I suggest that you do *not*.” Mavrel sounded a little testy. “A fearful and unwilling mate would be a terrible thing. It's bad for the mating process. *Scientifically*. We will reach

out and make contact with her first. There are at least a thousand better ways to approach her.”

Jerik raised his hands. Why were folks always so edgy around him? “Mav, I’m talking shit, all right? I’m not going to do that. I told you already. I’m gonna trust the process.”

The tech let out a sigh of exasperation. “Well, if you want to do it right, I’d suggest you go and get some mating advice from Iskar, Ikriss, or the First Division guys. Even the prince could tell you a thing or two.”

“Since when did you know so much about the mating process?”

“I observe, Sir. A *lot*.”

“Fine. I’ll leave the initial contact to you. Tell me her name, at least.”

“*Cla-rissa Lee*.” The pronunciation rolled awkwardly off Mavrel’s tongue. “She’s fairly standard as far as humans go. Works in some sort of service job. *Executive assistant*, whatever that means. She owns a dwelling under debt with installment payments and has one brother and one sister, both mated and with their own offspring. Not rich, not poor, standard Federation education. And she is *not* currently seeking a male.”

“Then why did you pick her out? Surely, it’d be easier to gain the cooperation of someone who *is* actually looking for a mate.”

“Well, here’s the thing. We have access to some of the Federation’s Network logs. And it seems she has searched for information on our kind quite frequently on the human databases.”

Jerik stared at the woman’s lovely, unreadable face. “And was the gist of her searches good or bad?”

Mavrel gave him the most infuriating shrug. “Like most things, it was a bit of both.”

THREE

CLARISSA LEE SAT at her desk and stared out the window, stealing a moment away from the insanity.

It was a gorgeous day on Sydney Harbor. From the thirty-seventh floor of Garner Tower, she had a priceless view of the harbor. The water shimmered under the bright morning sun. Boats drifted lazily across the surface, occasionally buffeted by the wake of large passenger ferries. Drones zoomed through the pristine blue sky, slipping under the unmistakable coat-hanger arc of the Sydney Harbor Bridge.

It was a multi-million credit view. It wasn't *hers*, though. It was a view she could only enjoy day after day because she worked here.

She'd worked for Garner Corp for the past five years. And it was only by accident that she'd found herself in the position of Executive Assistant to one of the richest men in the Oceanic Republic.

Cooper Garner.

Wealthy. Powerful. Knew how to command a room.

But secretly, she thought he was a bit of a man-child. An only child, he'd inherited his vast family fortune. He was

eccentric—as rich people were allowed to be—and had very specific requirements that Clarissa had to know right down to the finest detail.

He could be uptight and demanding. A right royal pain-in-the-arse. But to be fair, he wasn't intentionally mean, either.

And quite by accident, she'd found that she was good at this sort of thing—juggling his many appointments and visitors, fielding highly specific requests, blocking people.

Oh, she knew how to block, obfuscate, and delay. How she could run defense against the most demanding of clients—even other trillionaires—who always wanted to see Garner *urgently*.

Sometimes, she almost found it fun putting up barriers against these entitled and powerful men and women. Her holodemeanor was an impenetrable stone wall.

She was surprisingly good at it, too.

Not that she'd wanted this particular job. Actually, she'd found herself here by improbable chance. Five years ago, she'd been working downstairs, a new hire and junior member of Garner Corp's executive PR team.

Until one day, Cooper Garner's EA of fifteen years, the formidable Sandra Singh, had an accident. She slipped and fell while rock fishing and got stung by a deadly blue-ringed octopus.

Sandra had been very fortunate to survive, and it was at that point that she'd decided to take a well-deserved retirement after delaying it for many years.

Somehow, nobody had wanted to take Sandra's poisoned chalice. Although being the EA to Cooper Garner himself sounded like a glamorous job, everyone in the building knew that Sandra had worked long hours and was always the last one to leave the building. Clarissa remembered a Friday night when she was in the pub across the road after post-work drinks with the team.

She'd caught sight of Sandra discreetly leaving the building, disappearing down the stairs that led to the metro

station.

At 11pm.

Perfectly coiffed, smartly suited, and never missing a beat, Sandra had been indomitable. She was Garner's right-hand woman; his smiling assassin.

Clarissa *never* could have imagined she'd one day fill Sandra's shoes.

Until the day when Sandra the EA didn't show up to work, and her boss demanded a hand-delivered, printed-on-paper copy of the marketing brief for Garner Corp's latest project—Centauri SkyHomes. So Clarissa, being the most junior in the department and, as her boss Tanner said, *the easiest to look at*, was sent up to the thirty-seventh floor to deliver the brief to the CEO himself.

Those assholes threw her under the bus. And look what happened. Nervous as hell, she showed up in Garner's chambers, brief in hand. And the old bastard just started giving her orders as if she were Sandra herself.

Clarissa had no choice but to jump. She delved into Garner's world, all the while feeling like she was careening off a fifty-metre cliff-face. She carried out his commands, certain she was failing miserably and was going to be fired at the end of the day.

But as he was leaving—at 10pm, no less—he walked past her, not even bothering to look over his shoulder. And he said, "*I'll see you tomorrow, Miss Lee.*"

And that was how Clarissa Mei Lee, from North Parramatta, filled Sandra Singh's very big shoes as the sole Executive Assistant to Cooper Garner, CEO and owner of Garner Corp, a multinational property development corporation.

She learned fast. She kept secrets. She knew when to be opaque.

Like now, for example, when the baker that made the three-grain sourdough that Garner liked to have his morning

tea cucumber sandwiches made with suddenly announced that she was abruptly closing up shop.

And Clarissa had three days to find a replacement.

At the same time, she was tasked with researching a new market for Garner Corp's next big development.

Garner wanted to know all about aliens.

Kordolians had arrived on Earth. They might blow up the planet at any given moment, but Garner the Visionary was convinced he should pivot toward building apartments for the silver-skinned aliens.

Clarissa was doubtful. *Kordolians* had colonized hundreds of planets and developed technology that allowed them to travel further than any other known species in the Universe.

Why would they want to buy apartments from a developer that was known for cutting corners? And why would any of Garner's glossy glass-walled designs appeal to beings that preferred to dwell in darkness?

She shook her head as she turned toward her console, forgetting about the glorious view. After all, that reality was an illusion.

It didn't matter what she thought about anything. She had to get back to work.

Find bread.

Research Kordolians.

Got it.

After all, even if the world was about to come crashing down around them and aliens were seizing everything left, right and center of Earth's immediate orbit, she still had a bloody mortgage to pay.

FOUR

JERIK DIDN'T QUITE UNDERSTAND why he felt strange. Humans weren't intimidating at all. For the most part, they were a soft species, unused to the rigors of space travel and sheltered from the conflicts of the Universe.

So sheltered.

But now, sitting in the domain of the human mates—the reserved space onboard *Silence* that his kind were permitted to enter only by invitation—he felt a certain way. Pulse a little faster than usual. On-edge. Out of place.

He hadn't been like this since he was a raw recruit.

Maybe it was because the surroundings were so alien to him. He was used to the functional minimalism of Kordolian warships, not this cluttered eccentricity—a room filled with vegetation and mismatched furniture and decorative trinkets.

Although he hated to admit it, the visual exuberance of it all was making him mildly anxious.

It reminded him of chaos and unpredictability.

He was in their territory, and he was about to broach a topic that was seldom spoken of by his kind, let alone disclosed to *humans*.

There were going to be two of them.

In another life, he might have even admitted to himself that he felt intimidated.

Here they are.

The Qualum doors slid open, and two figures appeared.

One was a tall and graceful human called Alexis.

The one that had captured a big, fierce First Division warrior called Nythian.

When Jerik first learned that Nythian had found his mate, he'd hardly believed it.

But he'd seen the changes in his friend. The fearsome warrior was a little less reckless; a little more measured and intentional.

Even in battle.

Not that it made him any less lethal.

Secretly, Jerik quaked a little at the thought. Not that he was frightened or anything... it was more of a sense of astonishment and awe.

How would *he* react to a human? Would he change, too?

The female beside Alexis was Sienna. She was mated to his good friend Commander Ikriss Peturic, and just as with Nythian, Jerik had witnessed the warrior change in subtle ways. Cold, calculating Ikriss had learned to relax a little; to enjoy company and leisure time, and interestingly, *food*.

Both humans were here on account of his dilemma. To advise him on human mating and attraction rituals. Before he went about seeking a human mate, Jerik wanted to be educated on certain matters.

Although he could easily do so, he did *not* want to take her by force. He came from a civilization that had built its power on enslaving other alien races. Kaiin's Hells; he'd even participated in subjugating countless poor beings during his time in the Kordolian Imperial Military.

His hands were stained with the blood of innocents. Redemption was necessary, and he had a long way to go—that's why he'd been one of the first to jump at Tarak's invitation to join the Darkstar Mercenaries.

And it was the very same reason he found the idea of taking a mate by force so distasteful.

So much so that it made him sick to the stomach.

Besides, Tarak had forbidden that particular approach—on punishment of death.

“Uh, hello, Commander Jerik.” Alexis was the first to greet him. She walked slowly toward him and pulled out a chair before gesturing for Sienna to do the same. “How are you?”

“I am well. Why do you ask? Do I not look well?”

The human laughed. “You Kordolians *do* tend to take things literally. I was just greeting you. It's something we humans do—ask how each other is. You don't have to answer honestly unless you feel like it.”

“Then what's the point?” One thing Jerik didn't understand about humans was their constant need for small and subtle deceptions.

Alexis smiled. “It's just our nature to pretend that everything's fine when it isn't. Sometimes, it makes life bearable.”

“You *did* look a little bit grouchy when we first walked in,” Sienna added. “One would think the weight of the entire universe was on your shoulders. Don't worry, Commander Jerik. We're just going to give you some useful pointers, that's all. What you decide to do with that information is up to you.”

Where Alexis was thoughtful and a little reserved, Sienna was forthright. According to Ikriss, she could be blunt and foul-mouthed at times. She was highly trained in the art of preparing food—something that was extremely important to humans. Apparently, she'd gotten her bluntness from working in the kitchens—a high-stress, fast-paced job where diplomacy was unnecessary.

Jerik folded his arms and frowned. “I know that. As you may be aware, I’ve identified a human with a potential for compatibility. She’s a civilian, an ordinary member of the Federation. I suspect she knows little about us and our ways beyond what is usually fed to your people through the official channels. All I want to know is how to approach her. I don’t want to scare her off on our first meeting.”

“You’re self-aware,” Sienna quipped. “That’s a good sign. So, who is she? How do you plan on introducing yourself to her?”

“She’s called Clarissa Lee,” Jerik said stiffly. “A corporate worker residing in the metropolis of Sydney. I plan on going down to Earth to visit her dwelling—”

Shaking her head, Alexis raised her hand. “Hold on a minute. You can’t just *show up* at her house. That’s a sure-fire recipe for being labeled a creep and a stalker. Given that this is an entirely new situation, I’d advise a different approach.”

“New?” Jerik growled, his impatience rising. “What’s so new about it? You have *all* been through the process.”

“True, but pretty much all of us were put into close proximity with our mates through circumstances we couldn’t control. Abduction, captivity, *incredibly* dangerous scenarios. You have the luxury of being able to go about the business of dating in much less dangerous circumstances.”

Jerik would almost prefer the former. Not that he would want any potential mate of his to be put in danger, but in a crisis, he would know what to do. He would be in his element; in control.

This sort of thing was a right infernal pain-in-the-ass, but he *did* want to claim his mate in the right way, so he would just have to put up with it.

He let out a sigh and massaged his left temple. “Fine. Just tell me what exactly it is that you suggest I do.”

Suddenly, Alexis and Sienna were all smiles.

“So glad you asked.” Sienna’s eyes lit up with a mischievous sort of look. Almost as if she were enjoying this.

Jerik hadn't realized that humans had a sadistic streak to them as well. He'd always thought of them as the balance Kordolians needed to rein in their more vicious tendencies.

"So, you have a woman you want to get to know," Alexis said quietly. "It's fine to be direct if you're interested in her, but first, you'll have to gain her trust in one way or another. You have a significant advantage over her; an unfair advantage—you've been able to access a lot of information about her. I think it's fine to let her know the true reasons in time, but you need to let her get a sense of you—the *real* you, without relying too much on your advantage."

If Jerik had been unsure about human mating rituals before, now he was completely and utterly confused. But he wasn't the type to let it show. "You are suggesting that I orchestrate a meeting first, in a setting where she would be more at ease? That I should converse with her to assess her willingness and suitability to become a potential mate?"

"That would be a good idea. I wouldn't rush at first. Take your time, and get to know her. If you feel that she's interested in you, you can start to get a little more serious."

"One thing you should know," Sienna added. "Earth women—hell, I'm sure women all over the universe are the same—we don't like it when men assume they're owed something, or when they don't *listen* and try to push things onto us that we don't want."

Jerik gave her a cold stare. Did this female think he was so unsophisticated that he would behave in such a manner? "You presume a lot, human."

"I know what the Mating Fever does to you guys. Trust me, I *know*. I'm just telling you this because getting hit with the Mating Fever at the wrong time... it might cause you to accidentally give off the wrong impression. If you want this girl to be into you, you need to be aware that you can be quite *intimidating*, Commander Jerik. She's an ordinary human who's probably never even been off-planet. All she knows about Kordolians is what she's been told through the media, and their portrayal of you guys can be a little, uh, *biased*."

“Hm.” Jerik knew his people had developed a certain reputation throughout the Nine Galaxies, and most of it was probably justified. He also knew that he could be abrupt, demanding, and exacting. He had little patience for incompetence and inefficiency, and certain things could make him quick to anger.

He wasn't the prettiest bastard, either. Not like that infernal Rykal or Enki or the former prince. He was scarred and battle-hardened and rough around the edges.

The human had a point, he supposed. He *could* try to show his gentler side, to make any potential mate understand that he wanted only to cherish and protect her—and never, ever harm her.

But he was who he was, and he didn't see much point in carrying out some big deception.

Either she liked him and accepted him for what he was, or she didn't.

If the latter turned out to be the case, he would find someone else.

“I'll keep what you've told me in mind,” he frowned at the humans. “If I can't go to her dwelling, then how do I approach her? What is socially acceptable to you humans? Do I need to have an introduction from someone of influence?”

Sienna and Alexis shared a look; a silent, mysterious communication.

“Jerik, you have some data on where she works and the places she frequents.” Alexis's eyes narrowed. “Does she ever go to bars? Clubs? That sort of thing?”

“Basically, places where alcohol is imbibed,” Sienna said dryly. “In some of our cultures, it's part of the mating ritual.”

“Alcohol?” Jerik's frown deepened. The substance humans called *alcohol* was a toxic poison. Apparently, it affected Kordolians much more severely than humans—something to do with an enzyme his kind lacked. The boss had strictly warned them to stay away from the stuff, not that Jerik would

ever voluntarily ingest such a thing. “I thought you said I shouldn’t take advantage.”

“I did. Whether she’s had a few drinks or she’s completely sober, that doesn’t change. Just be aware that there’s a huge power imbalance between the two of you. When she realizes exactly *who* you are—well, it would be quite intimidating, I would think.”

“I’d suggest identifying a public space she’s likely to frequent,” Alexis offered. “Somewhere near her workplace; a cafe, a bar. People often go out for after-work drinks. It’s perfectly acceptable to become a regular and then strike up a conversation. Get her to know you a little before she learns about everything else.”

“Hm.” It all sounded far too complicated for Jerik’s straightforward military mind.

He sat back and considered his options.

Could he actually see himself sitting in some human drinking establishment, waiting vainly in the hope that the subject of his interest would just happen to glance at him and become engaged?

Him?

In a crowd full of humans?

Human mating rituals were all well and good, but he *wasn’t* human, and there was only so much he could handle. He couldn’t imagine the kind of disaster that might occur if his Mating Fever were triggered in such circumstances.

Then there was the fact that he was quite obviously Kordolian. What was he supposed to do? Use one of those disguise devices that could make him look vaguely human?

Again, he didn’t like the subterfuge.

He also mildly disagreed with Alexis and Sienna on the *unfair advantage* matter. The prospect of having to deal with a potential mate who was human, delicate, and quite possibly afraid of him was fucking daunting.

Jerik made up his mind. “My thanks for the advice. I’ll take what you’ve told me into account.”

After all, Alexis had a point. He was the first of them to actively go out and *seek* his mate instead of encountering her in some precarious situation. His approach could well become the prototype for the rest of the unmated Darkstar males.

Sienna grinned at him. “I think you’ll be fine, Commander. Just turn on that roguish charm of yours. It’s kinda cliched, but a lot of the ladies... they *do* love a bad boy.”

Jerik snorted. He didn’t think there was anything *bad* or *roguish* about himself at all.

“We shall see...” He stood and offered the humans a small bow as he exited the room, conveniently deciding *not* to mention the fact that he was very much going to do things his way.

FIVE

CLARISSA TOOK the Northern Loop back to her apartment in Eastwood. The train was extremely fast and soundless, and at an hour to midnight on a Monday, it was almost empty. In this carriage, there were only two other passengers besides herself. One was a man in a suit—probably a corporate worker like herself. He was seated against the window, his head resting against the glass, asleep despite the ultra-bright lights shining on his eyelids.

The other was a kid, probably no more than fifteen or sixteen, dressed in the spacecore style that was in fashion these days—tightly fitted reflective metallic top, baggy white trousers with multitudes of pockets, and a sleek cap with a digital visor that concealed the wearer's features and connected to a virtual display.

One could go out in public and yet be comfortably ensconced in their own little world without ever having to interact with another human being. Those visors were equipped with AI that could pay for tickets, order food, communicate with bots, and so on.

Clarissa had never liked the things. She'd tried one once. It had made her feel both detached from reality and claustrophobic, so she'd never gotten on board with the trend.

She leaned back against the hard seat and closed her eyes as the train entered the tunnels. In a heartbeat, they would be underneath the Sydney Harbor.

As a child, she'd been terrified of riding this train. Her vivid imagination had conjured thoughts of water seeping through the ceiling before a huge crack dumped the contents of the harbor into the tunnel, drowning them all.

She'd long since overcome that irrational fear, but even now, shooting through a confined space without any view of the outside had her feeling a little tense.

If only she could catch a nap like that guy over there, but she'd never been able to sleep on the train. The only place she felt perfectly comfortable was in her apartment. On the 14th floor of a towering complex constructed a couple of centuries ago, it had a precious view of the surrounding neighborhood, which was leafy and peaceful despite the fact that it was ultra-high density.

It was her sanctuary; her nest.

Her very own slice of the world. A year after she landed her first salaried job, Clarissa didn't hesitate to put down a deposit and buy the apartment. Sure, she was chained to a mortgage—the price of real estate in this city was horrendously high—but at least it was *hers*. No intrusive landlords, no threat of being evicted.

If there was one thing she valued in this life, it was her independence, and she was getting ever closer to paying down her astronomical debt.

Stars knew Garner paid her handsomely enough. The end-of-year bonuses certainly helped, even if Garner used them like a carrot and stick to demand absolute *perfection* from her.

She knew what he was doing. She just pretended to be a little bit naive because things went easier that way.

All she had to do was put her head down and do her job. Eventually, she'd be debt-free.

Then she'd have the freedom to find a different job—or even to go out on her own.

One day.

The train stopped again and again. One, two, three, four stops before it finally arrived at hers.

“Eastwood Station,” an expressionless female voice announced over the speakers.

She got off and walked through the empty station, her heels clicking on the polished floors. The bright lights strained her weary eyes, so she fished around in her handbag and found her sunglasses.

God, she was tired.

Her feet ached. Her entire body felt weary. Fortunately, home was just a five-minute walk away—part of the reason why she’d bought this particular apartment.

Ignoring her sore feet, she walked faster, up the escalator, out into the brightly lit street, where delivery bots whizzed past and people strolled by on late-night walks. The discomfort was a minor inconvenience compared to the many hours she spent on her feet at work.

This evening had been no exception. Garner was supposed to sign off on some documents before she left for the day, but he’d decided to go and have a rock-climbing session in his private rooftop gym, so she’d had to wait until he was finished.

“And since you’re going to be paid generously for your overtime, you can prepare another briefing for me about the aliens. I want you to scan the Network Databases for information on the power players within the Kordolian network. Those that hold any amount of influence. Make me a list and a chart, and have it in my inbox by tomorrow. I want to know the hierarchy; who sits at the top, who can and can’t be influenced...”

Clarissa sighed as she reached the entrance to her apartment. The facial recognition activated at once, releasing the sliding doors that led to the entrance foyer.

On the far wall, there was a row of lockboxes. Hers popped open as she passed, revealing a metallic heat-seal bag

containing her dinner and a small, flat package.

Thank *god* she'd remembered to order food that afternoon.

She couldn't remember what the package was about. Something she'd ordered during a late-night shopping session, probably.

Clarissa gathered her items. The lockbox's door slid shut. She entered the elevator.

Moments later, she was walking through her front door. The lights and heating were already on. She kicked off her shoes, threw her bag on the counter, grabbed the heat-seal bag and a fork from the drawer, and flopped onto her blue velvet sofa in front of the holo-display.

She unzipped the bag and inhaled the comforting scent of jasmine rice and a fragrant Thai green curry.

Her life was predictable, packaged convenience, but there were benefits to that, too...

Right?

Placing her dinner on the coffee table, she shoveled food into her mouth. She'd been ordering food from this Thai place down the road—The Golden Crown—for years, and it never disappointed.

"*Arista*," she said between mouthfuls. "Can you pick up where we left off and show me the draft of the hierarchy?"

"*Certainly*," *Arista* replied, in the same unflappable tone of voice that every single AI on the planet seemed to use.

Clarissa suspected that voice had been specially developed to lure them all into a false sense of security.

A diagram appeared on the screen. It contained information on the few influential Kordolian figures they actually knew something about. Garner seemed to think he could just approach these people—these *aliens*—and influence them with his vast property empire and huge fortune. As if these aliens were actually in need of his services. As if they didn't have their own superior technology that had allowed them to become the dominant force in the Nine Galaxies.

Like most of the elite super-wealthy individuals on this planet, Cooper Garner lived in his own little bubble. He'd been born into riches and taught that he could have everything he wanted in life. He was ruthless in business, but he could also be surprisingly naive. Clarissa suspected he was in denial about the true implications of Kordolians appearing in Earth's orbit.

She studied Arista's graph, staring at the figure at the top of the hierarchy.

Tarak al Akkadian.

Former High General of the Kordolian Imperial Military. Commander of the Imperial Fleet. Head of the Darkstar Corporation. Leader of the Kythian Revolution.

Did Garner really think that this *Tarak al Akkadian* would be the least bit swayed by his shiny new building developments or whatever the hell it was he wanted to sell them?

The brief text about the general was accompanied by a picture. Clarissa suppressed a shudder as she swallowed another mouthful of curry.

The image supplied by the AI was of a silver-skinned, pointy-eared alien. He looked somewhat like an elf, only his features were hard, not delicate. His hair was pure white, and his eyes were blood-red and as cold as ice.

A chill went down Clarissa's spine. She couldn't help it. These aliens were warriors. Killers. Enslavers and colonizers. The official story was that they'd renounced their old ways, but who really knew what their agenda was?

Did Garner *really* want to try and deal with these people?

A small, devious voice in her head told Clarissa that maybe it was a good thing. Maybe the trillionaire needed a reality check.

Was she a bad employee because she thought this way? Was she supposed to be trying to discourage him?

If she went out of her way to arrange some sort of meeting with the Kordolians, would that be considered passive-aggressive workplace behavior?

But that was what Garner wanted, right?

A list of names appeared on her holo—more influential figures within the Darkstar Corporation. This information was a result of the AI scanning all media reports and all citizen posts on the Network's socials.

Xalikian Kazharan (former Prince of the Empire)

Zharek (no surname known, role not specified)

The former High Commanders of the Kordolian Imperial military, answerable only to Tarak al Akkadian himself:

Iskar Gar-Kurai

Ikriss Peturic

Jerik Garul

Mardok Raghar

Tarkun Xiross

Each was accompanied by a profile shot, some grainy and indistinct, others as clear as day.

As expected, the five commanders were as hard and intimidating looking as their boss. Terrifying, really. A couple of the profile pictures were taken from what appeared to be real combat situations, where they were clad in sleek obsidian alien armor and decked out in an arsenal of futuristic-looking guns and blades in sheaths.

The least clear of them all was of the guy called *Jerik Garul*. His image had been captured in dim lighting. All she could make out was his powerful frame, the shadows of weapons, and what appeared to be a bald head.

Still, there was no question that this guy was as tough as nails. Clarissa wouldn't want to be meeting him in a dark alley anytime soon.

She glanced at the time on the holo.

12:14am.

Jeez, she needed to take a shower and go to bed. At half past six in the morning, she'd be back on the Loop, heading to the city for another long day of work.

It occurred to her that she'd forgotten the small package on her kitchen bench. It was a sleek black capsule-type thing about the size of her fist.

It was probably jewelry or makeup—something she'd ordered from a virtual store late at night. She could hardly remember—she'd probably been tired at the time.

Whatever. She was tired now, too.

She'd check it in the morning.

SIX

AS CLARISSA CHECKED herself in the mirror one last time, making sure her hair was perfectly coiffed and her makeup was flawless, she remembered the little parcel on the counter.

Might as well open it.

She had ten minutes before she had to be out the door. If it was jewelry or something, maybe she could add it to her outfit of the day.

She'd dressed in her usual work style—conservative but classy. A tailored navy blue pantsuit over a white silk shirt. She didn't have many clothes, but she made a point of ensuring the pieces she bought were timeless and high quality.

Dark tones, muted tones, natural fabrics, minimal jewelry and makeup.

That's what was required for her role as Garner's shadow. Efficient. Discreet. Never giving unsolicited opinions, even when there were things she distinctly disagreed with.

All her life, whether directly or indirectly, she'd been taught not to stand out. She was the youngest of three. Her two older siblings, Eric and Ava, were high academic achievers.

Eric was a robotics engineer.

Ava owned a dental practice.

Both were happily married and settled with kids.

Clarissa's choice to study marketing and public relations was met with mild disapproval from her parents, but she persisted anyway because she knew that she was good at one thing.

Communication.

Somehow, she was pretty good at reading people and anticipating their reactions; their needs.

Becoming an executive assistant to one of the wealthiest individuals in the region hadn't been part of her plans, but it worked for now. The things she'd witnessed behind the scenes; a peek into the world of the ultra-wealthy and connected, an intimate knowledge of the *who's who* of Earth...

These things were invaluable, and she swore that *one day*, she would put this information to good use.

Satisfied with her appearance, Clarissa walked over to her kitchen counter and found the small package. It was strange, really, unlike any packaging she'd seen before. These digital stores were always trying to outdo each other with different kinds of fancy packaging.

It was a capsule; rectangular, but rounded at the edges. Perfectly obsidian and smooth, almost like wood, but not quite.

There was no seam, no opening. She fiddled with the edges, pressing her thumb against one side to see whether she could pop it open.

And pop open it did.

Actually, it unfurled like a flower, revealing eight perfectly symmetrical geometric 'petals.'

What the hell?

Suddenly, someone else was in the room with her.

Clarissa stifled a scream.

There was a man. No, not a man.

A freaking Kordolian. Tall and imposing, with long white hair and gently curved obsidian horns and luminous silver skin. He had elegant features and striking golden eyes, and he wore flowing robes of midnight blue made from a silken material.

In the eyes of anyone—human or alien—he would be considered terribly beautiful.

“*Hello,*” he said, his voice sounding slightly unreal; echoey and distant. Actually, the sound came not from his mouth but from the capsule-thing.

“*My name is Xalikian Kazharan. I am the Kordolian Cultural Ambassador to Earth.*”

The alien spoke in flawless Universal. Clarissa knew Universal. These days, anyone who wanted to study at university needed to know Universal to a passable standard. The Federation government had implemented the requirement decades ago—even before the Kordolians had appeared in Earth’s orbit.

It was the future, they’d said. In order to survive, Earth needed to open up to trade with alien civilizations.

This alien standing before her... his Universal was flawless and elegantly enunciated. It made sense. Kordolians had invented the language, after all.

Her hand shot out... and passed right through the alien.

I knew it.

It was a hologram.

Not just any hologram. This one was so detailed and realistic that if not for the slight sense of something being *off* about his voice, Clarissa would have totally mistaken him for real.

The effect was jarring and surreal. It was almost as if she had a real live Kordolian standing in her kitchen.

How could these beings even be real? The alien was so striking and unearthly, like something out of a fantasy novel... only with scarily advanced tech.

Was this some sort of scam?

But no, it couldn't be because no scammer in their right mind would fork out thousands of credits for a device that could create such a perfect holographic simulation.

Why do I even have this right now?

“You might think it strange that you’re receiving this unsolicited communication from us,” the alien continued as if reading her mind. He flashed a smile, revealing a pair of gleaming fangs.

Fangs!

“I want to assure you that there is nothing untoward about this message. It’s nothing more than an invitation, and you are free to choose whether you accept or decline. As part of our intention to create a long, peaceful, and prosperous relationship with the humans of Earth, we would like to extend an invitation to you to attend our inaugural Kordolian Cultural Event. If you would like to know more, press the center of your device.”

Clarissa was inches away from pressing the damn thing when her Link Band buzzed, reminding her that she had to be out the door in thirty seconds or she'd miss the train that would get her into the city on time.

She stared at the hologram for a moment, blinking in disbelief.

Then, she picked up the device. It closed in an instant, the geometric petals sealing together to form a seamless pod once again.

She threw it into her handbag and rushed out the door, a thousand insane thoughts swirling through her mind.

SEVEN

AS SHE WALKED through the glass doors of the entrance foyer, Clarissa ran into Bea, who worked at front reception.

Bea—short for Beatrice—had joined Garner Corp at the same time as Clarissa. On induction day, they'd bonded over their mutual dislike of boring simulated training courses and mandatory checklists.

