

A muscular alien man with a blue-toned, textured skin is shown from the chest up, looking to the right. He is set against a dark blue space background with a planet and a spaceship. The text is overlaid on the image.

A SCI-FI ALIEN ROMANCE

ALIEN BILLIONAIRES: BOOK 2

ALIEN BILLIONAIRE'S

Fake Girlfriend

AMI WRIGHT

Alien Billionaire's Fake Girlfriend

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BLURB

KNOT dating the bad boy alien billionaire.

Mirra's friend Cassie has a hot new polar bear alien boyfriend and Mirra can't help but be jealous. So when Cassie offers to introduce Mirra to her boyfriend's gorgeous billionaire friend, she jumps at the chance.

Mirra doesn't even need Lennox to send her into heat. She's already burning for him. And burning with curiosity to find out if everything her friend says about Ximian biology is true! Too bad this gorgeous alien is only interested in a fake girlfriend. Should she risk her heart playing games with the bad boy alien billionaire?

Lennox lives by a set of rules designed to make sure he never turns into a brokenhearted sap like his father. Rule number one: don't fall in love. When his father tries to set up an arranged match for him, he's looking for any way to avoid it. He comes up with the perfect scheme: Fake date a human woman to make his father think he's finally fallen in love.

The problem is, when he hires Mirra as his fake girlfriend, all his rules go out the airlock. All he can think about is sending her into heat and showing her why Ximians do it better. The longer he spends with Mirra, the more he starts to worry he might be about to break the most important rule of all.

This rags to riches billionaire alien romance contains explicit language and content that is intended for an adult audience! Each book in this series has a new couple and a HEA. If you like growly, possessive polar bear aliens who are really teddy bears for their ladies, this series is for you. Please check my website for content warnings.

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Please let me know if you feel I've missed anything.

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ONE

Lennox glanced down at his wrist-com again, just to be sure. This shitty apartment block was where his friend Errytt was living? The guy was heir to one of the nine seats of power on their home planet, Ximia. Errytt was a billionaire for fuck's sake! Well, his parents were.

So was Lennox, but his wealth was self-made.

Yet the apartment block he stood in front of was a boxy complex the same dull gray as the ten other buildings in this row. Its bland exterior appeared all the harsher because it had absolutely no windows. Sure, viewscreens and artificial sunlight generators were bound to be inside. That was pretty standard, even in this backwater part of the five systems. Even humans apparently had the architectural sophistication to expect that much. But still. It was bleak. This entire section of Nova Space Station was bleak. Nano-copy 3D-printed buildings all looked the same. Row upon row, they marched on in neat straight lines. Just looking at it killed something in his soul.

Shaking his head, he swiped a hand over the exterior panel and selected apartment 298. Moments later, the familiar strong features and broad grin of his friend Errytt appeared on the viewscreen.

“Yo, how can we—Lennox! I did not expect to see you all the way out here.”

Lennox frowned. “I told you I'd come visit.”

Errytt scoffed. “Yeah, but who actually wants to come all the way out to the ass end of the galaxy, right? You coming up