In the same way that Clarissa had landed in her role, Bea had found herself at the front desk in a coincidental manner. The last person in the role—a severe, intimidating guy called Tanner—had been poached by one of Garner's arch-competitors in a vicious and bitter move that left the boss in a foul mood for weeks.

Young and inexperienced, Bea had been thrust into the role in what was supposed to be a temporary appointment. But she was motivated and gutsy, and she had the fiercest resting bitchface Clarissa had ever seen.

She'd turned out to be impressively good at dealing with the irate, difficult people who frequently showed up at Garner Tower's front door. But behind her no-nonsense exterior, she was also one of the warmest, most generous people Clarissa had ever known.

And now, something was wrong because the normally unflappable Bea looked like she'd just seen a ghost.

"I'm so glad you're here." She pushed a cup of coffee into Clarissa's hand. "Your usual. You're going to need it."

"What's going on?" Clarissa stopped in the middle of the marble-floored foyer and frowned at her friend. She lowered her voice and raised her coffee cup to her lips so the cameras wouldn't pick up on what she was saying. "What's Garner done this time?"

"It isn't Garner this time." Bea's voice dropped to a whisper. Warily, she looked over her shoulder. "You're not going to believe this, but *they* showed up as soon as the doors opened this morning."

"*They?*"

"*They*. Aliens. Silver ones."

Clarissa stifled a gasp. "Y-you mean..."

"Kordolians. Well, two Kordolians and a human—but even the human dude looks like someone you wouldn't mess with."

Her heart slammed into her throat. For a moment, Clarissa was unable to speak. This was all so crazy. First, there was the weird hologram thing; that *invitation* from the scarily smooth and suave alien that called himself Xalikian.

Then, *this?*

If she were a conspiratorial sort, she might almost think the two incidents were connected.

But no way. Why would they target *her*, of all people?

Unless they wanted to get to Garner through her...

"Bea," she said slowly, trying to force herself to sound calm as she met her friend's dark gaze. "I don't see any Kordolians in the lobby right now. I hope that's a good thing. I really do. Can you *please* tell me exactly what happened?"

"They're in the guest waiting area," Bea whispered, cupping her mouth. "How was I supposed to tell them that they're expected to have an appointment? What was I

supposed to do, kick them out? Even security doesn't want a piece of them."

"Who are they... and what do they want, exactly?"

"Apparently, they're an official delegation from the, uh, *mercenary group. Darkstar.*" Bea's eyes widened in incredulity at her own words. "They want to see Garner himself. I... I'm sorry to drop you in it, Clarissa, but I told them to wait until you arrive since you're the only one in this building that actually has direct access to the guy."

Clarissa glanced over Bea's shoulder in the direction of the guest room. Furnished with a long wooden table and plush leather rolling chairs—a boardroom of sorts—it was comfortable enough, and it had tea and coffee-making facilities.

Did Kordolians drink coffee?

What an odd thought.

Why would she even wonder about that?

She sipped hers—an almond latte, extra hot. Bea had made it just the way she liked.

"They've been civilized enough," Bea informed her, crossing her arms. She wore a cream-colored pantsuit that accentuated her curves in all the right places. "That's why I'm not freaking out as much as I should be. But if you want, I can get security to liaise with enforcement, just in case. Maybe—"

Clarissa held up her hand. "Let's not. Until we know what's going on, we don't want to draw unnecessary attention to the situation. I'll go and talk to them."

Bea took a deep breath. "I'll come, then."

"No, you stay here. Someone has to keep an eye on the front. You never know who else might walk in the door." Clarissa glanced out across the street. It was a sunny spring day. People were strolling around peacefully. The trees were resplendent with new foliage.

One would never suspect that a group of Kordolians had just walked into the lobby of Garner Tower.

“I’ll have one hand on the emergency button,” Bea whispered. “You just yell out if you ever want me to—”

“That won’t be necessary,” Clarissa said calmly, holding up her hand. But despite the calmness in her voice, her hand was trembling a little.

Funny, she didn’t actually feel terrified, but her body was full of adrenaline.

She gave Bea what she hoped was a reassuring look and strode across the polished floor, her heels clicking loudly.

She reached the glass doors that led to the guest room. Through the windows, she spied three figures seated at the far end.

Two were unmistakably Kordolian. She could tell that even in spite of the semi-frosted glass.

The other was a dark-haired human.

Not missing a beat, she walked straight into the room, projecting a confidence she didn’t feel at all.

“Gentlemen.” She smiled, concealing the fact that she was actually nervous as hell. “My name is Clarissa. I’m the Executive Assistant to Cooper Garner. Gentlemen. How may I help you today?”

She put on her *very* best professional smile, but in reality, she was trying not to stare.

There were three of them, just like Bea had said.

One was definitely human. He was tall, with jet-black hair that was slicked back, accentuating his severely handsome features. Immaculately dressed, he wore a grey suit that was obviously hand-tailored—Clarissa could tell just by looking at it.

A hint of a tattoo was visible just above the edge of his perfectly pressed collar.

He was polished and urbane in a sharp-edged kind of way. He definitely looked like he could be dangerous if he wanted.

The second guy was an alien. A *Kordolian*. Clarissa could hardly believe that one of those unearthly beings was sitting right here before her in a big leather swivel chair. He was slender and delicate-looking—almost effeminate—with gleaming silver skin and golden eyes and long-ish white hair.

He studied her with a cool, calculating gaze. And she, who was so good at reading people, couldn't decipher his expression at all.

But *he* wasn't the one that worried her.

Her attention shifted toward the second alien, who occupied the chair at the very head of the table.

Oh, my god.

The other two were striking enough, but *this* guy...

Just looking at him made the fine hairs on her arms stand on end. She was glad for her long sleeves because she *swore* she had goosebumps right now.

And not necessarily in a good way.

Was this feeling fear? Fascination? A bit of both?

He radiated an aura. Surely, she wasn't imagining things. She could *feel* it; a pressure of sorts, both intimidating and oppressive.

It didn't help that his appearance was much more alien than the other guy's. His counterpart had dressed in a rather human style—long-sleeved shirt, leather jacket, and black denim jeans over sleek alien-looking boots.

This guy, on the other hand...

He looked unapologetically Kordolian. He hadn't made any effort to try and blend in at all.

For a brief moment, Clarissa was at a loss for words. She took in his appearance, which was, if she could use one word to describe it, *hard*.

He was bald, with the same luminous silver skin as the other Kordolian. His ears were elf-like and more prominent due to the absence of hair. He was powerful and muscular,

with a broad chest and bulging arms, his body encased in a suit of obsidian material that looked like a cross between metal and silk. Was his outfit really a suit, or was it actually some sort of armor?

At least she couldn't see any weapons on him, which was a relief, but she could understand why Bea had been hesitant to call Enforcement.

This alien seemed like he could be capable of *anything*.

A black mask covered the lower half of his face. Seamless and form-fitting, it was made from the same material as his armor. It gave him a mysterious and slightly menacing air as if he were some sort of high-tech, futuristic ninja.

Was he afraid of Earth's pathogens? It wasn't unusual to think that an alien might don a mask. Lots of people wore masks for various reasons: illnesses, allergies, a desire to be anonymous in the age of constant surveillance. If Clarissa got a virus, she popped on a mask for a few days, no biggie.

Or... was he hiding something?

Above the mask, his gaze was searingly intense.

He had *red* eyes.

Clarissa was wearing her own mask; a neutral, professional expression she jokingly called her *battle-face*, but she couldn't stop her heart from beating wildly. Her attention had been completely stolen by this strange alien. As clichéd as it seemed, a feeling of mystery and danger radiated from him.

He was the boss here. That much was obvious. She'd been Garner's EA for long enough to develop a sense for these things.

And he was looking at her like *that*—as if he recognized her from somewhere.

But there was no way that was possible. She'd never had anything to do with Kordolians before.

A terrifying thought suddenly occurred to her. Was it possible that she'd drawn attention to herself because of her

recent searches for information about Kordolians on the Networks?

No... there's no way they could be targeting me because of that. I'm sure millions of people on Earth are doing searches on Kordolians right now.

Her very first encounter with Kordolians in the flesh, and *this* was how she felt?

Get a grip.

With great effort, she dragged her eyes away and briefly made eye contact with the other two.

Clarissa smiled, suppressing a little shiver as her attention snapped back toward *his* crimson stare once again.

Here we go...

She breathed in deeply and steeled herself. “Gentlemen. This is a rather unexpected visit.” She clasped her hands together. “So, what brings you to Garner Tower today?”

EIGHT

TO SAY that Jerik was irritable was an understatement.

He was drugged up to his eyeballs, having been injected with a suppressant that would reduce his chances of getting the Mating Fever. That's why he was wearing the respirator, too—it completely prevented his olfactory system from exposure to even the slightest hint of her scent and the unique pheromones that would trigger a powerful biological response in him.

Jerik wasn't taking any chances.

There was no manual for this.

No system.

He was on his own.

Tarak had left him to his own devices, as he usually did. Jerik appreciated that about his boss—the only man he would ever serve under. Tarak wanted things done—and he *always* got what he wanted. He treated his men fairly, permitting requests and differences of opinion.

He had even been known to change his mind based on advice.

And unlike some of the military bosses Jerik had known—micromanaging bastards—Tarak didn't issue minute orders

over every infernal little detail. He trusted his people and rarely intervened once a plan was set into motion.

With regards to finding a mate, Jerik was now left to his own devices as long as he followed the rules laid out by Tarak.

And that was fairly simple.

No force, no duress.

Respect their customs.

He'd tried to be open-minded and seek advice from humans, but their suggested methods were all but incomprehensible to him.

However, one thing that stuck in his mind was their advice that he should create a situation of proximity—so they could familiarize themselves with one another—and *then* decide whether compatibility existed.

So he'd decided to engineer his own terms. He'd consulted with Zyara's human, Kainan, and technologically—and culturally—astute Mavrel to find any excuse for Darkstar to engage in dealings with Clarissa's employer—this so-called *Garner Corporation*. Indeed, the *Darkstar Mercenaries* had plenty of reasons to be interested in a company that was involved in the procurement and development of one of Earth's dwindling resources—land.

Of course, they could just go ahead and *take* territory from the humans, but they'd decided to respect Earth's rights as a sovereign planet.

This was a much softer approach.

Land could always be acquired through the proper channels—respecting human laws and customs—and as they now owned assets on Earth, the Darkstar Corporation had a universally justifiable right to defend them.

Not a single member of the New Intergalactic Forum—a ruling body composed of representatives from all planets and territories in the Nine Galaxies—could argue against the legal right to defend one's property.

Earth was theirs.

Humans were their responsibility.

As a secondary measure, he'd enlisted Xalikian—with the help of his mate, Sera—to create a cultural event. It wasn't only Clarissa who'd received an invitation. Others had been selected to attend based on potential genetic compatibility.

Today's visit served two purposes. It was about business, but it was also about forming a preliminary connection.

It would *not* be unreasonable for him to approach her should she decide to attend the Cultural Event.

And she *would*.

Jerik stared at the female who had unwittingly become the target of his undivided attention. It was strange, but ever since she'd come into his awareness, he'd been thinking about her. What was she like? What *did* she like? Of course, he knew things about her already—factual things—but you couldn't quantify character or the innate biological *sense* of a person through packets of data.

Humans were complicated beings.

And right now, this human, Clarissa Lee, who'd been nothing but a distant image; a profile on his holo—was standing right before him.

In the flesh.

And Jerik couldn't stop looking at her.

She had no idea who he was or why he was here—what his *true* intentions were—and yet she met his gaze unflinchingly, and everything about her was perfectly polished and unflappable.

He took in her appearance, which was completely alluring, to say the least.

She was a creature of softness and elegance; of self-assuredness wrapped in a fragile armor—gleaming smile, perfectly groomed hair, tailored clothing that was both demure and wicked, for although it hugged her form in all the right places, her outfit left almost everything to his imagination.

So *this* was what it felt like to encounter a human female who had the potential to form a mate-bond. He took in her delicate features, which had been artfully accentuated with the application of a small amount of pigment.

Kaiin's Hells; she was fucking *beautiful*.

Her smile was gorgeous but Callidum-hard. Her eyes betrayed nothing of her nervousness, even though he could detect it in the slight tremor of her fingers.

“So, what brings you to Garner Tower today?” Her voice was as fluid as a stealth cruiser's slipstream, her Universal fluent.

Jerik was transfixed. He'd never encountered a human female like this before. The only others he'd met were the mates—already spoken for—there was no way he would ever allow himself to take even the slightest bit of interest in an already claimed mate.

But *she*... she was ripe for the taking.

As long as she was willing.

How could he, as-rough-as-guts and accustomed to the bastardy and brutality of war; he, who liked to *blow things up*, for the Goddess's sake, claim a delicate creature like her?

How was he even supposed to talk to her?

Jerik hated to admit it, but he was a little lost for words right now.

He needed more time to process his thoughts.

He sat back, keeping quiet as Kainan leaned forward, hands steepled together. When it came to dealing with Earth matters, Zyara's human was as sharp and decisive as an ice-pick. It helped that he knew Earth's complex systems inside and out, both legal *and* illegal.

“A meeting with your boss wouldn't be too much trouble at this time of the day, would it?” Kai's mild tone belied his—*their*—intent.

“Of course not,” Clarissa answered smoothly. “I’m sure Mr Garner will be more than happy to meet with you right away.”

Jerik felt a flicker of admiration. As a former High Commander, he’d dealt with his share of gatekeepers. Some would try and lie and obfuscate and stall for time, not grasping the seriousness of the situation.

This woman, on the other hand...

She got it straight away. She hadn’t even had to communicate with her boss to seek his instructions. She already understood that when *his* kind showed up on their doorstep, it was folly to deny them.

“I would just need a short amount of time to let Mr Garner know so that he can clear his schedule.” Her smile remained fixed in place as she looked at Kainan. “And in order for us to best prepare for the anticipated meeting, may I know what the order of business is today?”

“We want to talk to Garner about a parcel of land he has earmarked for development. The proposed site of the *Copernicus Towers*.”

“I see.” If she was surprised in any way, she didn’t show it. “Are you interested in purchasing property within the development?”

“No, Miss....”

“Lee. Clarissa Lee.”

“Miss Lee. We intend to acquire that land.”

Her perfectly shaped eyebrows rose ever so slightly. “That may be problematic.”

“That’s why we’ve come to discuss the matter in person. I’m sure that even Cooper Garner might be amenable to our terms.”

“The price to acquire *that* parcel of land may very well be beyond impossible to achieve.”

“Our resources are vast, as are our capabilities. Almost infinite, one might say.” A hint of amusement entered Kainan’s voice. It seemed the humans were engaging in communication on some deeper level; there was a subtext to this exchange that eluded Jerik.

Not that it mattered. Kainan would fill him in on everything later—in a way that he understood.

For a heartbeat, Clarissa Lee’s disquiet was revealed. It escaped in the form of fluttering lashes; in the form of a quickening of her heartbeat and a slight increase in the trembling of her fingers.

For a heartbeat, Jerik felt an irrational urge to go and comfort her.

Don’t be afraid. You should never be afraid of us—of me.

But then the moment passed, and her defenses slid back into place once again, seamless and impenetrable.

She was perfect in a way he could barely comprehend.

“For the record, gentlemen, before informing Mr Garner about this meeting, may I know exactly *who* we have the pleasure of welcoming to our headquarters today?”

Her attention shifted, and for a moment, her gaze locked onto his.

Particularly his.

That meant she’d identified him as the decision-maker; the most powerful person in the room.

Which he was, but it didn’t really matter.

A jolt went through him. His insides twisted and his heart clenched.

What in the Nine Hells is this feeling?

He’d taken every precaution to avoid being exposed to her potent biological essence. Surely, this couldn’t be the stirrings of attraction.

Not *yet*.

Kainan stood and offered her a respectful bow in the Kordolian fashion. “I’m Kai. Advisor to the Darkstar Corporation on *human*-related matters both legal and financial.” He nodded in Mavrel’s direction. “This is Mavrel Atavan. Technology and intelligence. And most importantly...” He turned to Jerik, a hint of amusement curving his lips.

Jerik shot him a baleful look. Was it now the case that even humans were getting amused at his expense?

“This is Jerik. He’s in charge of... *many* things.”

Her eyes widened ever so slightly as she met his gaze once again.

Jerik felt he had to do something; he had to acknowledge her at the very least, so he offered her a slight nod.

Her eyes lingered just a moment too long, and he wondered whether that was a good sign or a bad one.

Then she smiled, and Jerik was glad he’d had the foresight to take the precaution of wearing the respirator.

Without it, he feared he would have succumbed to his most primal instincts.

How did they do it? The warriors that had come before him... those First Division bastards. How had they managed to secure their mates without terrifying them... or breaking them?

He was also somewhat relieved that the mask partially hid his expression right now.

Clarissa returned Kainan’s bow, but the entire time, she was looking at *him*. “Kai, Mavrel... *Jerik*. It’s a pleasure to meet you. Now, if you will just excuse me for a moment, I’ll be upstairs moving heaven and earth to facilitate this meeting for you.” She chuckled softly; a low, throaty sound that triggered a strange, pleasurable kind of tension within him. “Although I’m sure it won’t take that much effort. I’m sure Mr Garner will be more than happy to oblige. I won’t be long. In the meantime, please make yourselves comfortable. Help yourself to whatever you like from the beverage bot.”

And with that, she was gone, her heels clicking on the polished floor in a rhythmic, mesmerizing cadence, leaving Jerik to contemplate his next move.

NINE

CLARISSA RODE the elevator up to the thirty-seventh floor.

It stopped at several levels, letting people on and off. She exchanged pleasantries and smiles, hiding the fact that she was *shook*.

At last, she reached the top. She waited a second before the doors opened. The AI needed to check and confirm her presence—her and only her. This was Garner’s floor, and only a handful of approved individuals were allowed into his office.

Clarissa didn’t seek out her boss straight away. Instead, she went to her own office—a small but light-filled room in the corner of the building, with floor-to-ceiling windows looking out across the city and the harbor beyond. She put her bag on her desk and sat down, leaning forward, dropping her face into her hands.

She took a deep, shuddering breath.

“*Oh, my god,*” she whispered. Adrenaline rushed through her before dumping itself like a wave, leaving her shaking.

I can’t believe I just did that.

She’d been alone in a room with not just one but *two* Kordolians.

Actual aliens.

And one of them was called Jerik Garul.

The Jerik Garul, who had appeared last night as a grainy, indistinct, and altogether menacing figure on her holoscreen.

Former High Commander in the Kordolian Imperial Military.

Before the Kordolian Empire had been dissolved, Garul would have been an extraordinarily powerful figure. Second only to Tarak al Akkadian in terms of influence.

And he probably still was.

What was *that* guy doing here?

Her unease intensified. What if they'd really caught her snooping on them last night? What if he was here to deal with her?

Don't be paranoid. There's no way a powerful figure like him would be interested in someone like me.

To think she'd stood there right in front of them and put on that little show, acting cool and calm and self-assured, when really, she was a quivering mess inside.

It didn't help that Jerik Garul had been looking at her the whole time. His penetrating gaze stuck in her mind. It felt like he could see through her, right down to the scared little girl she felt like underneath her polished facade.

Why had he been looking at her like that?

She'd tried not to be affected by his presence, but his mere existence was a magnet for her attention.

Ugh. What is this feeling?

He was so fucking raw and primal and everything she never knew could exist in a sentient being on two legs.

Clarissa took a deep, shuddering breath. She tried to erase the image of Jerik Garul from her mind, but she couldn't.

He exuded pure power. He was jacked and ripped like nobody's business, arms bulging, chest and abs sculpted and

enhanced by that form-fitting obsidian armor of his.

And even though his features were partially concealed by that sleek black mask, the intensity of his expression had been searing.

It was in the way his pale brows drew together, leaving a slight crease between them.

It was in the crimson depths of his stare.

In the way he just *was*, and he radiated a certain kind of stillness, reminding her of a giant, immovable boulder.

God, he wasn't even her type, and she was having these kinds of thoughts?

Wait...

Why had the notion of *type* even entered her head?

Am I going crazy?

Clarissa shook her head and looked up. She stared out across the city, across the harbor, watching tiny white flecks drift across the water—boats.

These aliens had just rocked up to demand Garner's land?

Garner *never* sold off his land. The only thing he ever parted with was long-term leases on the box-like apartments he constructed all over the world.

And the *Copernicus* site?

That was supposed to be his jewel-in-the-crown; a vast tract of land in the middle of the Oceanic Continent that had been in the Garner family ever since Cooper's ancestors arrived here. Centuries ago, it had been a cattle station. These days, it was nothing more than barren desert, the pastures and dams long dried up, and Garner wanted to transform it into a lush oasis; a new city within a stone's throw of Teluria.

There was money to be made from terraforming that baked landscape.

Loads of it.

And now the aliens wanted it?

And *that* guy was involved...

Although the other two, Kai and Mavrel, were intimidating enough, her attention had always been drawn to Jerik Garul. Never before had she encountered someone who radiated such a commanding aura.

Not even Cooper Garner, the trillionaire, could hold a candle to him.

Speak of the devil...

A gentle chime dragged her out of her temporary madness. Her attention flicked toward a glowing blue light near the top of her desk.

That was the *call signal*.

Garner wanted her in his office, now.

All he had to do was press a button, and she was expected to be there within five seconds, at his beck-and-call for as long as she remained in the building.

Clarissa was always reminded of a certain analogy, but she didn't want to think it.

She stood, sighing as she smoothed down her trousers.

Then she exited her office, walking across the plush hand-knotted silk carpet until she reached the tall, polished burr-wood double doors that led to Cooper Garner's personal office.

The door swung open noiselessly as she pushed it.

Sometimes, these doors were locked, even when Garner was inside. And even when they were open, she wasn't permitted to enter without being called.

Garner was always watching. He knew where she was and what she was doing. There was no time for downtime, even during her lunch break.

Clarissa carefully composed her expression into a neutral mask, reminding herself that he was *paying her well enough*—for now.

She wasn't going to be doing this forever.

It was just a temporary job.

“Good morning, Mr Garner,” she said cheerily as she walked toward her boss's desk.

Cooper Garner sat in his big leather chair, barely looking up as she approached. He was going through some detailed construction plans on his holo-console.

He wore what he always wore when he was at work—a simple black tech shirt and tailored grey trousers. His salt-and-pepper hair was slicked back, accentuating his sharp features, which had that smooth, ageless look the ultra-rich were able to achieve through a combination of anti-aging medicines and cosmetic treatments.

Clarissa knew very well that he was at least in his sixties, though.

“I see you've been busy this morning, Clarissa,” Garner said, meeting her gaze at last. “You know I don't give last-minute appointments.”

Ah. So he'd been watching, listening.

Of *course* he had.

Clarissa smiled, resisting the urge to grit her teeth. “Well, these people aren't our typical clients, as you're undoubtedly aware.”

“No matter who they are, they can't just barge in here and expect me to meet them at the drop of a hat.” Garner pinned her with a cold stare—as if this was all somehow *her* fault.

Clarissa's smile felt like a rictus grin. “Would you like me to send them away, then?”

She called his bluff. *He* was the one who was interested in aliens; the one who'd made her research Kordolians in the first place. She knew very well that he was desperate to establish business links with the Kordolians. In the grand scheme of things, Kordolians were *very* wealthy. After all, not too long ago, they'd controlled most of the intergalactic economy.

Her smile widened. “I can tell them to come back another time if you like. They seem reasonable, even the one called Jerik Garul. For someone who used to hold such a high rank within the old empire, he seems surprisingly unassuming... but maybe I just got the wrong impression. I mean, he’s a former *High Commander*. How could I possibly know what he might be thinking?”

Garner went quiet. He fiddled with his holo-plans some more, making her wait.

Clarissa stood there, quietly resenting her boss, who always treated her as if she were lesser. As if he were an emperor and she a mere servant. He probably wasn’t even aware of it. It was just how he’d been raised; the kind of world he lived in.

In his head, the gap between people like him and people like her was unimaginable.

But she’d worked for him long enough to be able to predict a few things.

And he’d taken her bait.

Bet you didn’t know who he was, huh?

“I’ll meet them,” he said at last. “*After* lunch. Until then, they can wait. That will give us enough time to ensure adequate defensive measures. Contact Gage Security. Tell Erasmus I need a full mercenary outfit in the building. He’ll understand.”

“Mr Garner, may I suggest that the Kordolians might not react well to such measures?”

Cooper Garner looked up, his grey eyes full of arrogance. “Dear, this is a negotiation, and we are on *my* turf. I’m not giving up *Copernicus*, but certain things *might* be for sale. I will see the aliens when I am ready, being mindful of the fact that I do not normally grant unsolicited appointments.”

Clarissa did a secret internal eye-roll. *This* was going to be fun. Extended waiting times and mercenary backup. *Yay*. “And how might we best entertain the Kordolians in the meantime, Sir?”

Garner waved his hand dismissively. “Well, you’ll have to figure something out, won’t you?”

TEN

WITH A HEAVY HEART and a cold sensation in her belly, Clarissa rode the elevator down to the ground floor, where the Kordolians and their human ally were waiting.

She a bit like the messenger who was terrified of getting shot.

Somehow, she was supposed to convince them to wait around for hours until Garner was ready to meet them.

Well, they could always leave and come back later, but Clarissa got the feeling *these* people weren't used to waiting for anyone.

What was her boss *thinking*? Didn't he understand that Kordolians possessed tech that could destroy them all in an instant?

She'd never understood some of Garner's decisions, but then again, none of them had really affected her until now.

The elevator smoothly reached the ground floor. The doors opened. Clarissa steeled herself and walked into the foyer, heels clicking in a steady, confident rhythm that was the complete opposite of how she felt inside.

She walked past Bea, who was arranging a bunch of long-stemmed electric blue peonies in a glass vase filled with water. The genetically engineered colors they were coming up with these days were getting more and more outrageous.

What next? Polka-dot flowers? Or would they make them glow in the dark?

“You okay, Clarissa?” Bea snipped the end off a long stem. The air was filled with sweet fragrance.

“No,” Clarissa said lightly as she stopped to savor the fresh floral scent. “I’m supposed to figure out how to keep our guests entertained. Any ideas, Bea?”

“Well, you *could* show them around, I suppose. Lunch? Go all out? They’re potential high-value clients, aren’t they?” Bea rotated the stem in her hands, admiring the flower. She put it to her nose and inhaled deeply. “Company expense account? You rarely ever use it.”

“I suppose it’s justifiable.” Clarissa didn’t mention to Bea that the thought of entertaining the dangerous-looking trio for the next few hours—let alone figuring out how to *feed* them—was causing a sensation akin to sharpened icicles piercing her chest.

What did Kordolians even eat, anyway? They might be sentient, bipedal, and remarkably similar to humans in appearance—sans the elf ears and the fangs and the different coloring—but she wouldn’t be surprised if their physiology was a little different.

They were *aliens*, after all.

And she’d just been presented with an opportunity some reckless individuals would go crazy for.

Some humans were fascinated by Kordolians. They idolized them and posted exaggerated accounts of even the slightest encounter all over the Network’s Social Hive.

“You know what?” She took the peony from Bea’s hands and took a deep breath, letting its fresh floral scent envelop her senses. “Maybe that isn’t a bad idea.” She popped the stem

into the vase of water. “I’ve never had to deal with anything *this* unexpected before—not on the job, anyway.”

Bea laughed. “My friend, you deal with those mercurial trillionaires all the time. I’m sure you can handle this. It isn’t as if the aliens have been hostile or threatening. I’m sure they could have torn up the place already if they wanted. All you have to do is turn on the charm. Good luck. You *got* this.”

“Thanks for the moral support, I suppose.” Clarissa left Bea with her flowers and buried her trepidation as she made her way toward the boardroom of doom.

She decided the best approach was to go on a charm offensive before any of the aliens had a chance to suspect that Garner was dicking them around.

“Gentlemen,” she beamed. “Mr Garner is pleased to meet you, but before we get down to the tedious minutiae of business, he’s asked me to extend you the highest level of hospitality. A tour of the tower, and then lunch at the finest seafood restaurant in Sydney.”

Judging from their stone-cold expressions, neither the Kordolians nor Kai were impressed.

Some people *loved* this kind of shit—the wining and dining—but this trio obviously saw right through the facade.

“Will Cooper Garner be joining us?” Kai asked skeptically.

“My apologies, but he has some prior engagements he needs to attend to first.”

The sound of Kai’s soft, humorless laughter chilled her to the bone. “Cut the shit, Miss Lee. Is your boss playing games with us?” He nodded in Jerik’s direction. “These guys are only acting nice because I asked them to, but there are many other ways we can do this.”

Clarissa silently cursed Garner for putting her between a rock and the deep, dark chasm of doom.

Once again, the thought of walking away from this job flitted through her mind, but she quashed it.

She had stability.

For stability, she could handle these mildly threatening aliens... right?

“I’m sorry, Kai, but—”

“If Garner refuses to see us right *now*, the alternative will be a thousand times more painful—for him.”

Clarissa racked her brain for ways to salvage the situation—and found nothing.

But then her salvation came unexpectedly, in the form of a deep, gravelly voice.

Jerik Garul, former High Commander of the most feared military force in the Nine Galaxies, held up an obsidian-gloved hand. “Kainan, it’s fine.”

Kai and Mavrel looked at Jerik in disbelief.

“Sir?” Mavrel especially seemed surprised.

“We will wait,” he said, locking eyes with Clarissa. “And avail ourselves of Ms Lee’s hospitality.”

That intensity of his was the strangest thing. The longer she spent in his presence, the more she felt his scrutiny wasn’t harsh or threatening. It was more... *curiosity*.

At least, that’s what she thought it was.

Her smile evaporated. How could she keep her professional mask in place when he looked at her like *that*?

Don’t overthink it. He’s a client, just like all the others. Just pretend he’s one of Garner’s irritating trillionaire friends.

She never felt intimidated by the humans Garner dealt with, so why should this guy be any different?

Well, aside from the fact that he’d probably colonized, enslaved, killed, and terrorized countless people across the Nine Galaxies.

Aside from the fact that he was probably *still* in charge of ships that had enough firepower to obliterate Earth.

Maybe... if she simply pretended he was an ordinary human being, just like all the other clients she’d handled, she

could do this without losing her mind.

“Thank you for your understanding.” She tried to convey her gratitude through her tone. Out of all the unlikely people to give her a break, this *Kordolian mercenary* was the one to let her off the hook. “Rest assured, I’ll make it worth your while.”

“I look forward to it.” His voice softened.

Clarissas’ heartbeat quickened.

Well, that was rather *charming* of him, wasn’t it?

Why was he being so nice to her?

For a moment—just a fleeting *moment*—she allowed herself to drown in the full force of his presence.

Powerful. Masculine. Quietly intimidating and yet strangely reassuring.

He evoked something in her—a feeling she didn’t quite understand. A weird rush of excitement, the way one might feel before jumping off a precipice with a bungee rope attached.

She’d always been the cautious type, but with a real-live Kordolian right in front of her, her curiosity was piqued.

Right now, she didn’t care about the *how* or *why* of it.

Suddenly, she wanted to pick Jerik Garul’s brains.

Who was he, really?

What made him tick?

Was this veneer of civility just a facade, or was he really different from how Earth’s media portrayed Kordolians?

She couldn’t deny it; part of her found him weirdly attractive, even though he was pretty much the complete opposite of the guys she’d dated in the past.

Maybe that’s why she was so intrigued by him.

“Clarissa,” he said suddenly, and she couldn’t be sure, but it almost looked like he was *smiling* beneath his mask. “You don’t have to feel intimidated by us. I’m very well aware of how many humans may perceive us, but I can assure you,

there is no threat to you from us whatsoever. Our dealings are with your boss. I know you're just doing your duty, and believe me, I know how hard it can be to please a master whose methods you don't always agree with."

"Y-you do?" Clarissa blurted without thinking. She couldn't imagine *this* man being answerable to anyone.

Jerik's eyes crinkled ever so slightly—he *was* smiling, wasn't he? "My current boss isn't like that, but I have served under many, and there were those who never stepped outside their own enclaves. They were the most difficult ones."

Clarissa's eyes widened in surprise. Was he a mind-reader?

There was no way she was going to start feeling solidarity with the alien commander.

So she chose to ignore his scarily astute observation. "I would be delighted to take you to the viewing platform at the top of the tower. It has a three-sixty-degree view of the city and the harbor."

"Very well," Jerik rumbled.

Both his sidekicks gave the commander an indecipherable look.

Mavrel cleared his throat. "I'm not exactly fond of heights or sunshine." Something appeared in his hand—a small black tech-device of some sort. "With your permission, Sir, I'll stay here and do some work."

Kai stood abruptly. "I have some business to attend to in this part of town. I'll make a quick detour and return in an hour."

She turned to Jerik. "Do you have somewhere you need to be as well, Mr Garul?"

The Kordolian shrugged. "No."

Of *course* he didn't.

"Well, I suppose it'll be just you and me, then."

His indecipherable expression sent a little shiver of anticipation through her. "Indeed."

ELEVEN

THE SITUATION HAD PLAYED RIGHT into his hands.

Jerik found himself in an advantageous position. Suddenly, unexpectedly, he had an opportunity to be alone with her.

It certainly helped that Kainan and Mavrel were tuned in to his demands; they'd immediately understood the situation and found reasons to be elsewhere.

He stood and made his way around the table to where Clarissa was.

She regarded him with a look that was equal parts trepidation and curiosity.

There's no need to be nervous, he wanted to say, but he knew words alone couldn't counter the immense weight of reputation.

Especially since most of that reputation was warranted.

For a human, she was doing remarkably well to keep her composure.

"Follow me," Clarissa said stiffly, gesturing toward the exit. As he reached her, she walked away, expecting him to follow.

So he did, allowing her to stay a step ahead of him as she led him toward the transportation module the humans referred to as an *elevator*.

She pressed her palm against a panel in the wall and waited until the doors opened. “After you, Sir.”

“It’s just Jerik,” he said gruffly. He didn’t want her to call him *Sir*. It didn’t sit well with him at all.

“Jerik, then.” She smiled, a flash of brilliant white between her dusky red lips.

Why was that sight so fucking tantalizing?

Jerik remained silent as he followed her into the transportation module.

The doors closed behind them.

The *elevator* was lined with mirrors. The effect was disconcerting, throwing up an infinite array of repeated reflections on either side.

Why did humans always clutter their environments with unnecessary visual stimuli?

He looked at the two of them in the mirror, stealing a glance at the woman who had captured his curiosity ever since she’d been presented to him as a candidate.

He hadn’t expected to come this close to her so soon.

She really was beautiful; elegant and delicate, her skin flawless, her face immaculately enhanced by subtle applications of pigment. Her sleek black hair was tied up in a smooth bun, revealing the silky nape of her neck.

The sight of it drove him a little mad.

What would happen if he caught a tendril of her scent in a confined space like this?

Would she be in danger from him?

How did those First Division bastards do it—keep their composure?

There was a faint *ding* as the elevator reached its destination. The doors slid open.

Jerik caught her staring in the mirror—at *him*?

Surely not.

She stepped out.

He followed, a brisk breeze swirling around them as they walked onto an open-air platform.

The infernal sunlight was blinding. Jerik raised his hand to shield his eyes, squinting against the harsh light. He could see—only just.

He uttered a command in Kordolian, activating his integrated armor-suit. Worn and not integrated, it wasn't as seamless as the symbiotic nanites his First Division brothers had been implanted with, but it was the next best thing—light, ultra-strong, and responsive.

That was what he wore almost all of the time.

He couldn't be bothered trying to blend in with the humans; to experiment with Earthian fashions like Mavrel or some of the younger Kordolians.

He was what he was, and he was too old and battle-hardened to change his ways. Whoever became his mate—and he prayed it would be *her*—would have to accept him as he was, armor, scars, and all.

Responding to his command, the armor extended segmentally from his neckline, forming a visor that shielded his eyes from the damaging ultraviolet radiation. Although his skin was coated in a transparent nano-polymer UV blocker, allowing him to walk outside in broad daylight, the layer didn't cover the most vulnerable part—his eyes.

He blinked furiously, waiting a moment for his eyesight to clear.

The discomfort was only temporary, and it was all worth it for the chance to get her alone.

“Are you all right, Jerik?” A look of consternation crossed Clarissa’s features. She tensed as if afraid of what his reaction might be.

“Your planet’s sun is extremely harsh,” he lamented, folding his arms. “Unlike you humans, who evolved in the light, we haven’t developed resistance to ultraviolet radiation.”

The expression of mild horror gracing her features was somewhat adorable. “I didn’t realize! I’m so sorry, Jerik. Let’s go back inside.”

“No. You brought me out here to show me the view. I’m interested in your little city. Besides, I’m protected now. Everything’s fine.” He tapped his visor, made from millions of nanites, hardened to form a transparent shield.

It was the latest upgrade, designed to make Earth’s harsh conditions bearable. Thanks to the continual research Zharek carried out on the First Division warriors, the tech was evolving at a scary rate.

She chuckled, a low, enthralling sound that took him by surprise because it was one of the most pleasing things he’d ever heard. “*Little city*, huh? Sometimes, I forget the Universe is so big. And I apologize. It was presumptuous of me to think you wouldn’t have a backup plan for sunlight exposure.”

She looked at him again, and suddenly, it felt like her mask had fallen away.

The wind tugged at her hair, pulling a tendril loose, twisting it this way and that.

“A dozen revolutions of command has taught me that I need to have a backup plan for everything.”

“Even delayed meetings?”

“Delays are inevitable. And I’ve encountered my share of egotistical bastards in the Universe. Let’s just say your boss is fortunate I don’t operate the way I used to.” He stared out across the city skyline; across the shimmering body of water humans called a *harbor*. Tiny floating vessels drifted across it, traveling in a leisurely manner as if they didn’t have a care in the Universe.

Humans were like that sometimes, caught in their little bubble, unaware of what lay in wait for them beyond Earth's idyllic blue skies.

He saw buildings and rooftops stretching toward the horizon. Structures of metal and artificial hardened stone. Bridges. Transportation lanes and tracks. Bots and drones whizzing through the air.

Humans built their civilized zones in a sprawling, disorganized manner, but Jerik had to admit there was a certain kind of genius in how their cities seemed to *work* despite all the chaos.

"I've lived in this city all my life, but I never get tired of this view," Clarissa said wistfully, following the direction of his gaze. "You know, Mr Garul, the more I thought about it, the more surprised I was... that you would personally come to Garner Tower to negotiate. My boss is one of the most powerful people on the planet, but I have no doubt you could find a way to take that site from him without going through all this bother."

Jerik nodded. That had been his first instinct. It would be easy to threaten Earth's ruling Federation into forcing Garner to relinquish his land, but then he wouldn't have had a chance to come face to face with *her*.

How pleased he'd been when Mavrel had informed him of this very *convenient* reason to visit Garner Tower.

The area in question was a large patch of arid territory in the center of this very continent. It wouldn't be remarkable or worth bothering about if not for the fact that it bordered Kenna Kendricks's homestead.

The current site of Darkstar's base on Earth.

How did she already understand the situation so well?

"Your loyalty to Garner seems a little fluid for someone of your position."

"I would never stray outside the boundaries of my official duty, Jerik. I'm just being pragmatic. I know you'll get what you want either way, so I'm trying to preempt things on behalf

of my employer. But I can't help but be curious. When I first heard that your ships had appeared in Earth's orbit, like many other humans, I thought this was it. That you'd take control of the planet—of *us*. So why haven't you?"

"Principles," Jerik shrugged. "We're not an empire anymore."

"I heard the empire was defeated. *Your* people did that?" She was openly curious and unafraid to show it. There was a certain naïveté about her, or maybe she knew a lot more than she let on and was willing to take a calculated risk.

He marveled that this delicate human could be like this with *him* of all people.

"I'm anti-imperialist," Jerik admitted. "Wasn't always the case, but when one sees enough and *does* enough, even the hardest of hearts can start to crack. My father was a military man. So was his father before him. As far as I can trace back, the men in my family have been warriors. They go to war, get wounded, go back again, and eventually get killed, leaving behind their mates and their younglings. I'm the last of my line, and there came a time when I realized I didn't want to be fodder for the meat grinder anymore. Didn't want to serve masters that wouldn't even bat an eyelid if I perished. And if I were ever to have the fortune of finding a mate and producing offspring, I wouldn't want that fate for her. There were other reasons, too—too many to mention. To give you the short of it, we'd all had enough. That's why we nixed the empire. And we all swore we wouldn't ruin the Universe by carrying on with their methods."

He surprised himself by saying all this. Maybe it was because he found her straightforwardness refreshing.

She was the first potential mate he'd encountered, and he was already spilling his guts to her.

This could become dangerous.

"Your threats are just more sophisticated now," she remarked dryly before her eyes widened—as if she hadn't meant to say that aloud.

Jerik chuckled.

She stared at him, still with that shocked, wide-eyed look, hovering between curiosity and trepidation.

Long, black lashes framed her eyes in the most delicate way. Her uncertain smile made him want to drop his armor and his concealed weapons and reassure her he wasn't *that* kind of monster anymore.

“That was supposed to be a joke.”

“I know. And you're right.”

“That came out wrong. I'm sorry. I...” She averted her gaze, looking out across the shimmering blue water. “Habit of saying inappropriate things when nervous. I'll be honest: this is the most unlikely encounter I've ever had. I'm just an ordinary Citizen of the Federation. Everything I know about Kordolians, I've learned from our Networks. I can't even begin to understand what you've had to endure, Mr Garul. But thank you for personally explaining something that's mystified the hell out of most humans on this planet. You have your reasons, and important ones at that. I respect that. I can only ask that when we're all seated at the negotiating table, you'll remember that my boss comes from a very different culture to yours.”

Jerik snorted. *So do you.* Even though she was on the payroll, he didn't like her speaking on behalf of that Garner idiot, who was apparently arrogant enough to think he could play power games with him.

If not for Clarissa, he would have had this Cooper Garner understanding *exactly* where he sat in the Universal hierarchy—beneath the edge of his blade.

They didn't want to break the man or dismantle his business empire.

They just needed to take *that* particular parcel of land.

Once he gave it up, they would leave him alone.

Her, on the other hand...

“You know who I am, don't you, Clarissa?”

“What makes you say that?” She was cautious again, her professional mask slipping back into place.

“I never told you my second name. And I don’t think it was a slip that you called me by it.”

“A reputation like yours is difficult to hide, Mr Garul.”

“I told you, it’s just Jerik.”

“*Jerik*,” she repeated, as if saying his name for the very first time. Because this time, she said it differently, as if she *knew* him. “Fine. I’ll admit, I knew *of* you. A little.”

“Oh?” Never could he have imagined that he would give two shits about what another being thought of him.

But now it seemed he did.

The wind swirled around them, cutting through the sounds of the city. And all of a sudden, Jerik heard voices.

Angry shouts drifted up from the street below, amplified by some sort of device. All the way up here, the sound was faint. Clarissa appeared oblivious. He doubted she’d detected the sounds—compared to his, her hearing wasn’t as acute.

But surely, she could see the plume of red smoke drifting up into the clear blue sky.

She groaned in dismay.

Instantly, Jerik’s danger-sense was activated. “What is it?” he asked sharply.

“We get them occasionally, but this is the last thing we need right now. Especially *today* of all days.”

“What do you mean, *them*?”

Who do I need to destroy?

“Protestors,” Clarissa sighed. “Not everyone likes what Garner Corp represents. I hope you have some form of aerial transport nearby because it’s going to be absolute hell trying to get out of this building today.”

TWELVE

CLARISSA'S HEART sank as the red plume of smoke drifted into the sky.

The protesters were back. Of all days, it just had to be *today*, when bloody *aliens* were in the house.

She would never admit it to Garner's people, but she could see where the protesters were coming from. Many of Garner Corporation's developments were built on reclaimed or barren land—at least, the company portrayed it as barren. Deserts, arid scrubland, old industrial sites...

Garner had coined the term *terraformation*. They planted urban forests and packed high-rise dwellings around them. They made artificial lakes and brought in instant pop-up businesses to create a *vibe*.

Build it, and they will come.

That was the theory, anyway.

It helped that Garner Corp tended to buy out all the existing vacant properties in the surrounding towns, forcing people looking for accommodation to buy their apartments.

That's how they controlled the market and the prices.

What they were doing wasn't *illegal*, but the profit margins were starting to get a little out of hand.

Although Clarissa worked for Garner, even she could see the problem with it.

And the protests were becoming more and more frequent. The Federation could only disperse them when they crossed a particular line—like committing violence—and the protesters were clever enough to know how to stay within the law—*just*.

She glanced at Jerik Garul, who was staring at the smoke, not saying a word. He was perfectly still—almost unnaturally so. In spite of the surprisingly personal conversation they'd shared just moments ago, he suddenly felt cold.

He moved, stalking over to the edge, where a glass balustrade was the only thing separating them from the thirty-eight-story drop.

Clarissa had no idea what he was thinking. With his expression concealed behind that mask and his eyes hidden beneath that gleaming visor, he looked more like a cyborg than a warm-blooded being.

Kordolians *were* warm-blooded, weren't they?

If she touched his skin... would he feel cold or warm? What would he look like without that sleek battle suit of his?

Wait, why was she even thinking about touching him? Why was she wondering what his skin would look like—smooth or rough? Battle-hardened? Scarred?

His armor betrayed his physicality. He was built like an elite athlete or a professional fighter, one whose discipline required bursts of raw power.

A rugby player, perhaps.

There was a feeling of coiled-up tension to him, as if he could burst into violence at any moment.

And right now, he was staring over the edge of the building at the protesters in the street below. Clarissa found his demeanor mildly terrifying because she had no idea what he would do next. It wasn't as if he was one of the Garner Corp

employees that she, as the boss's EA, wielded *some* authority over.

She had no control over him whatsoever.

A big, hollow *boom* echoed from below. Something flew up into the sky. It was big and round and...

Clarissa followed its trajectory as it arced toward them.

Something appeared in Jerik's hand—it looked like a gun, but it was different from any gun she'd ever seen. It was pure black; compact and sleek.

Utterly alien.

How had he gotten that thing past security?

How had she not noticed it before?

What *else* was he packing in that getup of his?

Time seemed to slow as a dozen questions raced through her mind. She stared at the projectile, which was slowing. It looked like an orb of some sort: gleaming, plastic, about the size of a large balloon.

"Jerik," she said apprehensively. "Please don't shoot that thing."

What if it was a bomb?

It kept drifting up into the sky, tracing a lazy arc toward them. As it slowed, Clarissa could see that it was filled with something.

Whatever was inside was a shade of red.

Pop!

And then it burst.

It rained red.

What?

Confused and shaken, Clarissa instinctively ran, making for a pergola in the center of the rooftop. Thankfully, the automated louvers of its canopy were closed. "Jerik, take cover," she cried.

But she already knew they wouldn't make it in time.

Something warm and powerful wrapped around her waist.
Him?

She couldn't believe it. How did he move so fast?

“What are you—”

Words disappeared as he lowered her to the floor, dropping her but gently cradling her at the same time.

He covered her with his body, shielding her as the contents of the sphere rained down all around them.

Splat. Splat. Splat.

He was on top of her, his hard, armored body pressing against hers, and it occurred to her that he *should* have been incredibly heavy, but for some reason, he wasn't.

He'd controlled their fall, and now he was almost hovering, barely touching her as he shielded her from whatever the hell was falling from the sky.

He *was* warm, though; big and strong and ridiculously fast, and there was something about being in such close proximity to him that made her a little giddy.

What just... happened?

She'd just been protected by Jerik Garul, a Kordolian of considerable power and reputation.

He waited until the mysterious substance stopped falling from the sky. Then he got up, pulling her to her feet.

“Are you hurt anywhere?” he asked, his deep voice filled with concern.

A pleasant little tremor danced through her. How could he be like that? So earnest and serious... like he was really worried for her?

“I'm not hurt. Actually, I'm fine.” Clarissa looked around. The entire rooftop was covered in pink blobs.

Hot pink.

The stuff looked like slime mixed with paint. She ran her hand over her hair. It came away coated in pink stuff. She held it up to her nose and sniffed. It didn't smell overly chemical. The smell reminded her of the harmless paints she'd used in school.

But it was everywhere. On the rooftop, splattered on her much-loved suit. and all over...

Him.

She was kind of glad for the protective gear concealing his face because she wouldn't want to see his expression right now.

His entire demeanor felt... *thunderous.*

"What is this?" he growled, gesturing at the pink splatter, which was...

All over. His. Armor.

He swiped his hand across his visor, clearing his vision. Even the smooth dome of his head was covered in hot pink gunk.

Clarissa gulped. He'd sacrificed his beautiful head and badass armor to save her from the worst of the mess.

She found his gesture strangely touching.

The stuff was beginning to dry, forming a thin, plasticky layer.

What if it didn't wash off?

And yet, in some bizarre way, the abstract pink splotches made him look even more spectacular, contrasting with the seamless obsidian of his armor.

Like a work of art.

He would look good in *anything*, because...

What are you even thinking right now? Don't even go there.

"Are you sure you're all right?" He stalked forward, raising his hand.

She tensed.

In a swift, elegant gesture, he grazed her cheek, his fingers coming away stained with pink.

Oh. He was just wiping that stuff off my face.

Why was his touch so gentle?

Why did the sudden intimacy of it make her feel some kind of way inside? It was as if someone were pouring warm honey into her chest, and it was spreading through her body in the most pleasurable kind of way.

Maybe... she was actually a little bit attracted to him.

No way.

She was *not* going to find the big, tough, intimidating alien commander attractive.

She could have these thoughts fleetingly, examine them from a distance, and put them away.

That's all she would do, *surely*.

"Clarissa," he said softly, his voice turning arctic. "What is the meaning of this, and who do I need to kill?"

"No," she blurted, putting her hands up, her palms facing outwards in what she hoped was a placating gesture. "It's just a prank. The sort of thing protesters do all the time. I think it's a paint of some kind. Probably non-toxic and temporary. I'm sure it'll wash off with the slightest bit of rain. They probably thought it would be funny to paint Garner Tower bright pink for a while."

She was certain the image was already being broadcast all across the Networks, and it would probably make Garner Corp the butt of all kinds of jokes for quite a while.

"But you can't be certain of what it is," the alien countered, examining a pink blob that had attached itself to his fingers. "It might be dangerous, toxic, flammable..." He looked up, glaring at her through his visor. "Go inside. Make sure you decontaminate thoroughly. I'll be back."

"Wait, where are you going?"

As he turned, something extended from his right hand—a thin black metal cable of some sort. Clarissa stared in horrified fascination as the cable shot toward the concrete tiles of the rooftop.

Clink.

Suddenly, metal claws extended from the cable, anchoring it securely in the concrete.

Jerik moved toward the edge.

No, it can't be...

Too late, she understood that the cable was the very thing he was going to use to abseil off the damn building.

But how?

They were almost forty floors up, for god's sake.

And there was nothing she could do to stop him.

Nothing at all.

"Please don't kill anyone, Jerik," she called out, feeling rather helpless.

"As you wish." He raised a hand in a lazy salute.

Then he was gone, leaping over the glass balustrade, the cable disappearing with him.

Good thing the balustrade was made from ultra-strong fullerene glass, so it didn't shatter. The cable sawed at it, though, making an indent in the top edge of the glass.

Clarissa sighed and made a mental note to log a job with maintenance.

Then she made a dash for the elevator, and the few seconds it took to reach the ground floor felt like an eternity.

Infuriating as the pink paint bomb might be, there was no way she was going to let this alien run amok in a street full of protestors.

Not out the front of *her* tower.

THIRTEEN

CLARISSA'S HEART pounded like a war drum as she rode the elevator down to the ground floor.

Her thoughts were filled with panic.

What on *earth* was going on outside?

She prayed Jerik hadn't gone and done anything too extreme. The protesters were a nuisance, but they didn't deserve to get beaten up over some stupid prank.

And she had no doubt the Kordolian could very easily beat them up.

He would be a wolf amongst sheep.

The elevator's descent only took seconds, but it felt like an eternity. Clarissa burst out of the doors, not caring that she was covered in specks of painty gloop.

Nor did she pay much attention to Bea as she swept past her friend at the reception desk.

"Wait, Clarissa, where are you going? You can't go out there now. There's a full-on protest happening in the street! Wait... did you... what's that in your *hair*?"

“Don’t worry about the pink stuff,” Clarissa called over her shoulder as she bypassed the hapless security guards, reaching the front entrance.

Beyond the sound-proofed cocoon of Garner Tower’s luxurious foyer, chaos reigned.

There was colored smoke everywhere. Bright red mingled with hues of pink. People milled about in a disorganized fashion.

Some were even running away.

Most of them had their faces covered by scarves or masks—to hide from the surveillance, no doubt—but a few brave souls had decided to ditch anonymity and show their faces to the world.

Some of them simply didn’t care.

Music played in the background; a deep, pulsating beat.

She couldn’t see Jerik.

Where is he?

Clarissa spied an umbrella in a nearby stand. Made from a reflective silver material, it was one of those newfangled *Force-Field* ones that actually emitted some sort of rain-repelling current.

Instinctively, she picked it up. It couldn’t hurt to have a long, sturdy implement in her hand. At the very least, she could protect herself from spills and splatters.

The big glass doors of the front entrance slid open as she strode toward them. She gripped the umbrella tighter and walked out into the cacophony.

The street was packed with people. They were mostly teenagers and twenty-somethings. To Clarissa’s surprise, nobody paid her much attention, even though she was obviously a Garner Corp employee.

Everyone seemed to be pushing and straining, gravitating toward a spot in the center of the commotion.

Then someone screamed.

A collective gasp went through the crowd.

Then, silence.

Even the music stopped.

It was strange, almost eerie. So many people, and yet the street was so damn quiet.

As if a cat had dropped amongst the pigeons.

And then the people parted like the sea, and a menacing obsidian-and-pink figure emerged from the commotion.

Of course, it was *him*.

Clarissa's heart skipped a beat. She was surrounded by humans, but her eyes were drawn only to him.

To his powerful, chiseled form, so different from anything and anyone else.

He stood out. It was undeniable—he was *not* of this planet.

He left a small group of shell-shocked humans in his wake. Wide-eyed and shaken, they didn't *dare* move.

She almost felt sorry for the two humans standing at the epicenter of the aftermath. One of them was a young man in his early twenties with long blonde hair tied back with a red bandanna. He was gasping for breath, clutching his ribcage as if he'd been struck. The other was a woman of around the same age. She wore a grey jumpsuit and big reflective goggles. In her hands was a large cannon-looking thing.

Was *that* what they'd been using to fire paint bombs at the building?

She didn't dare point it at anyone.

She was actually shaking a little.

Clarissa could hazard a guess as to what had happened.

The big, bad Kordolian must have scared the living daylights out of those poor kids.

Did he get the answers he was looking for?

Jerik strode forward with brutal precision until he reached her.

Nobody dared challenge him.

Suddenly, hundreds of eyes were upon her—upon *them*.

The protest had effectively stopped, and *everyone* was staring at them.

“I thought I told you to stay inside,” he growled.

If only she could see his expression right now.

What did he *look* like under that mask? The curiosity was beginning to kill her.

“You told me to go inside, not *stay* inside,” she said coolly, her tone disguising the fact that she was a little bit of a hot mess inside. Clarissa looked around at the protesters. “Guys,” she shouted, raising her voice. “This is the one time you should call it a day. You got us, okay? The tower looks spectacular. You definitely made your point.”

A quick glance skyward told her Garner Tower had been hit with multiple pink paint bombs. She suspected the woman with the cannon-looking thing was the culprit. It was barely visible from down here, but the higher windows of the building were decorated in an abstract disaster of pink paint splotches.

“Leave now!” Clarissa yelled at the protesters. “This is *not* the time or place to be doing this.”

Normally, she would have accepted their right to protest, but there was a real live Kordolian amongst them.

She was more worried for *their* safety.

At least he hadn’t killed anyone... or so she thought. There was a relieving absence of bodies on the ground, anyway.

Jerik inclined his head. He was close now, about a handspan away from her, so close she could make out the faint red glow of his irises through his semi-translucent visor.

He snorted softly as if amused.

Then he pulled his weapon from a sleek holster against his armor and raised it in the air.

He pulled the trigger.

Boom!

The noise was incredible. Clarissa covered her ears as a bright flare of white-hot energy shot up into the sky, like the tail of a comet.

Holy shit. Clarissa froze in shock. She hadn't expected him to do something so unpredictable.

"Leave," Jerik thundered.

The protesters scattered like ants.

Evidently, his method was highly effective.

He'd probably done this a hundred times before.

"I hope this makes your job somewhat easier," he said dryly.

"Oh, believe me, it will... and it won't. Did you find the answers you were looking for?"

He stared at her for a moment, silent and bristling with indecipherable tension.

"You were right," he muttered at last. "It's a harmless water-soluble compound—according to them, anyway. Should wash off easily. They merely wanted to embarrass your master."

"He isn't my master. He's my *boss*. There's a big difference." Clarissa tucked the umbrella under her arm as she folded her arms and glared at him. "As an employee, I take my job very seriously. Now, I appreciate you clearing out this crowd—in a way that only *you* can, apparently—but please do not fire any weapons in front of my building again. That was completely unnecessary."

"It worked, didn't it?"

"They're just protesters."

"*You* came out here. That's what made the difference."

“Are you trying to put the blame on me for your reckless actions?”

“Reckless?” He chuckled softly, surprising her. She’d thought he was angry. He was infuriatingly impossible to read, even to her. “I would never hold you accountable for anything I do, Clarissa. But when you’re standing in a crowd full of people where I can’t predict actions or outcomes, my instinct is to make you safe. That is all.”

A strange feeling wormed its way into Clarissa’s chest. *Did you do that because of me? Because you wanted to protect me all of a sudden?*

Why should her safety be such a priority for him?

They’d only just met one another, and he was a *Kordolian*.

An alien.

Why should he care so much about a simple human like her?

Something was off.

Why?

“I can handle myself,” she said quietly, glancing to her left. A gleaming grape-colored car accelerated around the corner. “We’d better get out of the road.”

She took a few steps backward until she was standing on the footpath. To her relief, Jerik followed.

Several cars—most of them automatically driven—glided past.

Someone honked.

No doubt it was because an armored, pink-splattered alien was standing on the side of the road.

People were going to stare. It was inevitable.

Clarissa sighed. “You’d better get yourself cleaned up, Jerik. You’re welcome to use our facilities, but it’s fine if you decide you want to go and come back another day. I’ll handle Garner.”

“Hm.” He stared at her for a moment, hard and impenetrable behind his obsidian armor. Even though she found him surprisingly easy to talk to, it felt like there was a barrier between them. “You act honorably even when the situation isn’t favorable to you. I won’t cause you more trouble by leaving and returning another time just to go through all this idiocy again. I’ll wait, Clarissa, because I find the time passes quickly when I’m in your company.”

Time froze. Her heart skipped a beat. The scary alien ex-commander wasn’t apologizing to her for shooting freaking *plasma* into the sky with his gun. Nor was he promising he wouldn’t do it again.

He was just saying things like *that*; things that almost made it feel like he was flirting with her.

No way.

That couldn’t be possible.

That would be *insane*.

This man was completely maddening.

Just the *thought* of him flirting... why did it make her feel like someone had ripped the solid pavement from beneath her feet and replaced it with clouds? And she was sort of falling... and, at the same time, floating.

All she could do at this point was push her luck. Maybe it was nothing, but *maybe*...

She looked him straight in the eye. “Fine. Stay. Wash up. You’re more than welcome to. I can even get you a spare set of clothes, custom-tailored to your measurements if you like. But Jerik, why don’t you let me see you?”

He stared at her for a long while, and Clarissa wondered if she’d crossed some invisible line.

He reached out.

She flinched involuntarily.

But all he did was take the umbrella from her, gently prising it from her clenched arms, forcing her to relax them.

It was only then that she realized how tense she'd been.

"I can easily do that. But first, you have to agree to something."

"Oh?" She could hardly believe her voice came out so smooth; almost sultry-like.

Inside, she was fucking jelly.

"Pass the time with me again—outside of your official duties."

Pass the time?

She blinked once, twice, her brain protesting the unbelievability of it all until the penny inevitably dropped. "You mean like... a date?"

"I understand you humans sometimes call it that, yes."

"*Oh*, uh, I..." She smoothed down the front of her suit jacket, which had mostly escaped getting stained with pink paint. "I honestly wasn't expecting this, but I..."

"You don't have to give me an answer straight away. Just consider it."

"No, it's all right," Clarissa replied, a wild, heady feeling coursing through her. "I'll take you up on that."

It was so easy, wasn't it?

To say *yes*.

Even when the one asking was a powerful ex-commander with a tendency to jump off the side of skyscrapers and fire plasma guns into the air without warning.

Dangerous.

Unpredictable.

Unknown.

But in spite of all that he was, not once had he made her feel unsafe, and he'd never forced or pressured her to do anything she didn't want to.

Actually, when all was said and done, he was quite the gentleman.

And she was dying to know what he really looked like under that mysterious mask of his.

FOURTEEN

HE WAS SO close to ripping away the protective barrier.

The mask, the armor, the thought that he needed to be cautious because she might *not* be the one for him...

He was on the verge of ripping it all away.

When had *he* ever been the cautious type?

He was the sort to rush headlong into battle, guns blazing, with little care for what lay in wait.

He'd never feared the specter of death.

But now, for the first time ever, he was *hesitating*.

All because of this delicate creature standing before him, her lips curved downwards ever so slightly in a disapproving frown.

She'd come outside in the middle of a wild protest, undeterred by the raucous, potentially dangerous crowd.

Unquantified threats were everywhere. Humans shouting, their faces contorted with emotion.

The so-called *protest* was pure chaos. Jerik had never seen anything like it. On Kythia, the slightest whisper of dissent

would have been crushed instantly, and sometimes, he would have been the one doing the crushing.

Were humans so free and naive that they allowed their own people to run amok like this?

Evidently.

And when he saw her standing there, staring at him from across the way, her arms folded, her expression stern, as if she were quietly chiding him for causing trouble, something triggered inside him, and the thought that she might come to harm in this infernal crowd had driven him a little mad.

So he'd dispersed them as quickly as he could—to save himself from killing anybody. Those impertinent humans had given him the information he sought, anyway.

Once they'd realized that he was indeed not *messing around*, they were quick to capitulate.

They were fortunate Clarissa showed up when she did. Otherwise, he would have terrorized them a bit more.

How dare they douse him in this ludicrous substance? This lurid pink filth?

The only good that had come of it was that he'd gotten her alone, and he'd secured her agreement on a further meeting.

Now, she was asking him to reveal himself.

It was a fair request.

But what if she found him undesirable?

The fear was real, for once he inhaled her scent, he would be undone, and he wasn't sure he'd be able to control himself.

What if she decided she didn't want him? What if he was left writhing in agony as the Mating Fever overtook his body and his sanity?

Tarak knew about the situation. There was a contingency plan. They would drug him up with suppressants and protect the female from him.

Surely, it wouldn't come to *that*.

A sense of awe came over him as he allowed himself to bask in her curious gaze. She was staring at him unashamedly now, her dark eyes wide and questioning, as if he were the most interesting specimen in the Universe.

What was she thinking?

He couldn't even fathom.

“If you're planning on staying, you should at least make use of the facilities,” she said matter-of-factly. “I insist. The protest was *our* problem. You didn't have to intervene.”

“It was *my* security concern. It's my job to assess and neutralize any potential threats, no matter how benign they might appear. You have no idea of what can happen when you least expect it.”

“Like Kordolians showing up at my workplace,” she said drily. “And one of them gets covered in pink. You know, it almost suits you.”

“Don't be ridiculous.”

Her hand flew to her mouth as she tried to stifle a laugh. “Pfft. Now I *really* want to see what you look like. It's not fair. I want to see your expression right now.”

A hundred possibilities ran through Jerik's mind. He thought about the worst possible thing that could happen to him...

And decided he didn't care.

It was her laughter that undid him. He'd never made anybody laugh before—not like *this*, anyway.

There was a lightness to her just now, a spontaneity and freedom he'd never seen before.

He was so used to people being terrified of him.

Fuck it. Let it go.

He uttered a soft command.

His suit activated, and the respirator retracted.

He took a deep breath, inhaling the scents of the city: the remnants of chemical smoke from the protest, the faint saltiness from the ocean.

But all of that was insignificant compared to *her*.

It came upon him slowly at first. A hint of the unusual: warm, fragrant, vibrant—*alien*.

Then, all of a sudden, it floored him.

He was drowning.

His vision blurred. A hammer blow of agony hit him in his left temple.

His nostrils flared. Her scent was like a dangerous drug—one that could destroy him if he wasn't careful.

He lost control of his body. His knees buckled. He was *this* far from hitting the pavement, but he caught himself just in time.

Kaiin's Hells.

Arousal slammed into him like an asteroid. Suddenly, he was hard, and he had to fight the urge to sweep her into his arms and take her away—as *his* prize.

Indecent thoughts entered his mind, but he restrained them. He was *not* going to give in to these savage urges. He was better than that.

Is this what it was like? Is this what his battle-brothers had endured?

This exquisite pain?

He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out.

She was staring at him—more specifically, at his mouth.

Her focused attention drove him a little wild.

He was in trouble.

Definitely in trouble, but he exulted in the unpredictability of it all, in the fact that he'd gone and done something so impulsive.

The severed bases of his horn-buds throbbed. He felt like he was being stabbed in the temple with an ice-pick, but he welcomed the pain because it was just enough of a distraction to keep him somewhat sane.

What was she looking at? Why was she so focused on him all of a sudden?

“Are you all right, Jerik?” And then she spoke, and her voice was filled with concern—for *him*?

Who in the Nine Hells had ever worried so much about *him*?

“I’m fine,” he said gruffly. “What’s wrong?”

“N-nothing’s wrong.”

“Are you certain?”

“Absolutely.”

She was flustered by him. She was denying it, but he could tell. A faint pinkish hue suffused her cheeks. Her eyelids fluttered wildly, showcasing her long, delicate lashes.

The notion that he’d destabilized her somehow—it was strangely exhilarating.

When she found out that he’d targeted her all along...

Would the deception put her off? Infuriate her?

Even the possibility of her anger was alluring to him.

He decided he wouldn’t let it go on too long, though. He’d have to be upfront with her at some point.

First, though, he’d deal with this Garner and the minor issue of land rights. Then, he’d make sure she had enough faith in him that she’d be confident to attend the Cultural Event.

The whole damn thing was Xalikian’s idea. The former prince was responsible for orchestrating the event. Jerik didn’t care much for the ceremony and the formalities, but he would use every opportunity he had to get closer to her.

“I will take you up on your offer. Allow me to use your facilities to clean up. Your assertion that pink gunk *suits me* is inaccurate.”

Normally, he would go up to his ship—the very one that was hovering in the sky above, cloaked against detection—to decontaminate, but he wanted to take her up on her hospitality. If he showed her that he was amenable to such things, she might be less intimidated by him.

He caught her staring again, her eyes drifting up and down, her true thoughts concealed behind a slight widening of her eyes; an alluring parting of her pink-tinted lips. “W-what? Oh, yes. Let’s go inside. I’m terribly sorry for all this disruption. I’ll do everything in my power to ensure the rest of the day goes a lot more smoothly.”

“No need. The Universe is unpredictable,” Jerik said simply. “I’m used to far worse things, believe me.”

But in truth, he wasn’t sure if there were worse things than having to endure this uncontrollable agony; this prolonged, drawn-out torture.

He’d taken a big risk, and yet he knew that if it ever came to pass, the reward of claiming her would transcend any satisfaction he’d ever known.

FIFTEEN

CLARISSA SAT IN A DEEP, comfortable chair, waiting for the Kordolian to finish. She had her holo-device in her lap and a steaming mug of jasmine green tea on the small table beside her.

It was the very least she could do to try and calm herself down.

What the hell just happened?

They'd been outside, standing in the middle of the street in the aftermath of the chaos, with the pavement stained with red and pink powder and the air filled with ephemeral tendrils of dissipating smoke.

Then, he'd taken off his mask.

And the sun was shining down, and the balmy breeze swirled around them, and for a split-second, her world spun on its head.

She couldn't stop staring.

At his lips, which had parted in a pained kind of grimace, revealing a pair of sharp, gleaming fangs.

At his strong jawline, above his broad, powerful neck.

She'd never seen anything so masculine in her life. Not pretty or handsome, just... *primally attractive*.

But then she'd gotten the impression he was in some sort of pain. There was a moment when he looked unsteady on his feet, and his gaze, still half-concealed behind that protective lens, had clouded over.

She only half-registered his discomfort because she couldn't take her eyes off him.

All of a sudden, she was hit with the need to see him whole, without the lenses and the armor and the distracting pink splatter. She wanted to appraise him the way she would a notable artwork.

Was she objectifying him?

Well, that was *wrong*.

But she couldn't deny that her insistence on him getting cleaned up was partly due to the hope that she would get another eyeful of him.

She'd even offered him spare clothing—custom-made in an instant, delivered from a renowned boutique in the city in a matter of minutes.

She'd brought him to the private lounge reserved for senior members of staff. It was a quiet space with comfortable chairs, a beverage bot, and shower and dressing room facilities.

It was a pretty good space to have access to.

Garner might be a bit of a dick sometimes, but he wasn't a terrible employer. Her working conditions weren't the worst in this industry, but they could be better, too.

Anyhow, she'd bent the rules a little by allowing Jerik—a freaking *alien*—into this restricted area.

Actually, she'd *broken* all the rules.

Yesterday, she wouldn't have thought of doing such a thing, but after getting to know him a little, it was obvious that he was completely different from how she'd imagined the aliens to be.

He was a lot more refined; a lot more *savvy*. She could tell he and his people had done this sort of thing a thousand times before—it was scary how well they understood Earth and humans and how things were done around here.

How quickly they adapted.

Not in a million years could she have expected that.

But then again, Jerik probably had experience dealing with all kinds of alien species and civilizations.

And when he'd acceded to her request—*I really want to see what you look like*—her whole world had fallen apart.

She took a sip of her tea and tried to calm herself, inhaling the delicate fragrance of jasmine.

She waited.

It was all she could do.

Good thing nobody else was around at the moment. The lounge was busiest after lunch and in the evenings, and it wasn't quite lunchtime yet.

She savored the floral aroma of her tea as she tried to decipher this feeling of lightness in her body, this fluttering in her belly, this warmth.

What was this strange, giddy excitement?

Waiting, waiting...

Until, at last, the door leading to the dressing rooms slid open.

And *he* walked out.

Clarissa hid behind her teacup, pretending to take another sip as she swallowed deeply.

He'd cleaned up, all right. Mask gone, protective lenses gone, silver alien features and pointed ears on full display.

He wasn't wearing the human-style clothes she'd procured for him. It was black armor or nothing, evidently. The pink splatter was gone, leaving only the obsidian suit in its place.

She couldn't ignore the menacing gun holstered at his waist, either.

Sleek, sculpted, seamless. The way he moved reminded her of a shark slicing through the water. Everything about him was powerful and purposeful.

And he clearly gave no fucks.

Now, for the first time, she saw his face completely, without anything concealing it.

And he wasn't *pretty* by any stretch of the imagination, but he *was* magnificent.

She slowly put her teacup down and rose to her feet. "Feel better?"

"Cleaner," he rumbled. "And not painted like an infernal target."

"I would like to invite you to lunch."

"No." He walked right up to her until he was just inches from her, so close she could detect his freshly washed scent. He smelled of cold midnight and pure water. "You have done enough already. The invitation is mine."

"W-what do you mean?"

Keep your composure. You can't let him compromise your logic like this!

He leaned in, his presence engulfing her to the point where she wasn't aware of anything else but *him*. "I'm asking you to come with me. *I'll* take you out for lunch.

The intensity of his focus was like a laser beam. He made her feel like she was the only human left on this planet.

"I can't leave work in the middle of the day," she said, trying her very best to sound calm in the face of this *highly* distracting male, who seemed to be very aware of the effect he was having on her.

Her heartbeat accelerated.

Was he really... making a *move* on her? An alien, and an extremely powerful one, at that, inviting her out to lunch? Almost like a date?

It certainly seemed that way. His attention felt more than just cordial.

Was it some sort of cultural misunderstanding?

Or, despite his hard appearance, was this alien dangerously smooth?

She was torn between wanting to accept his invitation and maintaining her professional barriers—her safety mechanism.

“Your boss ordered you to keep me at bay while he mis-prioritizes his time. Earlier, you even named an eatery you were planning on taking us to—an outside location, I presume. He didn’t specify that you weren’t to leave the building, did he?” His fang-tipped smile was mischievous.

How tempting it was to give in to his demands.

But what if this was all just some ploy to soften her up? To get information out of her that he could use against Garner?

Faced with the most distracting presence she’d ever encountered, she tried to think about it for a moment.

No. He isn’t being disingenuous.

Because if he really wanted to, he could have just threatened Garner with total destruction and seized the damn land.

Everyone knew Kordolians were outside Earth’s laws.

Everyone knew they could destroy the planet in the blink of an eye if they wanted.

According to her research, the only thing that was stopping them was their apparent fondness for humans.

Some Kordolians were *mated*—that’s what they called it, anyway—with humans.

The possibilities were endless and terrifying.

And despite going through the motions of resistance...

Of *course* she was going to take him up on his invitation.

“I’m free to leave the premises as needed. I do so all the time. I was talking about being absent from *work*.” Her heartbeat was a rapid staccato. She felt light and heady, detached from reality. “Where would you even take me? And *how*?”

“My cruiser is waiting above. I’ll take you to a place of my choosing, but we won’t leave Earth’s orbit. And if it gets you in trouble, you can tell your boss that I made this demand as part of the negotiations.”

“You’re being rather insistent, aren’t you?”

“Why shouldn’t I be?” Roguish and self-assured, he was still smiling. He had the air of a man who could do anything he wanted.

“Why *should* you be?” she countered, half-scared to know the truth.

Why me?

“Because you accepted my offer. As a Kordolian, I take such declarations extremely seriously.”

“Persistent, aren’t you?”

“It appears you know me well enough already.”

“Fine,” she sighed, feigning reluctance even as a flicker of excitement coursed through her. Whoever would have thought a *Kordolian*—rare and inaccessible as they were—would be inviting her out for lunch?

In what appeared to be a declaration of his interest... in her.

It was beyond madness.

She should walk away right now before he entangled her in something that was way beyond her understanding.

It’s just lunch... right?

Right?

He held out his hand—big, powerful, encased in inky-black armor.

“All right. As long as we stay on Earth. I need to be able to receive calls and return within a few minutes’ notice if necessary.”

“Understood.”

She stared down at his outstretched hand, a quiet entreaty.

Fine.

“There’s nothing sinister behind it,” he said gruffly as if reading her mind—Kordolians *couldn’t* read minds, could they? “I just want to take you out of here.”

When he looked at her like that... and when he looked *like* that, he was a glimpse of something alien and otherworldly in her otherwise mundane existence.

Something impossible.

What was the point of it all if she didn’t take a risk now and then?

She slipped her fingers into his. They were warm, soft, and hard, all at the same time. It was a hand that could probably crush hers in an instant, and yet he was so impossibly gentle with her.

“Let’s get out of here, then,” Clarissa said, her voice coming out breathier than expected. She stole a glance at him yet again—she could hardly believe someone like him existed. “Before the office gossips learn that I’ve traipsed off to lunch with some mysterious Kordolian.”

“Mysterious?” His pale eyebrow rose in a quizzical manner. “There’s nothing mysterious about me, Clarissa. What you see is what you get.”

SIXTEEN

THEY RODE the elevator up to the rooftop again. It was only a few seconds, but being in such close proximity to Jerik made it feel like an eternity.

The silence between them was filled with her second thoughts and the palpable awareness of *his* presence.

How still and silent he could be, like granite.

Galaxies of difference lay between them. She could hardly believe this was happening—that she'd scored a lunch date with the very same guy that had appeared as a grainy image on her holo late last night.

He was famous—or *infamous*.

She stood beside him, not making eye contact but stealing furtive glances at the sculpted outline of his arm and shoulder.

As the elevator reached the top floor, he took a deep, shuddering breath. A faint tremor went through his body, but he didn't say a word.

What was that reaction just now?

They reached the top floor.

Her thoughts were so scrambled by his presence that she'd forgotten to ask the obvious. "Why are we going back up here again?"

"Easiest way to access my ship," he said matter-of-factly.

The idea that an alien craft could swoop down undetected in the protected airspace of Sydney's Central Business District was mind-boggling and more than a little terrifying. "Care to explain?"

Before they stepped out of the elevator, Jerik uttered a command and activated his armor, protecting his skin from the harsh sunlight. Clarissa couldn't believe her eyes. The suit responded immediately, extending from his neckline in a series of interconnecting segments, creating a semi-transparent lens across his eyes, the apparatus seemingly forming out of thin air. "My ship has been above you the entire time. The official process for entering Earth's airspace is unnecessarily complicated and time-consuming, and your people always become disproportionately alarmed. So we use cloaking technology to avoid detection."

"Oh." Who would have thought it was so easy for these aliens to enter Earth's atmosphere undetected? Clarissa was only beginning to realize how overwhelmingly powerful these Kordolians were.

If only people knew...

There was *so* much the Federation's media concealed from ordinary citizens.

They walked out into the blazing sunlight. The wind whipped at Clarissa's hair as she shielded her eyes and looked up into the sky, trying to catch a glimpse of the Kordolian ship.

She couldn't see anything even remotely resembling an alien ship.

She couldn't hear anything, either. The ultrafast landflyers crisscrossing Earth were horrendously loud. She couldn't fathom a completely silent ship capable of going into space.

Jerik walked across to the center of the rooftop, beckoning her with a subtle yet imperious gesture—a slight tug of his fingers.

Something lazily dropped from the sky—a long, thin black tendril.

Jerik caught it with ease.

She realized it was a cable of some sort.

He wrapped it around his hand—loops and loops of thin, flexible cable.

Clarissa could guess at his game plan. Was he... going to haul them up on that flimsy-looking thing?

Once again, doubt and anxiety washed over her.

“Come,” he said, extending his arm. “Since we’re in a hurry, this is the quickest way.”

Did he want her to... hold onto him?

The thought of being pressed against his powerful body sent her into a mini-meltdown.

This was madness.

How did she know he wasn’t just going to abduct her? He could make her disappear off the face of the earth, and nobody would be the wiser.

She thought she was a pretty good reader of people, but she’d never had to figure out an alien before.

She didn’t sense anything malicious from him, but...

“Nothing bad is going to happen to you,” Jerik said gruffly as if sensing her hesitation. “When you’re with me, you’ll be safer than anywhere else in the Universe. But it’s completely up to you. If you change your mind, I’ll let you be.”

She really *did* feel like he was being genuine.

And how could she pass up an opportunity to see inside one of the most mysterious and awe-inspiring alien civilizations to ever come into contact with Earth?

All right. Let’s do this.

Something stirred inside her—an old feeling she hadn't experienced for a very long time.

It was the sense that there was more to this existence than her job and her security and her day-to-day routine.

There had to be *more*, surely.

She stepped forward.

“Hold onto me.” He wrapped his arm around her waist, clutching her securely. He was warm and every bit as strong as she'd imagined. “Put your arms around my neck.”

Clarissa reached up, extending her arms, clasping her hands behind his broad neck.

She felt as light as a leaf as he lifted her, and suddenly, they were flying through the air, higher and higher, until Clarissa could see the endless cityscape stretching out below. She saw the buildings, the shorelines, small strips of golden-white beach nestled against the verdant gardens of the ultra-well-heeled.

A gust of wind swept past, causing them to sway. Clarissa couldn't help it—a loud shriek escaped her, and she inadvertently wrapped her legs around his, fearing she would fall into oblivion.

The Kordolian chuckled softly. “I won't let you fall, Clarissa.”

His self-assuredness was maddening.

How the hell had she gotten herself roped into this?

Unable to take it anymore, she closed her eyes and buried her face in his chest.

Even though they were dangling from a precarious height, suspended only by a thin cable, she somehow believed him.

Impossibly, he made her feel safe.

And all of a sudden, the wind stopped, and everything went silent.

He released her waist. Her feet landed on a solid surface.

She opened her eyes.

The sky was gone. A black roof curved overhead, momentarily disorienting her. She blinked furiously as her eyes adjusted from the bright light outside to near-darkness.

Small blue lights nestled in the walls allowed her to see. She stared at Jerik in shock as his visor retracted, revealing his crimson eyes.

On Earth, in the bright light of day, he'd looked slightly out of place, but in his spacecraft's shadowy interior, he was perfectly in his element.

"I can't believe you just did that," she said, her voice light and breathy.

"It worked, didn't it?" His eyes widened a fraction, and for a moment, she almost got the sense he was in just as much disbelief as she was.

But then the moment passed, and he reverted to the stern, impenetrable alien commander.

His face itself was a study in ruggedness—he reminded her of a sculpture; a bust of some powerful figure from ancient history. His broad forehead was slightly furrowed, his thick eyebrows were drawn together, and his lips were pressed together in a tense frown. His jawline was strong and hard, and there was a bend in the bridge of his nose as if it had been broken once upon a time.

The severity of his appearance was accentuated by the absence of hair, which suited him perfectly; she couldn't imagine him any other way.

"Where are you taking me?" She tensed. Although he'd let go of her waist, they were still *very* close.

"New York."

"New York?" Of all the places on Earth to choose from, she couldn't have been more surprised by his answer. "I was thinking you'd go for somewhere a little less... *hectic*."

"I have a place in mind," Jerik murmured, leaning in and placing his hand lightly against her back.

Clarissa could have flinched or shied away, but she didn't.

She had to admit, she didn't mind the attention.

He knew exactly what he was doing, and so did she. She also knew she could kick up a stink at any time if she didn't feel comfortable.

She didn't feel like doing that right now.

So she let him exert a small amount of pressure on her back, guiding her through what appeared to be the rear compartment of the ship until they reached another chamber with ample seating.

He didn't get her to sit. Instead, he showed her to a window, a small, oval port hole that looked out over the world below.

They were over the sea. It stretched out forever, deep blue and shining like a jewel. She saw blurs and shadows, masses of clouds, and dark patches that could be storms. But she couldn't be sure because they were moving too fast, and suddenly, they were over a gigantic landmass—was that the African continent? She saw green forests and vast sandy deserts, abruptly interrupted by the intricate network of a huge city.

It disappeared, giving way to the ocean once more.

Wow.

They were moving unbelievably fast—faster than any human-made ship, and the craft was so damn silent and smooth that she hadn't even realized they'd taken off.

And they *were* headed in the general direction of New York, just like Jerik said.

How strange and wonderful this day was turning out to be.

But she was fooling herself if she thought the Kordolian's sudden appearance in her office was all sunshine and unicorns.

“Why are you after my employer's land?” she asked, figuring that aside from the paint bomb incident, Jerik the Kordolian had been given an easy enough ride so far.

He couldn't just *show up* unannounced and suddenly decide to whisk her away.

If he wanted to win her trust, he had to answer for himself.

“Several reasons. That tract of land is adjacent to my dwelling on Earth, amongst other things. We can't afford to have human construction and proliferation in that region. If our enemies ever decided to target Earth, it would be the first place they strike.”

“I see.” Clarissa stared out across the ocean as Jerik's words sunk in. How had Garner's analysts been so oblivious to the Kordolian presence near the *Copernicus* development? “Your reasons are more sensible than I'd imagined.”

“And what *did* you imagine?” The low rumble of his voice was laced with a hint of danger. She found it irresistible.

The reckless part of her wanted his hands on her again.

In the deepest, most secret part of her imagination, she wondered what it would be like to see him without his armor—without anything on him at all.

What else was she supposed to do? The man was undeniably attractive, and he was making all the right moves.

Who bloody taught him, anyway?

He wasn't supposed to be so good at this.

She couldn't even imagine what he'd be *like*...

What did you imagine?

“Oh, the usual mundane things. I thought maybe you'd become aware of the presence of some rare mineral, or you wanted to develop the area yourself... bring in your own people, that sort of thing. You should know that Garner isn't going to give up that land without a fight, no matter how compelling your reasons are.”

“We're willing to offer him a very fair price for compensation.”

“Money doesn't matter to people like him. Believe me, you'll have to do better than that.”

“Our offer is based on a fair valuation of the land. If he’s wise, he’ll take it.”

Privately, Clarissa agreed, but she couldn’t say it aloud. “And if he doesn’t?”

“He will have missed an opportunity. It’s in his best interests to take the deal, and if you want to help him, you should do your best to convince him of that.”

“Thanks for the tip,” she said dryly, knowing very well that Garner had already made up his mind.

She was just a spectator watching the slow-motion train wreck unfold.

And *the* main actor had stolen her away from where she was supposed to be.

Suddenly, Jerik stiffened. “Wait here. Take a seat. You won’t need safety restraints as we’re only on Earth, so don’t worry about a thing. Make yourself comfortable. I need to discuss something with my pilot. Be back in a *siv*.”

“Uh, all right.” Clarissa glanced around the cabin, eyeing the tall-backed obsidian seats. There were six in total, each standing alone, arranged in two rows with an aisle running down the center.

Before she could move, *he* leaned in close, and she caught his scent again, laced with a hint of male musk. It drove her a little wild.

“You smell incredible, by the way.” His voice deepened into a low growl, making the fine hairs on her arms stand on end. A warm, pleasant sensation coursed over her scalp and down her neck, seeping into her chest and making her feel fuzzy all over.

And just a *little* bit aroused.

Before she could come up with a clever enough retort, he was gone, stalking through the cabin with the silence and grace of a big hunting cat.

She took the seat nearest to the window and looked outside. Crimson fire momentarily lit up the sky before

blending into darkness.

They'd left the daylight behind, flying into the dark,
glittering night.

SEVENTEEN

AS SOON AS Jerik reached the cockpit, he snatched a small medi-kit from its compartment and retrieved an injection vial. Wasting no time, he stabbed it into his neck just below his jawline.

A faint sting of pain hit him, but it was nothing compared to the agony in his horn-buds and the throbbing ache in his temples.

The suppressant acted almost instantaneously, dampening the force of the Mating Fever.

Kaiin's Hells, how was he even holding it together?

Logic and instinct were at war inside him. Part of him wanted to just *take* her for himself and be done with it.

There was a time when he was different. When he didn't think so much about complicated things like *morality*.

When he didn't think so much at all.

But that was a long time ago.

He still didn't fully understand how all this had come about; how he and his kind, conditioned to be brutal and obey the hierarchy, had learned to think differently.

He had Tarak al Akkadian to thank for enlightening him. The general's influence was one thing, but there was also the fact that he'd seen enough and done enough, and for whatever reason, a kernel of remorse had existed in his black heart.

He was under no illusions that the old him would have taken advantage of his power over her.

He was furious at his old self.

That's why he was more determined than ever to do this *right*. It had taken every shred of his self-control to be restrained around her... to the point where masking his agony became almost unbearable.

But if he won her trust, it would be so much sweeter when she yielded to him.

Pain before reward.

His battle was with the darkness inside him, and he would fight it with every fiber of his being.

How could he ever do anything to harm her?

She was so calm, so trusting. So perfectly sweet and gentle, unlike anything or anyone he'd ever known before.

Everything they said about human females was true.

He turned to his pilot, a seasoned operator called Rukan, who was staring at him as if he'd just grown three horns. "You all right there, boss?"

"Fine," Jerik growled. The suppressant was really taking hold now, and although it didn't completely eliminate the symptoms of the Mating Fever, it made them bearable.

Rukan let out a soft snort as he brought the cruiser down through a bank of thick cloud into the luridly illuminated night above New York City. The ship was Jerik's personal stealth cruiser, the smallest in its class but enviably fast and agile.

He'd named it *Tarsin*—*small dagger*—after a spectacular knife-shaped constellation in Sector Three.

They swooped over a familiar set of buildings until they reached one that Jerik recognized very well.

It was a site he was all too familiar with, considering it was the place where a human called Sienna, the mate of his good friend Ikriss, had built a restaurant.

It had a strange human name: *The Whisk and Pin*, whatever in Kaiin's Hells that meant.

The ground level was where the human customers dined.

Above it was a secret second level, which had been transformed into a mess hall of sorts. Any Kordolian was welcome to drop in for a feed. The meals were concocted by Sienna, who had slowly been convincing his kind that food could be a source of pleasure—not just nutrition.

Jerik had been skeptical at first, but after tasting something called *steak tartare*, he'd grudgingly come around to the idea that perhaps food *could* be enjoyed.

Occasionally.

First and foremost, it was still merely a form of sustenance.

The only thing he could see himself truly enjoying was pleasure of the carnal kind—with his chosen mate.

Hopefully, it would be with *her*.

If there was one thing he was confident he could do well, it was to make her feel pleasure so intense she would never look at him the same way again.

After all, he'd read *The Manual*.

"Boss, you want me to land her or just hover? With the human, landing would be easier for—"

Jerik held up a hand, interrupting his pilot. "Hover. Remain cloaked."

"Right." Rukan shot him a skeptical look, his pale golden eyes narrowing. But he knew better than to argue. "You'll alight via the roof?"

"Correct."

You don't understand, lad. Not yet.

Jerik knew very well that having Rukan land the ship on the roof would make it easier for Clarissa to exit the *Tarsin*.

But he'd liked it when she'd clung to him so very tightly as they were lifted into the air, with him holding the Callidum cable in an unbreakable grip.

And he'd gotten the sense that despite her initial reaction—infernal ear-splitting scream and all—the way she'd clung to him like *that* had been somewhat intentional. How could he forget the way she'd nestled her sweet little face against his chest as the wind ruffled her hair, dousing him in her complex, intoxicating scent?

He would get her to hold him like that again just because he could.

And he would ensure Ikriss's mate and her staff prepared her only the very finest of human foods. Something that was sure to impress and delight her.

Humans went mad over food.

Perhaps it was the very thing that would help her relax and lower her guard.

Even though she'd accepted his invitation, she was still wary of him, and rightfully so.

She was curious, though, and that was good.

So was he.

In the short amount of time they had together, he, Jerik Garul, former High Commander and all-round tough bastard, would have to convince her that he wasn't as bad as the rumors made him out to be.

To her, *never*.

EIGHTEEN

WHEN JERIK RETURNED, he was different, somehow—calmer or something. She couldn't quite put her finger on it. A half-smile played across his lips, but his stare was as intense as ever.

Maybe that was just *him*.

Always intense; a forceful personality.

She got the feeling he was used to getting his way.

“We've arrived,” he announced as he walked across to her seat, placing his hand on the headrest. She got an eyeful of his broad, powerful arm. The armor molded against him perfectly, contouring over bulging muscle.

Deep in the innermost part of her thoughts, she wondered what he would look like without the outer layer, that impenetrable second skin. She could almost visualize his arm: taut, silver, veins prominent against his honed muscles.

She'd gotten a sense of how strong he truly was when he'd held onto her as they were being pulled into the cruiser by that deceptively thin cable.

It had felt like she was being restrained by warm, living steel, only he was gentle about it, never forcing her or hurting

her.

To be like that... it must take a lot of self-control.

“Where are we, exactly?” She looked up. He towered over her, silver and obsidian and perfectly restrained.

She couldn’t even fathom what he was thinking.

What he was *doing* right now.

Surely, his intent was more than just platonic.

How had this happened so fast? Why was she going along with it so easily?

It was so unlike her—but maybe it was for that very reason that she’d taken a chance and gone away with him.

For the past several years, her life had been a predictable routine. Go to work, anticipate Garner’s needs, control her emotions, put out small fires, stay behind until everything was perfect, go home, eat takeaway, go to sleep.

Rinse and repeat.

She had friends she met up with regularly. She had her four weeks of annual leave. She booked holidays in predictable places—fancy beach resorts or mountain retreats, well-reviewed and *safe*.

She always went on holiday alone. Her brother and sister were busy with work and kids, her friends couldn’t get leave approved at the same time as her, and her parents didn’t want to travel anymore—they were getting old, and they preferred familiar places and things.

She ate her dinner alone, usually late at night.

In her private office on the thirty-seventh floor, she was alone. Garner was rarely there, and even when he was, he was a distant personality.

They inhabited different worlds, after all.

She’d gone on dates through a matchmaking program. Some had led to casual sex. Some of the guys were sweet.

Some turned out to be awful once they stopped putting much effort into trying to charm her.

None of them had made her want to lower her barriers.

None had been able to see through her, but maybe that was because they were also struggling to be themselves, without pretense; without the carefully constructed masks they all wore—her included.

Sometimes, it was as if even she had forgotten who she was.

Sometimes, everything felt so fucking *milquetoast*.

And then *this* guy had come along, dropping into her existence without warning, and he was unlike anything or anyone she'd ever encountered.

Forceful.

Alien.

Dangerous yet restrained. Completely in control. Immensely powerful but never flaunting it.

The whole package was devastatingly compelling.

She was very well aware of his potential for brutality—of his undeniable history—but at no point had she ever felt unsafe around him, and that was beyond surprising.

Besides, if he wanted to do something terrible, nothing on Earth could stop him.

And he hadn't.

All he'd done was whisk her away to lunch—well, *dinner*, given the time zone—in New York.

She looked out the window and saw a neighborhood packed with tall buildings—some old, some modern and shiny. Bright lights and laser projections illuminated the background, creating a cool kind of ambiance.

They were hovering over a flat rooftop.

“There's no way down but to jump, I take it,” she said dryly, not quite understanding the logistics of Kordolian ships

and packed human cities.

“I can find another way if you’re particularly against it,” he offered.

She looked him up and down and imagined herself clinging—hopefully *elegantly*—to his hard, flawless, armored body. “We can go down the way we came up... as long as you don’t make any moves that would scare me half to death like last time.”

He snorted arrogantly, amusedly. “I told you already, you’re safest with me. And it isn’t as big of a height as last time.” He offered his hand. “Do you think I would ever allow anything to happen to you, Clarissa Lee?”

“I barely know you, Jerik Garul. People don’t normally trust strangers straight away, you know.”

“Do you consider me a stranger, still?”

“We’ve known each other less than half a day.” She had to stifle a laugh at his ridiculousness. Despite asking her these questions in the most serious manner, despite him being alpha as hell, there was a certain innocence and naiveté to him.

Did Kordolians have different expectations around familiarity? How did any of this even work?

Still, she took his hand and allowed him to pull her to her feet. As their fingers connected, a pleasant thrill coursed through her, causing her skin to tingle and making her feel warm all over. The warmth danced inside her chest and trickled down into her belly and between her thighs.

Oh, he was definitely quite *hot*.

She really *could* do with his arm around her again.

“This place I’m bringing you to is enjoyed by humans and Kordolians alike. It’s an important place for us, and I hope you will find it to your liking. It’s also a safe place. Once we’re within those walls, I am yours. Considering you *barely know me*, you can ask me anything you wish. I implore you.”

Clarissa’s heart pounded as he led her down the cabin toward the rear of the ship.

He was inviting her... to get to know him better.

This definitely wasn't a simple business lunch.

This was much, much *more*.

What if we...?

The thought was almost too much for her brain to handle.

There were so many *what-ifs*, *buts*, *maybes*, and *be-fucking-carefuls*.

Considering *what* he was, he should be the biggest walking red flag ever.

But he didn't make her feel that way at all.

A familiar, flexible cable extended from a mysterious compartment in the ceiling. Jerik grabbed it without a second thought and wrapped several loops around his armor-encased hand. A satisfied grunt escaped him as he tested the tension. Clearly, he'd done this sort of thing a thousand times before.

"Ready?" he asked.

There were no windows in the back. It was darker in here, casting his features in shadow, making him look even more otherworldly. His eyes became hooded, his gaze impenetrable.

"Okay," Clarissa said, her voice sounding stiff because her heart was in her throat. She tensed as he came alongside her, wrapping his arm around her waist. His grip was firm. Her body molded against his, and it felt *natural*.

Almost immediately, his proximity became maddening.

She became weak at the knees. She was at his mercy right now, but she would do everything in her power *not* to let him know that.

Maybe he already knew.

If that was the case, she was already done for.

As the hatch opened—*unraveled*, really, millions of tiny black fibers literally coming apart to reveal the cool night below—she couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to have him *this* close...

But without any barriers between them.

NINETEEN

AS THEY DROPPED onto the roof, Clarissa's heart was hammering like crazy.

Jerik landed with perfect timing and precision, dropping her onto her feet and releasing the cable from his hand.

It swiftly retracted, disappearing into the night sky, where the ship was completely invisible.

It was all so surreal. To think Kordolians could just come and go as they pleased, undetected, and they had little haunts like *this* place all over the world.

As far as Earth was concerned, it was over.

They'd already invaded.

What defense did humans have?

"Let's go down." Jerik led her to the edge of the roof, where an old-fashioned metal staircase led down to the alley below.

Although the skies were clear now, it was apparent it had rained recently. The street glistened, reflecting the bright neon lights of surrounding buildings.

Pink, red, blue. As if someone had painted the dark surroundings with little neon highlights.

Taking great care, Clarissa climbed down, her heels clicking loudly on the metal stairs. She gripped the handrail tightly, hyper-aware of Jerik's presence behind her.

In spite of his size, he hardly made a sound as he descended. Every move he made was efficient and intentional. There were no wasted actions or gestures.

They reached the bottom. After all that flying and dangling in the air, Clarissa was mildly relieved to be standing on solid ground once again.

Jerik reached for her hand.

She accepted. His grip felt good. He was almost too good to be real.

She so badly wanted to trust him.

He led her around the corner onto a busy street front, where the occasional passerby hurried along the footpath, and delivery drones whizzed through the air. Cars glided past, gently disturbing shallow puddles.

Jerik was in full Kordolian mode, not bothering to hide his appearance, but nobody paid him much attention. Maybe they were neighborhood regulars, already used to the fact that Kordolians frequented this particular building.

A scent drifted to her on the cool night air—the sweet, spicy aroma of baking.

She saw the sign out front, hanging from a post, the lettering done in a quaint, old-timey style.

The Whisk and Pin.

Warm light spilled from the windows.

The whole place looked ridiculously inviting in an old-fashioned way. It had a vibe that was seldom found in this day and age.

Jerik pushed open the big French doors and brought her inside.

Instantly, she was charmed. The restaurant was furnished with characterful wooden tables and vintage chairs that reminded her of cafes in Paris. The photographs on the wall depicted scenic places all around the world. Their imperfections—slightly off-kilter angles, light artifacts—made them feel honest and authentic.

Lush, well-cared-for plants further enhanced the space.

What the hell?

How had the Kordolians conquered a space that was so damn *homely*?

Her gaze was drawn to a table in the center of the room. This one was covered in a pristine white tablecloth.

There were candles. Crystal-clear long-stemmed glasses. Elegant green-white tulips in a vase.

Except for the two of them, the place was empty.

Unable to conceal her surprise, she turned to Jerik. “You planned this. *How?*”

You didn't know me from a bar of soap. We only just met.

A feeling of suspicion rose inside her, and she didn't like it. She *so* wanted all of this to be perfect, like a scene from some dreamy fantasy novel.

She *needed* that in her life right now.

“All it took was a simple communication,” he answered. “The people here know what they're doing.”

He gestured toward the table and pulled one of the chairs back for her. “Please. Allow me.”

Clarissa smiled. “You're making this too easy. I'll allow it.”

She sat down.

Jerik took his place opposite her.

There was a menu on the table in front of her. Not one of the usual digital self-ordering ones, but a quaintly printed one

—elegant lettering on what appeared to be handmade cardboard.

She ran her finger over it, appreciating the slightly bumpy texture.

It was the kind of rare, bespoke thing the uber-wealthy folks in Garner's world would have liked.

Handmade things, organic things; these were becoming rarer and rarer, and thus more prized.

“Oh, you're here already. Jerik, I'm glad you could make it.” A voice made Clarissa turn.

A woman walked into the room—blond and tall, with strong, attractive features. She wore a simple black apron over a white chef's uniform with sleeves rolled up to reveal slender, sinewy forearms that spoke of hard work and skill.

“And who might I have the pleasure of sharing my menu with today?” She sauntered across to the table, relaxed and confident, in a manner that very much told Clarissa this place was *hers*.

This wasn't what she'd been expecting at all, but then again, when had Jerik and his Kordolian ilk ever been predictable?

“Clarissa, from Sydney,” Jerik said calmly as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“An absolute pleasure, Clarissa.” The woman offered her hand and proceeded to give her a warm, strong handshake. “I'm Sienna. Head chef, owner and proprietor of this establishment, and hopelessly and irreversibly involved with the silver, fanged variety.” She gave Jerik a pointed look. “Full disclosure. *His* good buddy is my significant other, and we serve everyone here. Human, Kordolian, alien. As long as they aren't here to make trouble. I'm not talking about *you*, of course. You're a highly valued guest. Outside of his toys and his duties, this guy doesn't get out much, so I'm really happy to see you here.”

“Likewise, it's a pleasure to meet you.” Clarissa grew even more surprised. Sienna wasn't scared or bound into service.

She was clearly in charge of her own universe.

“To start, can I offer you something to drink? What’s your poison? Something alcoholic, or—”

Clarissa shook her head. “Technically, I’m still at work, so I’ll pass on the good stuff. A mocktail would be nice, though.”

“What flavors are you feeling like? I’ll make something just for you.”

“Um, something citrusy? I don’t really mind if you surprise me.”

“Done. I’ll be back to take your order when you’re ready. Don’t rush. Take your time.” Sienna glanced at Jerik. “You as well, Sir.”

Jerik wore an expression only a Kordolian could display—imperious annoyance mixed with gratitude.

Sienna gave them both an enigmatic smile—as if only she knew what was up—and disappeared into the kitchen, leaving Clarissa alone with *him*.

And all of a sudden, she was nervous again.

She didn’t let that stop her, though. “Just before... you said I could ask you anything.”

“I did. That hasn’t changed.” He leaned back in his seat, crossing his arms and frowning slightly. Amidst the quaint furniture and the plants, he looked decidedly out of place.

Like a wolf in a manicured garden.

And it was that very dangerousness of his that made this all the more remarkable because now the wolf was letting her pat his neck...

Or something like that.

There was no point beating around the bush. “Fine. Forgive me if I’m mistaken, but, um, are you trying to *seduce* me or something?”

Pale eyebrows rose. His brow furrowed.

“Yes,” he said without hesitation.

Her heart did a backflip. *All right. That answers that.*

“Why me?”

Out of all the billions of people on Earth...

Abruptly, he leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table, looking at her with a quiet intensity that made her feel like she was the only living human in the universe. “Clarissa...” His voice was both a low rumble *and* a caress. “It’s true that I came to Garner Tower on official business, but I was already aware of your existence.”

Her blood ran cold. “What are you talking about?”

“I took this mission so I had a reason to encounter you.”

What? A mess of emotions stirred within her—confusion, anger, and, despite herself, a hint of excitement.

Because although she was pissed, she couldn’t ignore the way he looked right now: brow slightly furrowed, eyes softening, almost contrite.

“You *stalked* me?” she said quietly, not willing to let him off the hook so easily just because he could make an expression like *that*.

“I *chose* you.”

You chose me? On the verge of an outburst, Clarissa fought to rein in her emotions. She tried to remind herself that the male sitting in front of her—fascinating as he might be—was an alien, and he hadn’t been in contact with humans for very long.

He probably had little concept of human customs, but he *was* trying.

Still...

“You didn’t just pluck my name out of a hat, did you? You chose me for a reason.”

In spite of herself, she felt a little chuffed at being *chosen*.

How ridiculous. She hadn’t had any choice in this, and Jerik had *known* what he was doing right from the start. She

should rightfully be annoyed and maybe a little scared.

If she wanted to be free of all this...

Would he even let her go?

“I do not intend to obscure the facts from you,” he said quietly, and everything about him was earnest. “You might be aware that my people are in the midst of a survival crisis. An unknown biological problem has resulted in a severe imbalance in the ratio of males to females.”

“And humans are it,” she added as the reality dawned on her. Suddenly, all the snippets of speculation and rumor she’d gleaned from the Networks made perfect sense. “*Mars needs women*, right?”

“Mars?” His eyes narrowed. “We haven’t colonized that planet yet, but it’s on my list. However, you are correct that we are actively seeking human mates. I sought you out because we are highly genetically compatible. As for the other...” he spread his hands wide in an expressive manner, “*things*, that’s why we’re here right now, isn’t it? That part is out of my control and for you to decide. From what little I know of you, I get the feeling you’re not the sort to make hasty, ill-considered decisions.”

I’m not the sort to deal well with surprises like this, either.

Clarissa took a deep breath, attempting to clear her thoughts. The only thing stopping her from walking out right now and catching the next landflyer back to Sydney was the fact that she’d *liked* how she felt when it was just the two of them together.

She couldn’t explain how or why, but he made her feel safe.

And she had a thousand burning questions.

“In your culture, what are your expectations of a... *mate*?”

A soft puff escaped his lips—as if he was relieved. “We don’t subscribe to the old imperial culture. A mate-bond is not to be taken lightly. There is only to be *one* mate, and my duty as a male is threefold: protect at all costs, provide whatever is

needed—that includes physical desires—and be a worthy companion.”

Ugh. Why did it all sound so old-fashioned and yet so damn tempting? Because the thought of having a guy like *him* dote over her...

And provide *physical desires*...

Christ almighty.

“Jerik, there’s something you should be clear on. I have my own will. My job and my life and my interests. I don’t want to be stuck in a relationship where a man assumes total responsibility over me.”

“Understood.” He looked around the room in a pointed manner. “Does any of *this* speak of that which you fear?”

“I don’t know what sort of arrangement you have with Sienna.” He had a point, though. That woman was clearly in charge here.

“You can ask her.”

“*Huh.*” For once, she ran out of words.

“You can ask any of the other human mates, too. They will all be attending the Cultural Event, to which I presume you received an invitation?”

“That was your doing, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Wow.” She leaned back in her chair and ran her fingers through her hair, letting out a huff of exasperation. She still didn’t really know how to feel about all this.

And there was Jerik Garul: Kordolian, big-shot, primally magnetic, looking at her like the entire Universe hung on her next word.

Silence hung between them, but strangely, she didn’t feel awkward.

It occurred to her that for an alien who probably had the power to obliterate Earth in a heartbeat, he was going to a

great deal of effort to respect her customs.

“What really happens to the women that form a relationship with one of you guys? I’d imagine they can’t just continue to lead a regular life on Earth. There would be security issues. *Political* issues. I don’t even know if you’re allies or enemies with our Federation.” If she stepped across to the dark-and-silver side, would she be seen as a traitor?

“You might hear otherwise from time to time, but we are very much on your side.” He lowered his head a fraction, imploring her with his eyes. “*Clarissa*. Listen to me. I am not out to harm you. I do not seek to control you. Nor do I wish to compel you to do anything against your will. I’m looking for a mate who will be my partner for life. One I can hopefully have offspring with. Genetically, we are an ideal match, but as for the rest of it...” He smiled: roguish, a little mischievous, a little tender, revealing his sharp fangs. “*I* feel you possess all the qualities that would give me great satisfaction and pleasure... to have you as my mate. As for you, you need to decide. Not straight away, unless you’ve already made up your mind. If not, take your time. I can wait. But please, *Clarissa*. Give yourself a chance to get to know me.”

“Consider yourself lucky. He doesn’t say *please* to just anyone.” Sienna said dryly, appearing from behind. She set a drink down in front of *Clarissa*. It was served in a tall glass with plenty of ice; fizzing soda atop layers of delicate yellow infused with flecks of gold and candied citrus, decorated with a vibrant sprig of mint. “Yuzu, lychee, and mint. Enjoy.”

Before *Clarissa* could say a word, Sienna disappeared back into the kitchen.

“I...” She cleared her throat and took a sip of her drink. It was the perfect balance of fizz, citrus, and minty. “I just need some time to *process* all of this.”

It wasn’t like she *wasn’t* attracted to him or anything, but this was all very sudden, like a hot, arousing slap in the face.

Kordolians!

Good lord.

Jerik leaned back in his chair, silent and enigmatic.

“Hm.” At last, he gave a slight nod as if satisfied with something. “Why don’t you peruse the menu?”

“Of course.” She needed a distraction right now. Food was as good as any.

As she looked at several tempting items on the menu, Jerik’s demeanor changed. He stiffened, and his eyes grew cold, his expression icing over. He cocked his head to one side.

It took Clarissa a moment to realize that he was *listening* to something.

He spoke in rapid, low-pitched Kordolian, issuing what sounded like a command.

She couldn’t help but be fascinated at how different he seemed all of a sudden.

This man had many different sides.

“Is everything all right, Jerik?”

And when he looked at her again, his expression gentled, and everything *seemed* all right.

But it wasn’t.

“Small disturbance at Garner Tower. We’ll have to go back earlier than expected. Go ahead and order what you like. I’ll have the pilot come back and deliver it to you.”

“All the way back here? That seems like a lot of trouble. You don’t have to—”

He held up a hand, cutting her off. “I *want* to. Urgent business must be dealt with, but I want us to continue this later. I hope you do, too.”

Hesitantly, she nodded. “I’ll... um, yes, I’d like to... see where this goes. But you’re right. We need to go back now.” If there was a disturbance, then she had to be there. “What exactly is going on?”

Jerik stood. He took her drink in his right hand and offered her his left. “Hostage situation, apparently.” His tone was way too nonchalant, as if this sort of thing was an everyday walk in the park for him.

Hostage? Oh, this was bad. She needed to be back at the tower right *now*. Garner would be flipping out.

Seriously, what was up with today? She stepped away from the place for less than thirty minutes, and everything went crazy?

I hope Garner hasn't gone and done anything extreme.

And then there was this whole *mate* thing to wrap her head around now. Suddenly, it seemed like the least of her problems. “Who’s the hostage?”

“One of mine.”

Oh. “Please don’t kill anyone.”

His fangs flashed wickedly. “I can’t promise that, Clarissa. But since it’s *you* doing the asking, I’ll try my very best not to.”

TWENTY

THE FLIGHT back began in silence. Clarissa looked at him a few times but didn't say anything.

She sat in her chair, her demeanor brittle and tense.

He got the feeling she wasn't entirely happy with him.

Well, that was to be expected. He'd dropped some unexpected news.

Silently, Jerik cursed the morons that had decided to take Mavrel hostage. He knew some humans were deluded, but he didn't think people could be this fucking stupid.

To take one of his very own team hostage?

If he wasn't so irritated, he almost might have found it amusing. Mavrel certainly seemed to—when he'd comm'ed Jerik, he'd spoken in a dry, bored tone. *“Er, boss, sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but apparently, I'm supposed to tell you there's a human pointing a gun to my head, and if you and the human female don't get your ass back over here now, he'll blow my brains out or something.”*

Jerik had told him to sit tight and only fight back if he thought it was safe to do so.

Then, he'd been forced to cut a very important conversation short.

He was *livid*.

He was certain he would have pulled it off—convinced her of his good intentions—if not for this infernal interruption.

How *dare* they?

When he found out who was responsible for this, he would sever their fucking...

No. You promised her you wouldn't.

At the very least, she hadn't reacted *too* badly. Some humans might have become afraid or hysterical. She could have rejected him on the spot.

But she hadn't.

He was just fortunate she had a calm temperament. Clarissa was adept at concealing her thoughts and emotions. She weighed things carefully and took her duty seriously.

That much he understood about her.

And he found her all the more fascinating because if he were in her shoes, he would have blown up at someone already.

With the current situation, he was *this* close to blowing up, and the fact that he was in the grip of the Mating Fever didn't help at all.

Thank the Goddess he'd given himself a shot of suppressant because if he hadn't, he truly didn't know what he might have done.

But it wasn't just the effects of the suppressant. There was something else, too.

Her.

Her presence maddened him, but somehow, she also made him feel calm.

Jerik walked over to her. He held out her drink, which he'd salvaged as they'd left the restaurant.

Sienna had been mildly outraged that they were leaving so soon, but she'd quickly grasped the seriousness of the situation, seeing them off with stern orders to return when things were taken care of.

Jerik could only hope that once he dealt with this infernal hostage situation—in his own style, as always—she would still want to take a meal with him.

“Your drink,” he said gruffly, a sliver of trepidation creeping through him. “Sorry we couldn’t stay for the food.”

She looked up, regarding him for a moment, her dark eyebrows drawing together, brown eyes narrowing.

Appraising him.

Skeptical.

A little annoyed.

He found her prickliness *so* attractive to the point where he became hard again. His headache returned. The suppressant made the ravages of the Mating Fever bearable—only just.

He was in a foul mood too—growing fouler by the *shiv*—but none of his ire was directed at her.

Never at her.

A puff of air escaped her delicate red lips. *Exasperation*. He wondered what it would be like to capture her mouth with his. Her lips were like the perfectly formed petals of some exotic flower.

He wanted to taste her so badly.

Patience. Let her come to you.

To his relief, Clarissa accepted her drink. “Now I regret not making it alcoholic,” she said dryly. “This hostage thing... it doesn’t have anything to do with you, does it?”

“It doesn’t,” he growled, somewhat affronted that she might think he would resort to such weak tactics.

In his world, there were only two options.

Mercy, or death.

“Humans are behind it,” he said coldly. “Probably the same ones that object to our presence in the building. That boss of yours... he never intended to negotiate, did he?”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “Garner wouldn’t...” A shadow of doubt crossed her exquisite features. “I really don’t think he’d be so reckless.”

“Seems to me a lot of your kind have a hard time grasping the reality of a situation.” Fury rose inside him, but he relented when he sensed her unease. He made a great effort to soften his tone—the last thing he wanted was to scare her. “I will do everything in my power to resolve this quickly. I’ll try to ensure nobody gets seriously damaged, but I can’t predict human behavior.”

She took a sip of her drink. He couldn’t help but stare as her lips touched the edge of the glass.

It was the most sensuous thing.

A faint imprint of red was left behind on the glass from the pigment staining her lips.

“No, you can’t,” she said at last. Her eyelids dropped, dark lashes fluttering, the subtle movement driving him crazy. “Do you know anything about who’s behind it... and who they’ve captured?”

“I know nothing about them, apart from the fact that they’re human. The hostage is Mavrel, who you’ve met.”

“*Oh.*” She sat upright. “I’m sorry to hear that. I can understand why you’re so angry.”

“I’m irritated, but I’m not angry.”

“I’d hate to see you angry, then.”

“I *will* be... if anyone harms Mavrel.”

She lowered her glass and looked him straight in the eye, her demeanor serious all of a sudden. “Jerik, I’ll do everything I can to help make sure your man isn’t hurt. I can act as an intermediary between you and the hostage-takers. I can try and help negotia—”

“No,” he growled. “I won’t allow it.”

She stiffened, a look of indignation crossing her gorgeous face. “While he’s in our building, I’m responsible for Mavrel’s welfare, too. Since when did you assume responsibility over me?”

Her resistance was irresistible.

And she’d said aloud what he’d been thinking for some time.

He was *responsible* for her, and if anyone harmed even a single hair on her head, they would lose limbs—or worse.

“When it comes to your safety,” he said softly, “I will not let you take even the slightest risk, no matter how reasonable the action might seem to you. That *especially* applies to situations like this. I’ve seen enough to know that things can get out of hand very quickly.” He leaned in, placing his hand on the edge of her chair, catching a whisper of her scent, which teased him terribly—*so close, yet so unattainable*. “When it comes to nearly anything else, I’ll be content to follow your lead, but on this, you need to trust me. This is what I *do*, Clarissa.”

She gave him a long, hard look.

Then, a soft sigh escaped her, laced with frustration. “I can’t even imagine how qualified you are to deal with a thing like this. I’m sorry this has happened. You and your people didn’t do anything wrong. You’ve been very patient, actually. If anything, Garner should have come down and met with you right away.”

“Don’t you *ever* apologize for the shortcomings of others, Clarissa.”

His words appeared to surprise her.

Her mouth formed a tantalizing *O*.

She blinked several times.

Impossibly compelled, he leaned in, drawn to her lips.

He wanted to taste her *so* badly.

But he held back because she was already wary of him.

Jerik wasn't known for showing restraint. He was the sort to charge in and take what he wanted. He didn't overthink things, and he didn't concede easily.

But *she* was different.

For her sake, he could hold back.

"You shouldn't let idiots dictate your existence," he said as the *Tarsin* started its descent. "You're far too good for that."

She shook her head slightly. "I appreciate the sentiment, but I'm not as *good* as you think. Don't you go putting me up on a pedestal, Jerik Garul."

"I wouldn't do any such thing," he muttered, lapsing into a more casual form of speech—how he spoke with his men or those he was familiar with. "And if you aren't all that *good*, it isn't a problem either. You don't have to put on a facade with me. Be who you truly are, Clarissa. And... no matter what you see me do, just know I'm on your side."

The look of surprise on her face disappeared, replaced with steely resolve. "You're dangerous, you know that? I have a job to do, and we might still end up on opposite sides of the negotiating table. But outside of that, we'll see..."

"Hm." He fought hard to keep the satisfied grin off his face. She wouldn't appreciate that right now.

As far as openings went, it wasn't huge...

But it was a start.

Now, all he had to do was deal with this cursed hostage situation without scaring her off.

Easier said than done.

TWENTY-ONE

WHAT WAS THAT JUST NOW?

She turned it over again and again in her mind as she followed the Kordolian down the corridor... back toward the foyer, which led to the meeting room where Mavrel was apparently being held at gunpoint.

She hung back, unable to bring herself to walk alongside him just yet. He was too...

Too *much*.

Too powerful, too magnetic, too distracting.

Too *everything*.

She told herself she wasn't going to stare at him—at his honed physique, encased in sleek obsidian. At his perfectly taut ass.

At the way he walked: brisk, efficient, all business.

He felt different. There was a tension about him—as if he could explode into violence at any moment.

It made her a little bit apprehensive. Her world and her work had always had a certain predictability about it. There

was routine. She knew the people and the personalities, and she could handle them.

But the sudden appearance of this alien—which she now knew was partly due to *her*—had thrown a major spanner into the works.

He was like a grenade that could go off at any moment.

What if they tipped him over the edge, and the civilized veneer he'd shown to her was stripped away?

What then?

And what could *she* do about it?

If anything, she got the feeling he wanted to prove to her that he wasn't the kind of monster the rest of the Universe made him out to be. As long as she was around, he would show restraint... *right?*

As they reached the soaring, marble-floored foyer, a group of armor-clad humans appeared, striding toward them, their boots ringing on the polished floor.

Clarissa's heart sank as she counted four in total: three men and one woman. Dressed in pixelated grey camo-print and carrying big guns, they wore tight, serious expressions and definitely looked like they were about to start some shit.

She recognized the logo of Garner's preferred security outfit—Gage Security. It was headed by Erasmus Gage, a former special forces soldier who had leveraged his family's fortune to build one of the biggest private military companies in the world.

Although Garner had asked Clarissa to alert them when the Kordolians arrived, she'd intentionally delayed, and up until now, she'd had the situation under control.

Garner must've contacted them himself.

Great.

Three of the mercs raised their guns. As they came to a stop in the middle of the foyer, meeting Jerik face to face, one of them—the woman—stepped forward.

“I’m going to have to ask you to leave the premises.”

What the actual fuck? Clarissa moved forward to intervene but stopped as Jerik raised his hand behind him, motioning for her to stay back.

It was obvious to her what had happened. Garner had never intended to meet the Kordolians. He’d sent her down to distract them while he contacted Gage and arranged for a mercenary unit to attend the scene.

Did he really think it was a good idea to antagonize Jerik and his people?

And in the process, he’d sent *her* down here as cannon fodder?

That asshole. He really doesn’t give a shit, does he?

But Garner could never have predicted that all this time, the formidable alien ex-commander had a thing for her. It was strange. No matter what happened, Clarissa felt certain that Jerik would never let any harm come to her.

He was as solid as a rock.

And there was a certain power in knowing that.

He’d asked her to trust him to deal with this.

“I’m not going anywhere until I have my man,” Jerik countered, his voice deceptively calm. *Too* calm. His entire stance had become relaxed, his hands hanging loosely by his sides. She saw a tiny flicker of movement—his finger twitching.

“He will be returned intact *once* you and your crew have left the building.”

“Since when were humans so inhospitable... and deceptive? A meeting was agreed to. On whose orders do you engage in such dishonorable conduct?”

“I’m not paid enough to get into the semantics over terms of your arrangement with Garner,” the woman snapped, her blue eyes hard. “You and your kind deal in threats to get your way, so consider this as us speaking in your language. If you

remove your presence from the building immediately, nothing will happen to your man. Once we have complete confirmation that you've left the building—including a visual on the departure of your cloaked ship—we'll let him walk.”

Clarissa almost fainted. Were these people *insane*?

Even she understood that playing this game with Kordolians could end very badly. She had no doubt the Gage mercs had gotten their directives from Garner, who was used to getting his way.

Maybe that's why he was having so much trouble grasping reality.

The trillionaire had never been seriously challenged in his life, and when confronted with someone who could actually destroy him, he couldn't handle it.

She'd been able to smooth over Garner's relationships with other stakeholders in the past, but this was different.

This was far bigger and more dangerous than any other business dealing they'd been involved with.

Why couldn't her boss just recognize that?

“*Jerik...*” she said softly, instinctively feeling like she should *do* something...

And why was she so confident that she would have any influence on him at all?

But she *did* feel like a word or a look from her would have some effect on him. She didn't understand how this was possible.

She just felt it, somehow.

To her surprise, he turned to look at her, ignoring the threatening mercenaries.

To her surprise, there was a twinkle in his crimson eyes. He chuckled softly, flashing the sharp points of his fangs. “Don't worry about a thing, Clarissa.”

There was a tenderness in his voice that she hadn't expected at *all*.

He turned back to the mercs. “We’ll accede to your demands.” He held up a finger. “On *one* condition.”

“What’s that?”

“I will speak with Cooper Garner now.”

“G-Garner? We can’t just—”

Jerik’s hand moved faster than humanly possible, becoming a dark blur.

It took Clarissa a moment to realize he held a gun, and it was pointed straight at the mercenaries. “Let me explain it in a way that you understand because I don’t think you fully grasp the situation. You and your masters exist because I allow you to. If I pull this trigger, you will be vaporized. Consider yourself fortunate I am *not* in the mood to obliterate you just yet. I’ve been patient up until now, but the moment you threatened one of my own, you indeed spoke a language I understand perfectly well, and I can only respond in kind. Take me to Garner now. Do *not* make me repeat myself.”

The woman with the gun looked at her comrades. Then, she looked back at Jerik, staring at the point of his sleek, black alien gun, which was unlike any weapon Clarissa had ever seen before.

The air was thick with tension. The mercs didn’t dare move. Although they tried to project stone-cold competence, Clarissa could sense their fear.

She didn’t blame them.

Who *wouldn’t* be terrified at the thought of being turned to ashes by a huge bolt of plasma?

And Jerik...

He was as cool and calm as anything, as if ice wouldn’t melt in his mouth.

Relaxed. Slightly amused, even.

As if this was little more than a minor inconvenience.

How could he be like this when, just moments ago, he was threatening to obliterate those four from the face of the Earth?

The boss-merc let out a heavy sigh. With a faintly trembling hand, she lowered her gun. “Shit. I don’t get paid enough for this. Hey, you.” For the first time, she directed her attention toward Clarissa. “You’re the EA, aren’t you? You have security access to his office, don’t you? Let’s go.”

Clarissa glanced at Jerik. “I’m coming with you?”

He smiled, wicked and tender at the same time. “Of course you are.”

How the hell was she supposed to do her job now? “And what if I tell you no?”

Are you going to make me bear responsibility for the lives of these four people?

The mercenary woman did a double take, staring at her in shock as if to say: *are you insane?*

“I could go without you,” he said lightly, “but that would probably involve damage to the building.”

Clarissa couldn’t decide whether to be amused or annoyed. “Urgh. *Fine*. But as an official employee of Garner Corporation, I’m as much responsible for his safety as these mercenaries. Promise me you won’t hurt him.”

Jerik turned so he was fully facing her. He closed his fist and placed it against his chest in a salute-like gesture. Then he tipped his head, bending forward slightly.

Was that a... *bow*?

He looked up, his crimson gaze earnest. “Clarissa, I promise I won’t hurt the man. I just want to speak with him. And after that, I will leave the building, as agreed.”

“Fine,” she said slowly, giving him a meaningful look. Her heart was pounding again, and there were butterflies in her stomach, but she hid all that. *I want to be able to trust you. I really do*. “Let’s go, then.”

The Gage Security people were looking at her strangely.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a flicker of movement. Clarissa looked over her shoulder.

There was Bea, frozen like a statue behind the front desk, shaking her head slowly, her mouth open in an *O* of disbelief and uncertainty.

She'd been there the whole time, watching them.

Clarissa suppressed a groan, knowing Bea would be on her case later, and somehow, she would have to explain all this.

How did one explain that, despite having one of his people threatened, this dangerous Kordolian ex-commander was somehow acting restrained... all because of her?

This timeline was getting more and more out of hand.

A thought entered her mind—one she'd had a hundred times before.

One of these days, I'm going to quit, I swear.

Maybe today.

She would tell it straight to Garner's face.

That is, if Jerik didn't kill him first.

TWENTY-TWO

JERIK WAS IN A GOOD MOOD—*MOSTLY*.

Despite the aggravation of being interrupted in the middle of one of the most important meetings in his life—a meal with the very human he wanted to entice—he felt he'd accomplished something.

Even though he'd leveled a dire threat at those involved in this idiocy, she hadn't shied away from him. Instead, she'd looked at him with an air of mild exasperation—as if he were a wayward child.

Nobody treated him like that.

Coming from her, he rather liked it. He hadn't scared her off, and that was a good thing.

Things were looking promising.

And now that he'd gotten what he wanted—an opening—he had no reason to hang around this infernal place any longer.

He didn't even really need to bother about negotiating over the disputed parcel of land.

The only reason he was riding this infernal metal box to the very top of Garner Tower was because he needed that human to understand one thing.

He didn't really care about the land deal—they would secure that regardless—but he *did* care about Clarissa, and she was far too tolerant to rail against her boss's ridiculous demands.

And this Garner clearly held no true respect or consideration for the lives of his employees—especially *her*. He'd gone and done the one thing that was unforgivable in Jerik's eyes.

The moron had knowingly placed her in danger.

Standing in the elevator flanked by a pair of armed human mercenaries, with Clarissa just behind him—so she was unknowingly shielded from any potential harm, he quietly wondered at the paradox of these soft-skinned creatures.

On one hand, they could be innocent and trusting. On the other, they could be dangerously ignorant and reckless. And more often than not, they harbored wild levels of delusion about their place in the Universe.

Such a weak, defenseless civilization.

But some of them were blessed with poise and elegance and foresight, and astonishing amounts of patience.

She was like that.

And her presence alone was powerful enough to make him both calm and frantic at the same time.

Suddenly, he understood how his battle-brothers—even the most feared and lethal amongst them—had succumbed. Humans were everything Kordolians *weren't*.

Thus, they were exactly what they needed. The urge to find a mate was driven by something deep within Jerik's subconscious. A yearning he hadn't even realized until she was right before him, drenching his senses with her pure, primal essence.

She didn't even realize...

The effect she had on him.

How could she? Human senses weren't as sharp as those of his kind. Existing in darkness for eons had honed their hearing, dark-sight, touch, smell...

They tasted things differently. The sweetness humans enjoyed was overpowering. Bitterness and salt were pleasurable.

He couldn't imagine how good *she* would taste.

At last, the elevator stopped. Jerik's weapon hand was steady, the point of his plasma gun leveled at the head mercenary—the blue-eyed woman who had quickly recognized the real danger in the room—*him*.

Pragmatic, this one. She served her masters, but only up until a point.

She must've had some off-planet experience. It hadn't taken long for her to understand the situation perfectly well.

And he could smell her fear.

But the only one who mattered to him was Clarissa, and she wasn't afraid of him, only mildly irritated.

That made him happy.

"Come," he rumbled, turning to look at her, ignoring the other humans entirely. "Let's go and meet this boss of yours."

Her eyebrows rose. A hint of a smile tugged at one corner of her mouth. There was a glint in her eyes he hadn't seen before—a look of defiance.

But it wasn't directed at him.

"Let's do that." She kept her tone low enough that only he could hear.

The mercs watched their interaction with thinly veiled curiosity, but they couldn't understand—or do—a single thing.

"Give me space." She moved across the floor. Jerik waved his gun, herding the mercs into a corner. They were sufficiently wary of him. Clearly, they understood the destructive capabilities of plasma.

A disembodied voice spoke through a hidden speaker. *“Clarissa Lee. Identification confirmed. Numerous unidentified persons present. Access denied. Return to ground floor.”*

She placed her finger on a glowing panel-screen beside the doors. “I suppose you know how to get around this,” she said dryly, glancing at Jerik.

“A simple fix.” He glared at the two mercs. “If you value your heads, don’t move.” They were already spooked, but it was good to give them a reminder now and then. The last thing he wanted was for them to think they had an opportunity or an opening and do something unpredictable.

In these kinds of situations, jittery mercenaries needed to know that he was watching them *all* the fucking time.

The woman offered him a grudging nod.

“Clarissa, come here. *Please.*” He added the last word so as not to make it seem he was ordering her around. Because he wasn’t, for safety reasons, he just wanted her by his side when he...

She wasn’t a fool. She came to him without a word, without any hesitation or protest.

She allowed him to slide his arm around her waist.

She leaned into him as he moved across to the doors and pressed the tip of his gun against the metal.

“Brace yourself,” he whispered in her ear, quietly enough so nobody else could hear. He enjoyed their closeness: the fact that she smelled so good, that she *let* him get this close without shying away.

It was becoming more and more natural.

He pulled the trigger.

Boom!

Suddenly, there was a hole in the middle of the doors. A gaping, smoking, head-sized hole.

“*Holy shit,*” the other merc, a big, bearded male, whispered.

“*Door breach. Severe damage detected. Security systems compromised.*”

“Did you just destroy my elevator?” Clarissa glared at him.

“I told you I’d find a way around this problem,” Jerik said lightly, poking his gun through the hole. “Cooper Garner!” he thundered. “Open this contraption now, or I’ll turn this place into fucking stardust.”

They waited. Nothing happened.

Both mercenaries groaned.

Clarissa shook her head slowly. “I can’t believe you’re doing this. Don’t kill him, remember?”

Jerik bared his fangs. “It would be much easier if he just opened the doors. I can keep blasting until part of the structure is obliterated, but there’s always the risk someone on the other side could be hit by a stray bolt of plasma.”

Suddenly, the doors snapped open.

Sunlight flooded Jerik’s vision, momentarily blinding him. He uttered a command and activated his armor, shielding his eyes from the infernal ultraviolet.

The one called Garner must have been listening, and he’d reacted exactly how Jerik had predicted.

Faced with the imminent threat of death, he’d caved.

Still with his arm around Clarissa’s waist—she felt perfectly snug, as if she were made from him—Jerik looked over his shoulder at the surly mercs. “Stay in here. Take one step outside, and I’ll destroy you.”

“You do that, and your man’s a dead man.” The female mercenary countered. She sounded tough, but she was all bluster.

“Stop talking shit. If he comes to any harm, it doesn’t take much to guess what will happen to you.”

Her face turned ashen.

Jerik released Clarissa's waist and led her through a light-filled antechamber.

"You've broken my elevator, threatened a Gage Security squad leader, threatened my boss, and most likely compromised my employment," she grumbled, folding her arms and frowning. Jerik's chest tightened. She was *so* achingly gorgeous. "And you're quite possibly going to take away Garner Corp's most valuable land asset at gunpoint. Are you keeping any more surprises up your sleeve, Jerik?"

Enjoying the tongue-in-cheek chastisement—he decided she was the only one he'd ever allow to speak to him like this—he nodded. "Yes. We are from different worlds, and we barely know each other. Of course there are going to be surprises. I have all kinds of surprises for you. Only good ones."

"You're something else, you know that?"

"Yes." He didn't know what she meant, but he could go along with it. "Now, before this so-called boss of yours tries to jump out the window, will you take me to him?"

Clarissa took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She tipped her head back, exposing the slender, decadent column of her neck. "I suppose I have no choice. Just don't kill him."

"You told me that already."

She opened her eyes again. "I'm just trying to make sure. I might feel frustrated and exploited, but I wouldn't wish death upon him."

"Anyone who sees fit to exploit your talents deserves death."

"No, Jerik. My world doesn't work that way. If you ever want me to trust you, you need to understand that."

Her world was beautiful, naive, and unrealistic. He would do his utmost to keep it that way for her. "Very well."

"Thank you." Her expression changed into something akin to awe, and it almost brought him to his knees. "I'll take you

to Garner now. My work here is pretty much done, anyway.”

“You’ll leave this job?”

“I’m thinking about it.”

Come with me, he wanted to say, but he didn’t dare. Not yet.

He didn’t want to scare her away when he’d made so much progress with her.

“Follow me, Jerik.” She walked across the floor, her tall-heeled shoes clicking loudly. Now she was in charge, and he was the one to go after her, unable to do anything but stare as she strode confidently toward the door that led to Garner’s office.

Something had possessed her.

He had no choice but to go after her—now it was *his* turn to follow.

Why did he have this feeling all of a sudden... that something momentous was about to happen?

Clarissa reached a pair of large doors made of dead tree material. She waited expectantly.

Nothing happened.

“My access has been overridden,” she said quietly. “He won’t let us in.”

“Probably trying to buy time so he can escape.” Jerik had had enough. He was itching to destroy a thing or two. He lifted his gun and shot at the large metal lock that held the doors together.

Boom!

Metal melted.

The smell of burning organic material filled the air. The dead-tree doors were blackened and charred and slightly ajar, the force of the blast having pushed them open.

Clarissa gave him a strange look, rolling her eyes upwards ever so slightly. “I don’t even know anymore,” she sighed.

“It’s called consequences,” Jerik shrugged. “Shouldn’t have locked us out.”

“Huh.” She looked neither surprised nor upset. Something in her had shifted—he sensed she was no longer as fiercely dedicated to her job as she used to be.

Being used as cannon fodder could do that to someone.

Rather savagely, he kicked the door open and stepped through the destruction into Garner’s office.

His gaze instantly snapped toward the far window, which was ajar.

And Garner was stepping through it onto a hovering sky-bridge attached to some sort of flying vehicle.

The fucker was trying to escape.

Jerik didn’t waste any time. He shot across the room toward the open window and raised his gun.

“Go!” Garner shouted at the flying machine, the wind scattering his voice. He was an older human, tall and slender, with black-and-grey hair and angular features. He wore the strange attire of humans: a stiff, formal suit with a white undershirt and a thin strip of fabric tied around his neck.

Right now, he looked rather desperate.

Jerik didn’t waste a moment. He was already at the window ledge, stepping across the floating bridge to the flyer, which managed to suspend itself in mid-air with force generated from primitive jet-thrusters.

Garner lunged toward an open hatch; a brightly-lit doorway that revealed a pair of crude flight seats.

This idiot really thought he could step onto this rudimentary vessel and escape?

What was wrong with some humans?

Balancing on his feet, Jerik danced across to Garner and dropped his hand onto the human’s shoulder. A gust of wind rocked the aerial bridge.

“What?” Garner cried, whipping his head around, his grey eyes wide with panic, the whites bulging. A vein popped in his forehead. His neck was corded and strained.

“Come with me,” Jerik snapped.

“Wh-who the fuck are you?” Garner’s Universal wasn’t as good as Clarissa’s, but it was passable.

The wind blew again, harder this time. The craft and the bridge rocked. With nothing else to hold onto, Garner gripped Jerik’s arm, his fingers digging into Callidum armor but finding no purchase.

He started to fall.

Jerik had half a mind to let Garner lose balance and slip off the bridge, down a vast height to the hard pavement below. He could even give the idiot a little shove to get him on his way...

But he’d *promised* Clarissa, and he didn’t want her first impression of him to be that of a ruthless killer.

Well, he *was* like that sometimes, and she probably knew that about him, but he wanted to prove himself to her.

He wanted to prove that he could show restraint; that he *listened* to her.

So he wrapped his gloved fingers around Garner’s slender forearm and gripped it so tightly the human wouldn’t have a chance in the Nine Hells of falling. He turned and strode back down the bridge, dragging the terrified, screaming Garner with him.

Until they reached the open window, where he pulled Garner through, hauling him as if he were a sack of vegetables. The human kicked and screamed, but Jerik was far too strong for him.

He threw him back into his very own office, onto the hard, polished floor.

He stalked forward as Garner attempted to scramble away.

He tripped him.

The human fell to the floor, gasping and spluttering.

Jerik leaned in and gripped his shoulder, turning him around until he was sitting on his ass, looking up.

Then he let some of his anger loose, grabbing the long strip of material that extended from Garner's neck. He yanked the human toward him, watching dispassionately as his pale brown skin turned a curious shade of red.

Thoughtless bastard. How could you put her in such danger without a care in the Universe?

"Y-you can't do this," Garner hissed, his eyes bulging with outrage. "It's *my* fucking land."

"We were about to offer you a fair deal, but you had to go and mess it up. You made your choice. Now deal with the consequences." Jerik shook his head in disbelief. How could this pathetic human hold so much power and influence in this world? He was deceitful, and the moment he was faced with an adversary stronger than himself, he'd tried to run. This wasn't about Garner's precious land, anyway. That was inconsequential, a convenient fact Jerik had used to get closer to *her*. "You might have paid for her to show you respect, but that doesn't mean you own her. If you do anything to harm her again, if you use your position to inconvenience her in any way... if you cause her even the slightest discomfort, I will come back for you, and I will make you suffer. Do you understand, human?"

"W-what are you talking about?"

Did this human *still* not understand?

"She's under *my* protection now." Jerik raised his gun and pressed the tip against Cooper Garner's forehead. "That is all you need to know."

His anger was incandescent. The thought of any harm coming to her made him insane. He could *so* easily revert to the old ways and eliminate this human right here and now...

But then something cool and soft came to rest on the back of his neck—her hand.

And he froze.

She touched the part of him that wasn't encased in impenetrable armor. The feeling of her bare skin against his...

It sent a frisson of electric energy through him.

How had she snuck up on him? *Nobody* could do that to him.

Maybe he'd been so consumed with anger that he hadn't noticed her.

Or maybe she was one of the very few beings in the Universe he could feel completely comfortable with, to the point where he sensed zero threat whatsoever.

Wary as she was of him, she disarmed him completely and utterly.

"Jerik, that's enough. *Please*," she murmured, her voice low and luscious; a soothing wave washing over him. "I'm really quite all right. You can let him go. I'll deal with this. He's *my* employer, after all."

Jerik rankled at the fact that she could refer to him that way—as if he still held power over her.

But she held some power over him, so he released the man's neck-string and let him fall backward.

"Clarissa," Garner hissed, locking eyes with her. "How could you allow this to happen? Call security, *now*."

You dare find fault with her for this?

Jerik was on the verge of eviscerating the man, but Clarissa grabbed his arm and *pulled* him backward until she was standing in front of him.

Nobody had ever done *that* to him before, either.

"Ordinarily, I would have felt obligated to salvage this situation—like always—but this is something far beyond my capabilities. Haven't you been following the news? Didn't you know that this Kordolian is a member of the very same group that was behind the revolution on Kythia? They're the people that caused the downfall of the Kordolian *Empire*, Mr Garner."

The human got to his feet, smoothing down his crumpled suit jacket. Outrage was written all over his sharp features. “What are you trying to say? That you would so very easily give up? That you would relinquish human sovereignty without offering even a scrap of resistance? I expected better from you, Clarissa. And you should have anticipated a situation as fraught as this. I *told* you to do your research.”

Jerik’s killing urge grew even stronger. He feared he might explode from the pent-up tension and violence.

Clarissa looked over her shoulder—at *him*.

In her brown eyes was a silent entreaty. *Let me handle this*, she seemed to be asking him.

Jerik let out a small puff; a sharp exhalation of pent-up tension. *Very well*.

If Garner did anything stupid, he was here to back her up.

“I did my research,” Clarissa said quietly. “But you never gave me a chance to tell you *my* assessment of the situation. If you allowed me to handle the Kordolians, things would have turned out differently. As of now, I’m officially allowing *this* to happen because I no longer work for you. Mr Garner, I’m tendering my resignation, effective immediately.”

“I refuse to accept it.”

“It isn’t like you have any choice in the matter.”

“You signed an agreement, Clarissa. There will be severance pay—from *you*.”

“No, there won’t. In light of the extreme and unusual circumstances, you won’t get anything from me.”

“You’ll be blacklisted from every organization on the planet. And if you disclose any single detail about my company to the media, my competitors, or even a mere acquaintance, you *will* be going to jail.”

“I doubt that.” She glanced at Jerik.

Her estimation of his power and capabilities warmed his hard, black heart. Of *course* there was no way he would allow

Garner and the human authorities to enact some scheme to imprison her.

Never, ever, ever.

Even if she turned his advances down, he wouldn't allow this pathetic human to wield power over her.

She was under his protection now, and that would remain for as long as he was alive.

He only hoped she could see beyond everything that he was on the surface and perceive his true intentions.

He glared at the human. The man called Cooper Garner held pure malevolence in his eyes. His expression was a mixture of outrage, disbelief, and arrogance.

You're just lucky I'm not allowed to kill you, bastard.

"You can't do this," the human said coldly. "Did you conveniently forget that your man's life is in the balance? If you want him to walk out of here alive, you will put down your gun, walk away, and leave Clarissa Lee to me. There will be *no* further discussion about the land at *Copernicus*."

For a terrified human, he really was good at pretending to be composed, but Jerik had encountered enough of his kind to know a bluff when he saw it.

"I'm not concerned about Mavrel," he said lightly. "You have no bargaining power here. You will release Clarissa of all her obligations and duties. You will swear never to come after her for any single thing. If I so much get a hint of a whisper that you have attempted to contact her, I will personally destroy you. Call off your mercenaries, Garner, unless you want to be responsible for the injuries that will occur beneath your roof."

This time, it was Clarissa who gave him a look of unbridled disbelief.

All this time...? she mouthed.

Jerik shrugged. Mavrel wasn't a supreme fighter, but he was exceptionally talented at inventing, and he had a few tricks up his sleeve.

He would be fine. Jerik had no doubt Mavrel could handle a room of low-tier human mercs. The tech had dealt with much worse in the past.

Cooper Garner looked at Jerik. Then his gaze swiveled toward Clarissa... and back to Jerik again.

“Very well,” he said at last, attempting to sound in control of the situation. “But you will leave off this land business. That land is *mine*.”

“Agreed,” Jerik said lightly. “But should you change your mind and decide to sell it to us, we will be open to a deal.”

Clarissa shook her head and folded her arms, a tiny sigh escaping her perfect lips. She was infinitesimally gorgeous, and Jerik wanted to devour her.

He prayed to the Goddess she would come to him willingly.

Surely, she would.

He'd been very, very good, after all.

TWENTY-THREE

WHEN CLARISSA finally managed to get away from Garner and the sullen mercenaries and the chaos of upstairs—escaping the incessant roar of her former boss’s flyer hovering outside—she went straight to the private lounge on the twenty-first floor, the only place she could think of that would give her the peace and quiet she so desperately needed.

And Jerik followed, filled with simmering tension, a stalking, hulking bodyguard who wouldn’t let anyone or anything get near her.

For once, she didn’t fight it.

On one hand, she was utterly daunted by his actions.

He’d reduced one of the most powerful men in the world to a terrified mess in the span of a few minutes.

And it had been so easy for him.

On the other hand, she *liked* his indomitable presence.

With Jerik standing behind her as she’d given Garner her verbal resignation, she’d felt unstoppable.

But now, as she stood in the middle of the lounge, she was shaking.

The place was deserted. She wouldn't be surprised if most of the senior staff members had conveniently taken the afternoon off.

She would have done so, too, if she'd heard there was some sort of hostage situation unfolding in the tower.

Especially one involving Kordolians.

Well, it was too late for that now. She'd come closer to a real-live Kordolian than she'd ever thought possible.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" Jerik stood before her, carefully apart yet overwhelmingly close. Unable to meet his eyes for a moment, she stared at the broad plane of his chest. Her eyes wandered, tracing the outline of his shoulders, the powerful, corded column of his neck, all the way up to his taut jawline.

He swallowed, his Adam's apple rising to prominence.

She was *still* shaking. Whether from overwhelm or fear or just the sheer magnitude of the adrenaline dump after the guns and the hostages and telling Garner to stick it and *him*...

She didn't know.

But she knew for certain that right now, it was *his* presence that was responsible for her wildly beating heart.

"I had no idea that all of this was unnecessary." She folded her arms, trying her best to summon a glare. "You didn't have to comply with the mercs' demands, did you? You actually weren't afraid for your man at all. So why go to all that trouble?"

Deep down, Clarissa already knew the answer to her question.

His expression softened, along with his tone. "You were dragged into my business. I didn't want you to suffer any adverse consequences, *especially* at the hands of that man."

"You made me quit my job."

"Is that necessarily a bad thing?"

Clarissa thought for a moment. *Of course it isn't*. She knew Garner had been taking advantage of her, but she'd also been complicit—she'd done her job so well she'd become invaluable.

Anything he asked her, she would find a way to do it. To the point where the demands became more and more ridiculous.

“Most of us on Earth don't have the luxury of being able to point a plasma gun to someone's head and demand whatever. I have a mortgage.” Clarissa shrugged. “My world is different to yours. I do what I need to do to survive.”

The thought of being truly on her own—without the security of a job and the certainty of being able to pay the bills—both terrified and excited her.

And although the sudden and very intentional appearance of this man—this *alien*—in her life was completely and utterly insane, she wondered if there was a place for him.

Because she *was* attracted to him. She couldn't deny it. He had power, and he knew how to wield it. He was larger-than-life and forceful and dangerous but also roguishly charming—and when it came to her, he was terribly considerate.

“I can make it so you never have to worry about those trivial things ever again,” he said, his voice a low rumble. “I can make it so you want for nothing.”

There was something dark and seductive about his invitation. She tried to imagine herself as his *mate*.

Would he keep her under his terms? Isolated from Earth, locked away on some floating alien space station, pampered and given every material thing she'd ever desired, and even power, if she wished it.

And she would be his...

His what?

Warmth seeped between her thighs.

What would it be like... to *be with him*?

“I... I can’t accept that. There’s no way I could exist simply for the sake of existing. I’m not wired that way. I’d be miserable if I didn’t have anything to strive for.”

“I never said you would lead that kind of life with me... unless, of course, it were your wish. I won’t deceive you; as my mate, you will become a target for our enemies, but we are more than well-equipped to deal with any kind of threat. I won’t interfere with your decisions. If you choose to make a living using your skills and talents on Earth, I would do everything in my power to facilitate that. At the same time, your knowledge and experience would be invaluable to our organization.”

“You’re asking me to come over to the dark side, huh?” A day ago, she’d have thought the notion utterly mad. But with Jerik standing before her, his expression so beautifully earnest, she was sorely tempted.

All of him tempted her.

“What’s wrong with that?” He must’ve sensed her interest because he leaned in a little... and she *swore* she could feel the desire radiating off him.

He wasn’t bothering to hide it anymore.

Suddenly, she was drowning, and she couldn’t care less.

“You aren’t what I’d expected,” she murmured, leaning in as well, tilting her face upwards, allowing her lips to part.

The day was already gone, and her life would never be the same again.

She might as well just *go* for it...

“Sometimes, there are hidden benefits to be found in the unexpected,” he rumbled.

Then, he kissed her.

At first, he was gentle, and his lips were warm, and they tasted of cold and crispness and something faintly cinnamon-y. When she yielded and returned his kiss, he took charge: demanding, insistent.

She didn't mind at all.

And when she broke away, fearing she'd get caught up in his deliciously dark intensity for good, he let her go.

She looked up at him in disbelief and wonder, and his gaze was unexpectedly soft, molten pools of crimson fanned by his snow-white lashes.

At that moment, he was unexpectedly pure... and beautiful.

What... what did I just do?

“Jerik,” she rasped, struggling to form coherent words. “I... I’m going to need some time. Take me home now, please.”

She didn't know what she was going to do.

But she'd enjoyed their kiss; there was no denying it.

It's just that the Universe was spinning way out of her control, but then again, maybe things had always been this way, and she'd just never noticed before.

TWENTY-FOUR

MAKING good use of *Tarsin* and its supreme cloaking technology, Jerik took Clarissa back to the place on Earth where she lived. She didn't want any fuss or ceremony. Just the fastest way home, in the most discreet manner.

They departed via the rooftop, leaving Cooper Garner, the rest of his mostly clueless staff, and the human mercs behind.

Mavrel had already walked out of the building to join Kainan somewhere in the streets. The human had arranged some sort of private transportation that would take them back to the Earth base in the desert.

Jerik had never been worried about Mavrel in the first place. The tech knew how to defend himself—both in combat and using cunning devices.

When Mavrel had reported back, he'd informed Jerik that all the human mercs in the room were currently unconscious.

Thus, their business in Garner Tower was concluded.

As for the tract of land he intended to secure, he wasn't particularly concerned. He'd given Garner a chance to receive fair compensation, but in his arrogance, the human had spurned him.

Now, the land would be rendered worthless. They were in the process of acquiring all the territory surrounding Garner's and securing the airspace. There would be no way to travel in and out without Darkstar's permission.

"*We've arrived, boss,*" Rukan informed him through the comm.

The trip had taken a mere *minute* in the human measurement, and that was with Rukan flying slowly.

Jerik turned to Clarissa, who was seated next to the window. As she gazed outside, filtered sunlight danced across her features, making her appear luminous and more enchanting than ever.

She was still a little annoyed with him, but he didn't mind at all because he'd secured a small victory.

That *kiss*.

She'd yielded to his demands, and he'd tasted her for the very first time.

She was every bit as sublime as he'd imagined. Soft, sweet, and more than a little wanting. He'd sensed her desire, and it had driven him mad.

And the Mating Fever had hit him again, *hard*. It took all his willpower to conceal the pain in his temples and the need to take her then and there.

He managed—only *just*—because he knew that giving in to his darkest desires would ruin everything.

The Manual had explicitly stated what could happen if he rushed things.

The harder you push, the more unwilling she'll become.

After all the ground he'd gained, he was loath to lose his strategic advantage.

So he would be patient. For a human, she'd dealt with a lot today, and she'd taken it all surprisingly well.

Facing the unexpected and the terrifying, her composure was impressive.

“We’re here,” he said softly.

She turned to look at him. “That was fast.”

“I didn’t want you to have to wait any longer than was necessary. You’ve done enough of that already.”

“Jerik...” As the cruiser came to a halt, silently hovering over her apartment building, she rose to her feet, coming face to face with him. “You have to understand, I never expected any of this—for you to suddenly show up in my fairly ordinary life. It’s going to take me a while... to come to terms with the implications of it all.”

“You know what my intentions are. You know what sort of person I am.” He hoped so, anyway.

“I think I do now.”

He held out his arm, offering her a choice. “Would you like me to escort you to your dwelling?”

“That... that would be fine.” Tentatively, she rested her hand on his arm, her slender fingers sliding over seamless armor. “There’s a residents’ garden on the rooftop. We can alight from there.”

“As you wish.” He took her to the hatch, which slid open at his command, revealing the bright sky and the dwellings below. Jerik activated his visor, saving himself from the agony of temporary blindness. He looked down and saw a tall, square building with neatly manicured vegetation on its rooftop. There were tall trees growing out of boxes filled with dirt. Smaller vine-like plants cascaded over the sides.

It was idyllic and so very *human*.

“I presume we’re going to jump?” She gave him a wry look, her eyes narrowing, her lips curving downwards.

He couldn’t explain why, but he enjoyed it when she looked at him like that. Perhaps it was because no other would regard him like this—with a mixture of amusement, disbelief, and affection.

Surely, there was a hint of fondness by now.

There *had* to be.

He was definitely in trouble because if she ended up rejecting him, he would be ruined.

But he didn't care. What was the point of worrying about the worst thing that could happen?

He slid his arm around her waist. She didn't protest. He felt her body; warm, lithe, filled with vitality, willingly pressing against him.

Not stiff and afraid like before.

She was getting used to him.

He held her close as he wrapped the flexible Callidum line around his hand several times.

Then he dropped through the warm afternoon, holding her tightly, feeling immense satisfaction as she wrapped her arms around his neck and clung to him.

They landed lightly on the pavement, Clarissa balancing elegantly on her high shoes. He didn't know how humans did it—walk in those strange contraptions, but she managed it with poise, quickly regaining her composure.

A faint pinkish hue suffused her cheeks. The wind ruffled her hair. He wanted to steal another kiss, but he held back.

You initiated the first one. Now, let her come to you.

"I'll be fine from here," she said quietly. "Thank you for bringing me home, Jerik. I hope everything works out well for you—and for *us*."

That last word could mean a dozen things.

He didn't dare to hope.

"You *know* what I want," he rasped, unable to stop the hunger from entering his voice.

"You've made that very clear." She stepped forward, lifting her hand. To his surprise, her fingers came to rest on his cheek, and she caressed the side of his face. The tips of her fingers were smooth and cool, not rough like his. Her touch

was gentle, almost reverent. “As I said, I just need some time. Would you... wait for me?”

“Course I would.” He lapsed into the rough manner of speaking that came more naturally to him. “Just let me know, all right? There’s still the Cultural Event...”

“I know.”

The event was to be held the equivalent of one human *week* from now. He’d agreed with Xal that this amount of time was long enough but not *too* long—so he would still be fresh in her consciousness.

He captured her cool, smooth hand in his and caressed her palm, delighted that she allowed it, although he was afraid to retract his armor because the sensation of her bare skin against his would probably send him over the edge.

He’d never been *this* close to losing control before.

Was this the exquisite torture his fellow warriors had spoken of?

He *could* hold out against it, but not for too long. Maybe a *week* was the longest he could withstand it. He feared what he would be like by the end of it.

There was only so much the suppressant injections could do, after all.

And if, after all of that, she didn’t want to see him anymore...

Nah. It isn’t going to happen.

There was no point in worrying about that. After all, he never worried about death when he stormed into battle.

“Jerik, thank you.” She ran her fingers along the inside of his glove, feeling the surface, her touch both familiar and curious. Her eyelids fluttered and then dropped to halfway, cradling her irises, which had turned the warmest hue of brown, illuminated by the golden sunlight. “In spite of everything that happened, there were moments today... when it was fun. I’ll be in touch, okay?”

“*Okay*,” he rumbled, using the Earth vernacular. He would let her have control—for now. But should she come to him willingly, there would be no holding back.

He disengaged from her touch and took a step back, offering her a formal bow. “I hope I see you again, Clarissa.”

“You will. I just need some time, that’s all.”

“Fair enough.” He watched as she turned and walked away, disappearing through a set of sliding glass doors.

Leaving him alone on the sun-drenched rooftop, wondering what in the Nine Hells he’d just done.

Drawing her so close... then letting her go completely.

To his Kordolian instincts, it felt so wrong, and yet, from everything he’d deduced, it was the right thing to do.

He’d done everything he could, using all his powers and resources.

Being incredibly restrained.

Now, it was all up to her.

Surely, she would come back to him.

TWENTY-FIVE

HAVING NOTHING TO DO FELT... *strange*.

Clarissa couldn't remember when she'd last had so much free time on her hands. Probably never.

Sure, she wasn't earning anything right now, and knowing Garner, her last pay wouldn't even come through, but she had a modest amount of savings to tide her over for a while, and she felt *free*.

That was new... and different.

With all this time and space at her disposal, she'd decided to simply enjoy herself.

She rode the slow ferry around the harbor, basking in the sunlight, enjoying the sight of the iridescent water as they lazily drifted past the glittering glass-and-steel palaces of the uber-wealthy.

Finally, the ferry sailed past the spectacular clifftops of the Heads, drifting toward its destination, a terminal close to Manly Beach.

She spent a day on the beach, reading a smutty romance novel under a compact umbrella as her toes sank into the warm, fine sand.

From behind her oversized sunglasses, she people-watched, observing the buff, toned ones and the imperfect and completely unselfconscious alike.

She marveled at how carefree people were, seemingly oblivious to the threat looming in the starry universe above.

She astounded herself by finding none of these people interesting beyond a quick glance; usually, she might find someone or other to admire from a safe distance, but now her idle thoughts were constantly occupied by one person.

Jerik Garul.

Kordolian.

Powerful beyond her comprehension. Once-ruthless, and probably still that way in many regards, but he seemed to have developed a soft spot for humans and a very obvious liking for her.

It was more than just a *liking*, though, and he'd very intentionally let her know it.

God, that man wasn't one to beat around the bush. Were all Kordolians like him? She was almost afraid to imagine what he'd be like when he was in official Kordolian mode.

But the most surprising thing was that she'd actually enjoyed his company.

His honesty, his stalwartness, his ability to be gentle with her no matter how angry he was. She missed his big, warm presence and his unapologetic Kordolianness.

What a day that had been.

It was three days since she'd received Jerik and his crew at Garner Tower and walked out of her job; since she'd left him there, standing on the rooftop of her apartment complex, staring at her as if his gaze could set a thousand suns on fire.

She thought that if she gave it some time, her feelings might become clearer.

She might end up feeling turned off by him.

But she wasn't. Not at all.

And a big part of her felt unfulfilled.

What if...?

She wanted to go to the Kordolian Cultural Event, but something was holding her back—stupid fear.

“Hey.” A familiar voice made her look up. There was Bea, sauntering across the sand. Wearing a white bikini and a wide-brimmed hat over dark cat-eye sunglasses, with a fuchsia-and-white-striped towel wrapped around her curvy hips, she looked resplendent, drawing admiring glances from more than a few onlookers.

“Nice hair,” Clarissa remarked.

“Thanks.” Bea ran her hand through her long white braids, which were so tiny and intricate that, from a distance, they looked like silken hair. “I wanted to go for a different look. Something bold and different. That’s twelve hours worth of sitting on my ass, but micro-braids are always worth it.”

“They look beautiful. But how are you going to get past Garner’s corporate image guidelines?”

“Meh. You started something, Clarissa. Staff have been walking out left, right, and center. They can’t afford to get rid of me now. Nobody else can manage the front desk right now. I figure I can take a few liberties.” Bea laughed as she unwrapped her towel and laid it down on the sand next to Clarissa—in the brightly blazing sun.

“There’s room under my umbrella,” she offered.

Bea smiled. “Thank you, hun, but I have more than enough melanin. Sun doesn’t bother me. And I’ve spent far too much time in that gloomy office. I *need* the vitamin D.”

“Fair enough. I’d go red like a lobster if I tried to do that. Then I’d peel and flake for days.”

“Almost like a Kordolian,” Bea laughed.

“Um, I suppose.”

“*Speaking of which...*”

Clarissa cringed. “Yes, I know. You saw. The, um... *mercenary*.”

“Former fucking High Commander of the Kordolian Imperial Militaries, a highly decorated warrior, master of weapons, a guy you do *not* want to mess with... I do *not* know what the boss was thinking, by the way...”

“How did you know he was...?” *Master of weapons? What does that even mean? Something incredibly badass, I suppose.* There were things Clarissa didn’t even know, and she’d spent the day with the guy.

Bea shrugged. “I looked the dude up. I take it he’s one of the ones that’s jonesing for a *mate*. And I *did* see you two together, and the way he looked at you like a desperate, adoring puppy-dog, and—”

“He did *not*...” *Puppy-dog? Jerik? No way.*

“Oh, he did, and he is obsessed beyond obsessed. You could probably tell him to take over Earth and install you as Queen, and he would do it for you.”

“I would *never*—”

Bea waved her hand airily. “Joking, of course.”

Clarissa didn’t tell her that her words had struck a nerve. “I had no idea he would show up and take a sudden interest in me like that.”

“Of course you didn’t. But count yourself lucky. They say these guys are the real deal, and they’re *very* devoted lovers. Like...” she made a suggestive gesture with her hands, “*very*.”

“Very,” Clarissa said dryly, carefully hiding her emotions—the sudden rush of excitement that came over her as she thought of Jerik and how he might be as a lover.

Intense, she bet. And generous, as he had been with her on *that* day.

He was used to being in control.

Would he exhibit the same tendencies in bed?

“So...?” Bea gave her a meaningful look.

“So, what?”

“Don’t be obtuse with me, my friend. I know you well enough by now. What are you planning to do about your obsessed alien stalker?”

“I... I’m still deciding.” She sighed, resigned to the fact that nothing much got past Bea.

“Clarissa.” Bea raised her sunglasses and propped herself on one elbow, giving her a terribly serious look. “I’m only going to say this because you’re my friend, and I’ve known you a long time, but *stop* putting yourself aside.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Just do what *you* want to do, for once. That man won’t do wrong by you. I saw the way he looked at you. I saw the way he treated you. And I’ve heard things... I have a friend who’s a friend of a friend. She actually knows someone who’s with one of those guys. *Mated*, they call it. Ha. That woman has an amazing life now. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a tiny bit jealous of you. Think about it. Why would he go to all that trouble to try and impress you if he was just going to steal you away and do nefarious things to you? Because he could, you know. They have unlimited power. I actually don’t understand why they’re being so restrained.”

“Don’t *say* that.” Clarissa hated the thought that Jerik might turn out to be a bad guy.

Surely, the good in him outweighed the darkness.

That’s what she’d sensed, anyway.

“Well, that just goes to prove that you like him, so there.”

“I *don’t*—” Clarissa was pretty sure her cheeks and ears were turning red. It was stupid because Bea was absolutely right, so why was she acting like a teenager thinking about her first crush?

“I know, I know. You never like anyone. You know how many guys at work have tried to get close to you?”

“I never noticed.” Actually, she *had* noticed, but pretending not to was easy.

“Exactly. That’s why you need someone like *him*. Super direct. No pretensions. Knows what he wants. Doesn’t give up in the face of rejection. *Inhuman* levels of confidence. ”

Clarissa nodded wryly. Bea had just described the guy in a nutshell. “I suppose you have a point.”

Suddenly, she really wanted to see him again.

He made her feel this giddy excitement that she hadn’t experienced with anyone else, *ever*.

What did she have to lose, anyway?

A low whistle from Bea stole her attention. Something had flashed up on her friend’s link-band. “I think I know why, but Garner Corp’s stock price just fell through the floor. I might be looking for a new job soon, too.”

“He should’ve just taken the deal,” Clarissa sighed. “We would have all been better off.”

“Would you, though? Maybe all this business with Jerik Garul wouldn’t have panned out like it did.”

“True.” Clarissa stared across the beach, watching as a pair of dark-clad figures drew nearer. They wore wraparound sunglasses and baseball caps.

Why are those guys wearing so much clothing on the beach?

If she was a paranoid person, she might almost think those strange men were heading straight for her.

Now they were close enough that she could make out the guns holstered at their waists and the comm devices in their ears.

“Um, Clarissa, who are those people? They look like mercs or undercover enforcers.”

“If that’s undercover, I’d hate to see what the actual uniform looks like. Never seen them before. I have no idea who they are, but I have a sinking feeling this is something work-related.”

“Time to make a run for it?” Bea said in an un-serious tone as if this was nothing more than fun and games for her.

Clarissa started to stuff things in her beach bag. “I think so.”

But just then, two sunbathers stood up.

Two big, buff men with long hair sweeping past their shoulders. They moved with an uncanny grace that reminded Clarissa of a certain someone.

No way.

These men were human, surely. Their skin was human-colored, and they both had brown hair. Their eyes were concealed by dark wayfarer-type glasses.

But when she looked closer, she saw the pointed taper of their ears.

Kordolians?

But why did they look like that? Where was the silver skin and snow-white hair? Had they affected some sort of disguise?

They quickly moved in and intercepted the black-clothes-wearing guys, engaging in a heated conversation.

And when that didn't work, they simply moved faster than the human eye could possibly see and decked the pair, throwing them onto the golden sand with great finesse.

It happened so fast that the bystanders could barely react, let alone understand what had happened.

The dark-haired pair left them there, lying unconscious in the sand. They walked toward Clarissa and Bea, their bare, honed torsos gleaming in the sunshine.

Oh, they were definitely Kordolian.

They reached Clarissa's little shade umbrella and stopped, their imposing forms casting shadows across the sand. Bea actually moved out of the way of their shadows.

“Can I help you?” Clarissa said coolly, carefully masking her anxiety.

“No,” one of the mysterious men said. Now that Clarissa could study him close-up, she decided his features definitely weren’t human. He could pass as human from a distance, or if one weren’t looking too closely, but she knew what to look for. “Just know that no harm will come to you.”

“You’ve been watching me the entire time?”

The other man smiled enigmatically. “The boss sends his greetings.”

Then they were gone, a pair of wolves camouflaging themselves in the crowd. They slipped away surprisingly quickly, disappearing before the lifeguards arrived on their hover-carts to rescue the two unconscious men. There was a flurry of activity as the would-be attackers were hauled onto stretchers and whisked away, monitoring nodes applied to their necks, oxygen masks placed over their faces.

Clarissa was pretty sure they were just unconscious, but still...

The disguised Kordolians must’ve hit them with something more than just punches.

Some sort of sedative, maybe?

Bea raised an eyebrow. “I still think we should get out of here before someone thinks we’re somehow involved with all this.”

“Agreed. Let’s go up to Freshwater Beach. Hopefully, it’ll be a little quieter there.” Clarissa wasn’t about to let this incident ruin her precious time off.

And Bea wasn’t involved with this, but *she* was.

All this time, Jerik’s people had been watching her, and she hadn’t even noticed.

Was she under constant surveillance now?

As she pressed the button that made her little umbrella retract into a compact stick, Clarissa sighed.

Being away from everything was nice and all, but she was going to have to pay the man a visit sometime soon.

She missed his gruff presence and his deep, growly voice. The way he smiled indulgently when she was annoyed with him. His unending patience and the fierce decisiveness he displayed when dealing with enemies and nuisances alike.

His kiss. Was. *So*. Good.

“Earth to Clarissa,” Bea said, her voice a distant second to Clarissa’s heated thoughts. “Come *on*, girl. Whatever you’re thinking about can wait. Let’s get out of here.

“Sure thing.”

And so it was decided.

She was going to this damn Cultural Event after all, wasn’t she?

Now, she just had to figure out what to wear.

As payback for all the shocks he’d given her, she wanted to make sure he was absolutely floored.

TWENTY-SIX

HE WAS IN AGONY.

What in the Nine Hells did I sign up for?

Jerik had tried everything to suppress the Mating Fever— injections, intense sparring sessions—even with some of the First Division guys, who always won, but he'd managed to give them a headache—a swim in the icy waters near the southern pole of the Earth, sedatives to knock himself out so he would just *sleep* it off...

Some of it worked for a short time, but the effects quickly wore off, and he found himself in the same predicament: aching horn-buds, headache that felt like an ice-pick was stabbing through his temple, irrational rage welling up at even the slightest infraction.

He'd asked Tarak to remove him from command for the time being. He wasn't rational right now; definitely not in the right mind to be making decisions or giving orders.

And everyone knew to stay out of his way.

He must be a sucker for punishment.

He knew he could just *go* to her again and force her to come with him, but...

He was also stubborn in his own way, and he wanted her to come to him.

So he waited.

Sitting in his office on *Tranced*, one of the fastest and most heavily armed warships under his direct command—well, up until now, for he'd allowed Tarak to take over for the time being—he leaned forward, dropped his head into his hands, and exhaled deeply.

This was madness.

He couldn't get her out of his fucking mind.

Was this the longest any of them had ever withstood the Mating Fever? The others had claimed their mates relatively quickly, but they'd had the advantage of being in the midst of dangerous situations—and most of the time, in their own familiar territory.

What he was trying to do was different.

He picked up the black leather-bound volume on his desk—the mysterious publication called *The Manual*. Nobody knew where it had originated from. It had appeared in the Mess Hall on the Fleet Station all of a sudden; this strange book printed in perfect Kordolian on archaic parchment.

The subject matter was very modern, however. It described in detail the values and expectations of modern human women, along with regional and cultural variations.

The first chapter, which Jerik had read over and over again, was entitled *Consent*.

Then there was information on personality and temperament, which could be shaped by past experiences—that was nothing new to him. There was a chapter on typical human mating customs.

So far, everything he'd read had proven to be correct.

More interestingly, there was a very detailed section devoted to sex.

Jerik couldn't bring himself to read that part anymore. Doing so would surely drive him mad—and give him an erection that would probably be the death of him.

This was the most difficult thing he'd ever done in his life.

He couldn't help but remember the part that said that human females sometimes enjoyed it when a male was dominant during intercourse.

It all depended on her preferences.

Was *she* like that? Because that would be complete and utter perfection. Nothing would make him happier than to consume every last part of her in *his own* way.

And make her feel a kind of pleasure that she would never experience anywhere else.

Almighty Goddess, please let it be so.

He wasn't a particularly religious or superstitious man, but in this instance, he was praying.

And now he was aroused again. Painfully so. It *really* didn't take much.

As if the Goddess had decided to throw him a kernel of sympathy, his comm buzzed, alerting him to an incoming caller on the holo.

He let it through. "Who is it?" he growled, anticipation coursing through him. The last thing he wanted right now was to be bothered by inane matters, but at the same time, he'd told his men to report on anything and everything out of the ordinary that happened with his Clarissa.

"My sympathies, brother." But the figure in the holo before him wasn't one of his men but Xalikian, rebel former prince and current Cultural Ambassador to Earth. Jerik didn't envy Xal his job. Ever since the *Krael*—factions of the Old Empire that had united to oppose them—had appeared, they'd been messing with the human population, trying to convince them that it was indeed Tarak and the Darkstar Mercenaries that were the terrifying ones.

Given Tarak and the First Division's record, that wasn't too difficult.

They were fighting an upstream battle, and Xal had his work cut out for him to convince humans otherwise.

Jerik was in no mood to dwell on that now, though. "What news is there, Xalikian?"

"Good news for you. She finally reached out. She *will* be attending the Cultural Event. That's in four rotations. Can you hold out until then, or do we need to stick you in a stasis tank and get Zharek to put you under deep sedation?"

Jerik thought about it. Xal's offer was tempting, but he was a bit of a stickler for punishment, and he believed the reward of claiming her would be sweetest if he held out.

Besides, he didn't want to meet her when he was fresh out of sedation, dopey and muddled. That would fucking *ruin* it.

"You think... you think she'll go for me?" he asked, unable to suppress the note of hopefulness that entered his voice.

"My brother, she has agreed to attend. If she wanted nothing to do with you, she never would have contacted me in the first place. Now, all you have to do is hold out until the event without becoming a menace to everyone around you. If you need any help, you know where to find me. If you ever fear you'll become a danger to her, contact Tarak or myself immediately."

"That will never happen," he said thickly.

"I trust you. Everyone knows you're a man of your word. But matters of biology aren't always controllable, and just in case, we'll be watching you—and there are measures in place to protect both of you should anything get out of hand."

"Hm." Jerik didn't like it, but at the same time, he was grateful his comrades were so experienced and foresighted in such things. "It won't be necessary."

"I suspect it won't, but you know we're not the sort to leave anything to chance. Oh, and a word of advice from me,

Commander. Why don't you try to dress up for the occasion? You might have forgotten, but our culture has formal and ceremonial wear, too. I'm sure humans would find some of it fascinating and aesthetically extravagant."

"Hm." Jerik hadn't even considered dressing in such a way. That sort of attire was for the nobility.

But if it would make her see him in a different light...

Perhaps his usual armor-suit could be substituted.

Just this *once*.

"Well, I'm out. Call me if you require a consultation prior to the event. I'm happy to advise even on matters of attire and formal customs. In the meantime, best of luck, brother."

Luck? Unnecessary.

He'd done his research, bided his time, acted honorably, and felt a deepening respect and admiration between them during their time together. She was the kind of woman he could have only dreamed about, and she was so close to being *his*.

There wasn't a single thing about her he disliked. Her cool, calm demeanor—even in the most heated of situations—was an antidote to his bluntness and fiery temper, and astonishingly, her presence had helped him handle the Garner situation in a more measured way than he usually would.

But there were times when he'd glimpsed a fleeting hint of something deeper—a spark of desire or heat; fierce emotion suppressed, waiting to be unlocked.

He wanted to see her unravel before him.

To see her drop her shields completely.

To claim her.

Make her completely *his*.

It would happen.

It *had* to happen.

TWENTY-SEVEN

FINALLY, it had arrived.

Clarissa had been waiting for this for the past four days. At first, she'd been rather calm about it, but as the event drew nearer, nerves, anticipation, excitement, and disbelief all combined to make her feel this constant fluttering in her belly.

She slipped into her cropped black leather jacket, smoothing over the front, satisfied that it sat perfectly over her deep blue dress.

The gown was made of lustrous silk that skimmed her figure and left little to the imagination. It was a one-off creation by the sought-after designer Sabrina Wong. Of course, she couldn't ever afford to buy such a thing, so she'd hired it from a designer rental service. The jacket was her own, though; well worn and comfortable, yet still looking as good as the day she'd bought it. It covered her back, where the silk of the gown gave way to a delicate, stretchy mesh.

She'd heard it could get cold up in space.

That's where she was going. To an orbital station far above the surface of the Earth.

It would be her first time ever traveling beyond Earth's atmosphere. Soon, the Kordolians would be sending a transport to pick her up and ferry her to the event's location.

To think it was nothing for them to travel between Earth and space, covering vast distances in a short amount of time.

To her, it was a very big deal.

She slipped into a pair of black satin heels decorated with crystal-embellished buckles. A pair of long, thread-through silver earrings with a lustrous Akoya pearl on each end completed her look.

When she'd spoken to him on the holo, the ambassador had told her to dress formally, after all. With flowing white locks and curving black horns, the Cultural Ambassador and former Prince of the Empire, Xalikian Kazharan, certainly struck her as unapologetically Kordolian, but he'd seemed very clued-in on all matters human and Earth-related.

Dress as if you're going to a black-tie event, he'd told her.

Clarissa had taken it all in her stride. She'd been to many such events in her capacity as Garner's EA but never as an official invitee. Instead, she'd been there to fetch drinks, take memos, and follow up on business dealings.

Now, *she* was the guest.

And she'd gone to more effort to dress up than ever before. Her makeup was perfect, her hair was swept into an immaculate updo, and she felt like a trillion bucks.

There was something empowering about being almost a hundred percent certain she would knock Jerik Garul's socks off.

What the hell am I even doing?

But she was too far gone now for that thought to take hold.

She was committed, and she couldn't afford to let doubts or fears ruin her conviction.

This felt like a trance, a dream, a complete un-reality she hoped she'd never wake up from.

And she didn't want to, either.

The very last touch she added was a slick of ruby-red lipstick.

Now, all she had to do was wait.

And so she did, pacing around her apartment, her heels clicking on the polished concrete.

She was tempted to pour herself a shot or five of tequila to calm her frayed nerves, but she didn't want to turn up there even the slightest bit inebriated.

She told herself that seeing Jerik Garul again would be worth it, that this state of heightened anticipation and nervousness, of feeling so jittery she might almost jump out of her own skin...

All this was normal, right?

And although she'd never wished for anything much in her life—she wasn't the sort to gamble or buy tickets in the Federation Lottery—a part of her felt this might just be the beginning of something huge.

All she had to do was hold her nerve.

Jerik had already told her what he wanted. She *knew* what he was all about.

Now, the ball was in her court.

Did she want *him* and everything he entailed, or did she want to go back to her ordinary, predictable life on Earth?

Deep down, she knew what she wanted, but did she have the guts to go for it?

Bea was probably right, but...

She needed to see him again to make sure.

And *maybe*...

She had a little thought at the back of her mind of how the night might end.

Just in case, she'd worn some *amazing* lingerie.

Were aliens even into that sort of thing?

A soft chime caught her attention. It came from the delicate black device on her dresser—the capsule-communication-invite thing she'd received from the Kordolians.

That strange piece of a puzzle that now made perfect sense.

For a moment, her heart stopped beating.

They were *here*.

She grabbed her purse and glanced at her appearance in the mirror one last time.

She looked as good as she was ever going to get.

Here we go.

Clarissa exited her apartment and made her way up to the rooftop in the elevator. A fellow resident dressed in track pants and a hoodie, a toy poodle cradled in his arms, stared at her momentarily before politely looking away.

He exited on the seventeenth floor, leaving her to ride alone to the rooftop, where the Kordolians had advised her to wait.

Were they going to drop down from the sky like Jerik had, pulling her up by a precariously thin-looking wire cable?

She could just imagine losing a heel or getting her hair ruffled in the process. *Ha.*

The elevator doors opened.

She stepped out.

Thankfully, the rooftop was deserted. The sun was setting, casting a golden-orange glow across the smooth pavers and the manicured gardens. A balmy breeze swept past, and it had the effect of calming her a little.

She was going to see *him* again.

What would he be like when he was in the presence of other Kordolians; at this official and formal event?

Would he be annoyed with her for holding out on him?
Would he be preoccupied with more important things?

He *was* a rather big cog in the machine, after all.

She walked to the rooftop's edge and looked out across the glittering cityscape. In the deepening night, the view was as beautiful as ever. She looked up at the sky, suffused with the glow of millions of bright lights.

She could barely see the stars.

Her tenseness kicked up a notch. There was nobody here. Were the Kordolians late?

What if nobody was coming?

“Good evening, ma’am.” But just then, someone greeted her in perfect Universal. The voice came from behind. She spun around and came face to face with a Kordolian.

He was young-ish looking, perhaps in his mid-twenties by human standards, although she had no idea what the normal Kordolian lifespan was or how they aged. He wore a dapper black uniform with a small silver star embroidered on the right side of his chest.

He offered her a slight bow and gestured toward a hovering machine-thing that had appeared out of nowhere. It looked like a giant floating surfboard, although it was black all over and had a sleek handrail for holding onto. “My name is Lyzar. I serve the boss, who had the pleasure of making your acquaintance one week past. He is pleased beyond measure that you have accepted the invitation to join him. I’m merely here to escort you. If you would be so gracious...” he gestured toward the hoverboard thing. “I will take you up to our vessel, the *Starcatcher*.”

“That’s a nice name,” she remarked, trying not to show her surprise. Since when had Kordolians ever had a reputation for being smooth like this?

Since Jerik, probably.

She looked up, but she couldn’t see anything except the deepening violet of the night sky. “I presume it’s up there

somewhere, hidden by your invisibility technology.”

A faint smile curved Lyzar’s lips. “That’s correct. *Starcatcher* is the first in a new series of small stealth-craft. The commander himself named it.”

“Commander? I thought you didn’t address one another by rank anymore.”

“That’s correct too, but we are from the military, and to many of us, someone like him will only ever be known as commander. It’s what we’re comfortable with. Out of respect, not deference. Many of us owe him our lives.”

“I see.” It was strange to hear Jerik—*her* Jerik—spoken of in such vaunted terms, especially after she’d met him.

He’d seemed so normal.

Down-to-Earth, for want of a better term.

At Lyzar’s gentle urging, she stepped onto the floating platform. “Don’t go too fast. I don’t want my hair to get messed up.”

“I wouldn’t dare,” the Kordolian said in a gravely serious tone, and Clarissa couldn’t tell whether he was being serious or not.

Were they *all* like this?

And just like that, they started to rise, and Clarissa didn’t even need to grip the little handlebar thing because the movement was as smooth and sure as anything she’d ever known, and somehow, she knew that she would never, ever fall.

They flew right up into the hatch of the waiting ship, and before she knew it, she was inside dark-and-luminous surroundings that looked vaguely familiar, even though she’d never been inside this ship in her life.

It reminded her of the ship Jerik had taken her on—*Tarsin*, he’d called it.

Lyzar escorted her through the rear cabin into a passenger chamber, albeit one that was much more luxurious than the

other ship she'd flown on. The seats here were big and plush, and surprise, surprise; there was actually some variety in color, the upholstery made of a cream-hued material that looked like leather, although it could be any space-age material, really.

The lighting was different in here, too; warm and muted, giving the cabin a cozy feel.

There was a beverage-bot at the head of the room. Not any ordinary department-store level beverage-bot, but a fancy high-end one, the *molecular composition* sort that didn't have to be refilled so often. It was the kind of thing that might exist in a trillionaire's kitchen.

She knew that well enough.

"Please be seated," Lyzar said. "As we'll be traveling into space, a safety harness will be activated, but don't be alarmed. It has been calibrated to your personal specifications and is designed to protect you in the case of an unexpected emergency. The flight won't be long. Less than a quarter-hour in human units of time measurement."

"Thank you, Lyzar." Clarissa made her way to the seat, which was right alongside a window-port.

"Would you like to consume a beverage before and during our flight?"

"No, I'm fine, but thank you for asking." She sat down, marveling at how comfortable the seat was.

"Very well. Enjoy the short flight, ma'am. I'll be in front. If you require anything, just call out."

He disappeared through a dark doorway that knitted shut behind him, thousands or even millions of tendrils coalescing to form a seal.

She probably would have found that creepy if she wasn't already a little accustomed to Kordolian ways.

A pair of black tendril-things came down over her shoulders and chest, gently securing her as the ship started to rise.

She didn't feel a thing, didn't hear a thing. All she could see was the rooftop disappearing beneath them and the building growing smaller and smaller, and there were the lights of the streetscape, floating away as they went higher, and all of a sudden, they were above the city, and the glittering landscape became minuscule, and everything was dark.

Now, she could see the surface of the planet, the half that was hidden from the sun's radiance.

The lights of the Eastern seaboard of the Oceanic Republic... she could see them perfectly well where the landmass abruptly ended, a glowing line marking the transition to the deep, dark ocean.

Just like that, they were in space, and the shadowed face of the Earth with its familiar glittering outlines—light-etched edges of continents—was becoming smaller and smaller, to the point where she could pretend to hold it between two fingers.

They traveled for a while; it could have been two minutes, could have been ten. She was so wound up that she could no longer estimate the passing of time.

Suddenly, something made her look across to the other window. She saw something unfathomable: a great floating mass of darkness, suspended in nothing, illuminated by the occasional unnatural blue glow.

The stars in the distance burned icy white.

These lights were different. Not bright enough to be signal lights, they appeared to indicate something or other, but she couldn't fathom what that could possibly be.

Then everything disappeared.

That meant they'd gone *inside*. The little ship had flown into a big one, probably.

My god, this is really it.

Just like that.

She didn't really understand what was happening, nor could she make out much through the window. All she knew

was that the stars and the Earth had disappeared, and she was sitting in a plush cabin with darkness all around.

Dressed to the nines.

About to meet the man—*alien*—who had upended her universe in such a short period of time. It was absolutely unheard of, but maybe all of this was nothing out of the ordinary for him.

Giddy excitement welled up inside her.

Stay calm.

There was no small measure of trepidation, too. Aside from meeting Jerik, she had no idea what to expect of these Kordolians, but if Lyzar's treatment of her was anything to go by, she was in for a doozy.

How the hell could she stay calm when anticipation was driving her up the wall?

And if this was how she was after a week of being away from him, what was the point of trying to fight it?

TWENTY-EIGHT

“WE HAVE ARRIVED,” Lyzar announced, suddenly appearing from the darkness.

Clarissa had been so preoccupied with what was happening outside—what little she could see, anyway—that she hadn’t even noticed his appearance.

“Please wait here for a short while,” the alien informed her.

“Wait here?” Her heart leaped into her throat. She leaned forward against the so-called *safety restraints*. They came free at once, retracting without so much as a single sound.

Well, at least she wasn’t restrained, but the uncertainty was killing her. “When will I see him?”

“Very soon, I can assure you. I must take my leave now.” Before Clarissa could say another word, he bowed and disappeared as discreetly as he’d arrived.

Leaving her alone in a sumptuous but very alien feeling cabin.

Until a pair of hands came to rest on her shoulders.

She stiffened, not daring to move or look up.

This touch felt familiar, and this time, the hands were bare, callused fingers coming to rest against the base of her neck, gently caressing her skin.

Goosebumps rose on her neck, rippling down her back and across her arms. She closed her eyes and luxuriated in the sensation of pure touch.

She hadn't yet seen his face, but she *knew* it was him.

Who else could it be?

Who else would touch her like this?

He didn't say a word. He just traced his fingers up her neck and along her jawline, tilting her head to one side, his fingers moving slowly and reverently.

Possessively.

And she let him.

Because she knew that by coming here, she'd already given him the answer to his question.

"Hello, Clarissa," he said at last, and his mouth was close to her ear; she felt the gentle caress of his breath against her cheek. His voice was a deep, warm rumble.

At last.

The confirmation of his presence did something to her.

Maybe it was the waiting—the fact that she'd intentionally held herself back for one week to sift through her own thoughts and make sure she was really certain of what she wanted.

Maybe it was the knowledge that she was now in *his* domain, and therefore, she had no power here. He could do whatever he wanted, and *this* was how he chose to greet her.

Making his intentions clear.

There was no doubt about what he wanted.

In any case, the sound of his voice was enough to trigger a sudden surge of arousal.

Her body was on fire.

“Hello, Jerik,” she replied, raising her hands to find his. If he caressed her like that one more time, she would probably fall to pieces, and she wanted to remain coherent enough to retain *some* semblance of control. “Fancy meeting you here.”

“Indeed. It is the greatest pleasure of all to receive you on this station.”

“The greatest?” She slowly opened her eyes as she twined her fingers through his, exploring the warm, rough surfaces of his hands.

“For *now*.” He maneuvered his fingers, placing his hand in hers proper. Just like a gentleman would. “Welcome.”

He gently drew her to her feet.

She felt like she was floating on a cloud.

Slowly, she turned, guided by his unwavering hand.

She was floating, and her heart was pounding faster than the speed of light, each beat coalescing to create a high-frequency thrum that reverberated through every cell and pore in her body.

For the first time, she caught sight of him.

And for a moment, she was speechless.

All she could do was stare.

Gone was the hard, impenetrable armor. He was dressed formally and sumptuously, albeit in a very Kordolian manner.

On top, he wore a garment of deep turquoise that looked like a cross between an elegant smoking jacket and a kimono. It draped perfectly across his shoulders and over his chest, accentuating his powerful physique. The folds crossed in a v-shape, treating her to a broad glimpse of his silver torso.

As suspected, the contours of his armor hadn't lied. He was every bit as chiseled as she'd been led to believe.

A soft belt of black suede-like fabric was loosely knotted around his waist. He wore simple, loose trousers made of a lightweight silken fabric in the same rare hue as his jacket.

His feet were encased in sleek, low black shoes that reminded her a bit of loafers, only sharper, like perfectly fitted pods.

Everything about his look was understated and minimalistic, yet the highest attention had been paid to quality and construction.

The outfit accentuated his strong features and his sharply pointed ears and provided a soft contrast to his overall harshness.

“You look very nice,” she remarked, her voice low and throaty. Seeing this very different side of him—all dressed up and refined—made her want to tear that elegant garment off his broad shoulders and jump his bones.

Seriously, what *was* this? She’d never felt this way before about anyone. She’d never been so quick to react to a man’s presence; so easily triggered to the point of arousal, craving his closeness, his touch, the feel of his body pressing against hers, his erection...

Dear lord, she could see the bulge in his silken trousers.

“Let me see you,” he commanded, stepping back and releasing her hand. His crimson gaze slowly traveled up and down, taking in every last inch of her.

She’d never felt so vulnerable before... and yet, she also felt powerful.

It was obvious she was having some kind of effect on him. He went very, very still, like a silver sculpture. His eyes were like embers in the shadows. His lips parted ever so slightly, revealing the points of his fangs.

He looked... *hungry*.

As if caught in a trance, Clarissa shrugged off her jacket and draped it on the chair. She tipped her head back, feeling the subtle weight of her earrings and the cool air against her neck and exposed back.

Jerik blinked slowly, like a cat.

Then his arm shot out, and he grabbed the back of the chair as if to steady himself.

A low sound escaped him: part whimper, part predatory growl, all primal.

Clarissa froze, like a deer trapped in a spotlight, only she wasn't afraid.

Just transfixed.

And addicted to his undivided attention, which made her feel like a goddess.

"I thought you were beautiful the moment I laid eyes on you, but now, you're transcendent," he whispered, his voice cracking. "I'm so glad you came back to me."

"I'm glad you sought me out... and I'm very willing to take this further," she replied, suddenly understanding that she couldn't expect this to unfold like a *human* relationship. They were moving at the speed of light, and that was fine. "And you scrub up all right too, commander."

"My attire pleases you, then?"

"You're a visual treat. I think... you look magnificent."

His eyes widened in disbelief. His fingers dug into the chair, knuckles pale with tension, wrist taut.

He was trembling ever so slightly—as if he might explode at any moment. His expression became strained as he pulled his hand away from the chair. "Clarissa, I beg you, wait here a moment. I'll return very soon."

"A-are you all right?"

"I will be, in a moment." And with that, he was gone, leaving her on fucking tenterhooks.

TWENTY-NINE

CAUGHT up in the storm of the Mating Fever, in the blistering intensity of his lust, stoked so high he was on the verge of exploding into stardust, Jerik did the only thing he could.

He escaped.

He stormed out of the ship and headed for the very first warrior he spotted, a young lad called Hygar, who was standing guard at the edge of the docking bay.

“Come here,” Jerik ordered, his voice hoarse. It took every shred of willpower in his body to keep from committing violence on the poor kid without reason—the Mating Fever had intensified to the point where he was hardly sane anymore, and all he wanted to do was Claim her in the most ferocious manner...

If he didn't have her in the next few moments, he would probably go insane for good.

But he honestly feared he might harm her.

He was much stronger than her. She was human—fragile and delicate.

He needed something to break this terrible spell—just a little.

Hygar approached with slow, practised movements, his expression betraying cautiousness.

The word had gotten around about Jerik's condition. Everyone was treating him like he was made of fragile glass.

Some were giving him a wide berth.

The only ones that remained chill with him—and slightly amused, to his eternal irritation—were the First Division guys, Ikriss, and Iskar.

They understood.

Speaking with each of them in turn had helped him endure four rotations of pure torture. It was the hardest thing he'd ever done in his life, and he'd been close to the brink of death more than a few times.

“How can I assist you, Sir?” The warrior reached his side and offered a respectful bow.

“Hygar, give me your dagger. And go get me that emergency medi-kit from the wall. Specifically, the *Hemacel*.”

“Er...”

“I'm not going to stab anyone else, so just give me the damn thing.” Technically, his orders carried little weight, since he'd been temporarily stripped of the right of command, but Hygar wasn't going to deny him now, was he?

The young warrior slipped his Callidum dagger from its sheath and handed it to Jerik.

Jerik simply spun the thing around once and raised his left forearm so the sleeve of his ceremonial *kashkan* fell away, exposing his bare skin.

Then, in an act of desperation, he stabbed himself through his left hand with great precision, deliberately evading tendon and bone.

Hygar swore and ran to get the medi-kit.

Jerik let out a small exhalation of relief as pain lanced through him, sharp and cold and familiar, cutting through the haze of his madness.

It was exactly what he needed right now—just enough of a diversion to slow down his lust to the point where he could control himself.

He kept the dagger in, savoring the agony until Hygar returned with a canister of *hemacel* in his hands. “Sir, I’m not going to ask any questions. Just take that damn blade out and put this on the wound.”

“That’s the whole point of it.” Jerik yanked out the blade and retrieved the canister from the warrior. He quickly applied a large amount of the viscous substance over the front and back of his wound. After all, he wasn’t like the First Division guys, who healed in an instant, thanks to their virulent nanites.

The *hemacel* worked immediately, stemming the bleeding and forming seamless black patches on both sides of his hand.

It stung, too, which was good.

It would ache for some time yet, providing a slight distraction from the intensity of the storm.

A small circuit-breaker. That’s what he’d needed to endure this exquisite agony just a little bit longer.

After all, he wanted her to experience the greatest pleasure she’d ever known before he Claimed her once and for all.

THIRTY

AS SOON AS HE RETURNED, she knew.

Before he appeared in the doorway, she knew.

She didn't know *how*—maybe it was his scent or simply the force of his presence because he didn't make a sound when he moved.

In a heartbeat, he was there again, and maybe it was just her imagination, but the tension surrounding him—so taut you could have snapped it with a breath—seemed a little less intense.

But he was *always* intense, no matter what mood he was in.

She was starting to get used to him. He was never cruel or malicious or terrifying.

He was just... *Kordolian*.

And he'd never made her feel like she was *lesser*.

"I hope you fixed whatever was bothering you," she quipped as he walked slowly toward her, his movement reminding her of a big hunting cat. Everything about him was so fluid and intentional.

“No, I didn’t.” He walked over to where she was standing, her arm draped across the back of the seat.

She was trying to act casual, like she was in control, but really, she was falling to pieces.

The memory of his kiss was seared into her mind. She’d never been able to shake it off. Since he’d left, she’d thought about it daily, probably even hourly.

Nothing she’d experienced had ever compared to that moment. When his lips touched hers, for the first time in her life, she’d felt like everything was in its right place.

Of *course* she wanted him to take it further.

But why was he acting so mysterious, leading her on with his alien charm, then disappearing on her like that?

He reached the seat where she was standing and rested his arm against the back so his forearm was pressed against hers. She felt his warmth through the soft fabric of his jacket. She got a sense of his sheer power; of how restrained he was being right now.

They locked eyes.

Jerik inhaled deeply, shuddering. His nostrils flared. His lips curved into a taut smile. “I’m a simple man, Clarissa. I follow my instincts. Act first and deal with the consequences later. When I see something I want, I will go for it. I’m not perfect, but I *am* loyal and protective of my own—to a fault. I seek companionship. A mate to wake up alongside. Someone I can enjoy talking about mundane and ordinary things with. Who I can spoil completely and utterly. But you already know that.”

“I... I didn’t know I was even looking for someone,” she replied. “But you changed my mind.”

“Then all I ask is that you let me.”

“Let you what?” Her heartbeat became a roar in her ears. Her body was wound tightly, ready to unravel at the slightest touch. She already knew, but she wanted to hear him say it.

“Let me *show* you my true intentions.” His hand found hers. He twined his fingers through hers. There was something smooth and strange on his palm. She looked down, turning his hand over so she could see it. A black patch about the size of a coin adhered to both his palm and the back of his hand. It was like glue or paint, only it had formed a seamless seal with his skin, and it moved as he moved.

Like a second skin.

“Wh-what is that?”

“A temporary thing. It’s nothing that will harm you. Nothing for you to worry about.” He leaned closer, tracing his fingers up her bare arm, sending a shiver dancing down her spine. “Now, come here. I’ve waited for you for far too long.”

At his words, something inside her snapped, and she found herself dancing around the damn chair until she was in his arms. His body pressed against hers, and she could easily feel his sculpted form through the sleek material of his outfit. She could feel his hardness down *there*, too, and there was no doubt he was insistent and *big*.

With tender fingers, he caressed her, sliding his hands up and down her back, feeling her bare skin through the delicate mesh of her dress. He planted a soft kiss on the base of her neck, inhaling deeply, appearing to savor her scent.

Sweet stars, nobody had ever *savored* her like this before.

Then he trailed kisses up her neck and along her jawline before finding her lips. He kissed her again and again, probing with his tongue, allowing her to touch the sharp points of his fangs, which never, ever caused her pain, not even breaking her skin.

She wouldn’t even mind if that happened.

She kissed him back, unleashing a hunger she’d suppressed for far too long.

He was the first man to ever make her feel like this, and she was going to savor him as much as he did her.

As he explored her body with his devious fingers, she, too, ran her hands over him, feeling the rippling muscles of his back through fluid silk. It was the most decadent thing. He was pure power, and he was under her fingertips, arcing against her touch as if it were the most pleasurable thing.

He moved his arms, and suddenly...

He was picking her up as if she were as light as a leaf; all she could do was marvel at his effortless strength.

She found herself gently deposited in the luxurious seat.

As he stood above her, looking down with fire and wonder in his gaze, she opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out because something about his expression told her that no words were necessary right now.

He dropped to his knees. He actually *kneeled* before her.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” he whispered. “I thought a goddess had come to me.” Rough fingertips ran up her thighs, caressing her skin through the fine silk of her dress. The thin layer of material forming a barrier between them made his touch feel all the more sensual. “You smell *so* good.”

Before she could say another word, he deftly hiked up the hem of her skirt, revealing her smooth thighs and her delicate underwear.

She’d worn white lace.

“Mmm,” he rumbled, pale eyebrows rising as if he’d just seen the most delectable thing ever.

Arousal surged through her. Her clit throbbed with need.

Her entire body was *begging* for him.

“Lean back.” It wasn’t a request but a command. “Close your eyes. Forget about anything and everything except for me.”

Why did his bossiness turn her on so much?

She was in no position to question it, so she did as she was told.

She closed her eyes, and suddenly, her world was submerged in blissful darkness.

She felt his warm, tender lips make a trail of kisses along her thigh.

Tension unfurled in her core, molten heat spreading through her body. He slipped his clever fingers between her thighs and gently prised her legs open.

He rained kisses on the insides of her thighs—both sides.

She felt his warm breath and the gentle-yet-dangerous grazing of his fangs against her skin. He could bite her anywhere, and she probably wouldn't mind that, either.

And then he kissed her *there*, over her delicate lace panties, and she could *feel* his lips through them; could feel his tongue as he tasted her and let out a deep growl.

Oh, my god.

One of his hands slid up her body, lifting her dress higher, exposing more of her. With his other, he carefully pulled her panties down until she was bared to him.

Still not daring to open her eyes—it was so *good* like this—she inched her thighs ever wider, teasing him.

Twisting her hips a little; provocatively.

And that seemed to drive him a little mad because he tensed.

Suddenly, he was kissing her *there*, right above her aching clit, and he seemed to know exactly what would tip her over the edge because his tongue darted out, gliding over the tender nub, and pleasure exploded through her body.

His roving fingers found her thin, lacy bra. He found her taut nipples and caressed them, one after the other. And all the while, he was stimulating her most sensitive point with his clever tongue, and now his lips were there, sucking gently, drawing even more pleasure out of her to the point where she couldn't believe this level of sensation was even possible.

She was in a dreamland.

Mired in pure bliss and selfishly exulting in every moment of it.

With his long, dextrous tongue, he went *inside* her.

She moaned and ran her hands over his head, feeling his smooth skin, finding the curious points at each of his temples, where it felt like part of his skull was slightly raised.

And when she touched those points, he went still for a moment, denying her pleasure—whether intentionally or unintentionally, she didn't know.

“*More,*” she whispered. “*Please, Jerik. I need to come. Please.*”

Her words appeared to set him off. He wrapped one arm around her waist and pulled her even closer, holding her tightly as he kissed and caressed and sent her higher and higher into a state of pure bliss.

But he didn't let her come yet.

Somehow, he knew exactly how to hold her there, in that place of euphoric desperation, just on the edge of oblivion.

She might almost think he *enjoyed* doing that to her.

He didn't say a word. She couldn't even imagine what he looked like right now—she couldn't bear to open her eyes and look at him.

“*Please,*” she whimpered.

She was *so* close now.

But he held her there just a little bit longer, just because he *could*.

“*Jerik, please.*” She was absolutely begging him, and there wasn't a thing she could do about it.

A devastatingly primal rumble issued from deep within his throat.

Then he simply grazed her *there* with a little bit of his fang, very, very lightly.

And that was enough to send her over the edge.

She climaxed hard, her body bucking and writhing, and he was there, moving higher, wrapping his arms around her, holding her closely, tightly, raining kisses through silk, engulfing her with his overwhelming presence.

He cocooned her.

She came.

He was patient.

He let her feel the aftershocks before he found her entrance.

Gently, possessively, he wrapped his fingers around her wrists and held her as all of the tension drained out of her body.

He planted a soft kiss on her neck, just below the angle of her jaw, where her pulse thundered.

Then he entered her.

A soft cry escaped him, a sound that was an exclamation of victory, release, and wonder.

He eased into her gently, an act of extreme self-restraint on his part because she sensed he would become ferocious in an instant if he could.

So she let him.

“You don’t have to hold back, you know.”

In her current state, she could take him easily—*all* of him.

“As you wish.”

At last, he fucked her, each thrust sending her deeper into ecstasy. He was no longer gentle with her, and she didn’t mind. He was creative, too, for he fucked her this way and that, occasionally changing position, moving her this way and that, showing her there were other points in her body that could be stimulated to elicit mind-blowing levels of pleasure.

He fucked her until she was slick with sweat underneath her dress. He explored her body with his hands and savored her with his tender-savage kisses.

He consumed her.

Fiercely.

Reverently.

Until neither of them could stand it any longer, and at last, he was at his breaking point.

And when he finally found his release in her, fervently whispering her name, it was just like that word he'd used before...

Transcendent.

THIRTY-ONE

“WELL, THEN,” Clarissa blurted, not really knowing what she wanted to talk about but needing to make some sort of exclamation all the same. “Huh.”

Still sitting in the comfy chair, she looked at Jerik, who was busy straightening his jacket and re-tying his belt.

“Indeed,” he agreed. His tone was mild, but the look he gave her was one of pure adoration.

She let out a sigh that was equal parts amazement and exasperation. How was it possible that *this* beautiful, deadly, warm, growly, gentle creature was hers now?

Because this was serious. The man was committed beyond *committed*. And she knew there was no going back.

This wasn't some forgettable one-night stand or a fleeting lover's tryst.

This was *real*.

She'd known that when she'd come up here—in fact, she'd expected it.

He'd given her a choice.

She'd made her choice.

And although there was so much she still didn't know, she was willing to dive headlong into this relationship.

Wasn't that crazy? She, who was always cautious...

But she was glad she'd taken the risk.

"Although I'm completely and utterly satisfied right now, I'm feeling a little bad about being late for the main event."

"You're not late," he said. "I made sure you would arrive early."

"You *knew* this was going to happen?"

"My habit is to be early for any important happening, regardless of the situation. I wouldn't presume to know anything when it comes to you, but the thought did cross my mind, yes."

She rolled her eyes a little in a good-natured way. "I can't even fathom what it must be like to have your kind of confidence."

"It's not confidence." He smiled, his grin as radiant as the sun itself, transforming him. She briefly wondered if he could smile that way at any other being in the Universe. She suspected it wasn't possible. "I was desperate. You have no idea what you do to me." His voice cracked a little, betraying the extent of the pressure he'd been under.

If things had been bad for her this past week, then what about him?

"I didn't realize you were suffering so much. I might've paid you a visit sooner if I'd known." She frowned. "But everything is all right now, I trust?"

"More than *all right*." His smile widened even further, fangs and all.

"Well, I'm glad... you're all right, I mean." She didn't understand much of their biology, but during her research into Kordolians, she'd come across a small amount of detail about genetically encoded attraction in Kordolians—a trait that appeared to be unique to them.

It was entirely possible he'd been suffering much more than he'd let on.

And maybe there was something about him that had made *her* react this way, too—the attraction and arousal she'd felt were off the charts compared to anything she'd experienced before.

She'd lost control.

She couldn't deny it. After Jerik had made her his—and made her climax to the moon and back, she'd felt incredible. It was as if every last molecule of worry and stress had been eliminated from her soul.

Right now, she was walking on clouds.

All her nervousness about attending this big, mysterious, fancy event had evaporated. Knowing she would be waking in on his arm—as *his* official partner—she felt bulletproof.

“Clarissa...” Jerik smoothed the front of his jacket and turned to her. Unexpectedly, he offered her a deep bow. “I am undone. And I do realize that this—*I*—might be different from what you are accustomed to. I just want you to understand that nothing in this Universe will ever be more important to me than you.”

She leaned back and let out a small exhalation of disbelief. “That’s a big declaration to make. Can I ask you something?”

He inclined his head, his smile evaporating. All of a sudden, he was terribly serious. “*Anything.*”

“What would you have done if I’d resisted you just before?”

He shrugged. “I had a plan for that. More than a few of my trusted comrades know of the situation. I would have called them immediately and had them drag me to the med-bay. They would have thrown me into stasis and knocked me out.”

“That bad, huh?” Clarissa was shocked. To think his existence was this extreme dichotomy between perfect control and giving in to those powerful instincts of his. To think of the

extent he would have gone to... if she'd decided to reject his advances.

But she hadn't.

She'd found him irresistible, too.

"That bad," Jerik agreed mildly. "You see, I'm at your mercy now."

"Don't say that. I would never take advantage of you."

"You should. I demand it."

"Why?"

He pressed his palm against the chair and leaned forward, delighting her with his closeness. Now that the tension was broken, there was an easy familiarity between them, as if they'd known each other for years. "Because nobody else is going to. I wouldn't allow it."

"Well, it looks like I'm going to have to, then." She let out a mock-serious sigh. "If my *taking advantage* of you extended to me asking you to deal with my enemies on Earth, would you do that for me?"

"It's about time. I don't normally meddle in the affairs of humans, but I'll take out anyone you ask me to."

He actually seemed eager.

Clarissa waved her hand, wondering if she'd taken things too far. "I was only joking. Actually, I'd rather ask that you *not* kill anyone on my behalf."

"I felt that might actually be the case. Then I'll try my very best to avoid it."

"You'll *try*?"

"If we were ever to encounter a situation where your safety was at risk, I would kill anyone that tried to harm you. Now, is there anything else I can offer to assist you with in the meantime?"

Good lord, he's serious. Of course he is.

Sometimes, she forgot that he was also a ruthless Kordolian.

“You can start by helping me to look decent again. I put a lot of effort into this outfit to impress you, and now it’s less than perfect.”

She was only teasing him, but a look of perfect horror crossed his features. “I... I did not realize. As soon as I saw you, I was blown into oblivion. Truth be told, you nearly destroyed me. And there’s no way you could look less than perfect to me. Nevertheless, I’ll do whatever you ask. We have all the facilities you might need to refresh yourself, but please believe me when I tell you none of that is really necessary because you are stunning.”

“I almost believe you, even if your biases are showing. At the very least, would you mind helping me put this back in? I can’t see without a mirror.” She held up the long silver earring with its iridescent pearl at the end. At some point, in the heat of the moment, one of her earrings had fallen out.

“Of course.” Taking great care to be delicate, he took the earring from her fingers and leaned in, deftly threading it through her pierced ear. Then, he rose to his full height and extended his hand. “I can assure you, you look incredible.”

Clarissa slipped her fingers into his.

Her skin was soft and smooth, his hard and callused.

They made quite the pair, the two of them. Like granite and silk.

And for the first time in longer than she could remember, she was actually having *fun*.

Would they always be good like this?

She certainly hoped so.

Her gut told her it would be so.

Not that she expected things to be this easy all the time. They would have their disagreements and their challenges.

Earth might even face an alien invasion or two.

Effortlessly, he helped her to her feet. With heels on, she was almost as tall as him. She retrieved her leather jacket from where she'd draped it over the chair. "This one, too." She handed it to Jerik.

He gave her a searing look and held up the jacket, allowing her to ease into its familiar warmth.

Gosh, he could be the perfect gentleman when he wanted.

Sometimes.

"May I?" he offered her his arm.

"Of course." She rested her hand on his arm and allowed him to lead her through the cabin.

As they reached the hatch, Jerik stopped. "May I?"

He leaned in.

Kissed her gently and slowly.

Tenderly.

His hand danced across the small of her back as he pulled her closer.

And she responded with equal fervor and sweetness.

Now, with the heat and the urgency gone, he was nothing but sweet.

"Just couldn't help myself," he whispered after he finally broke away. "I'm tempted to skip the infernal event entirely and just take you to my chambers, but at the same time, how can I keep you from the very event you came here to attend? I'm not one for gatherings or ceremonies. Hate the cursed things. But maybe with you, I might actually tolerate it."

"You might even have fun," she said wryly.

"Might," he grumbled.

"Well, I was always looking forward to learning about Kordolian culture from actual *Kordolians*, not from the various dubious sources we have access to on Earth, so you can't back out now. You have to take me... and I would very much like to visit your chambers afterward."

“That, my divine human, can certainly be arranged.”

Together, they stepped out into a vast, shadowy chamber. At the far end was a window that looked out across the stars. Through it, Clarissa caught sight of the dark side of the Earth, decorated with billions of glittering lights.

It was so very surreal... and hauntingly beautiful.

She could hardly believe she was here.

With *him*.

What have I done?

She could ask the same question for a millennium, and she still wouldn't understand how this had happened.

But what was the point in worrying about that?

Look at all the possibilities stretching out before her now.

She slipped her fingers into his and let him guide her into the darkness, across a bridge between worlds.

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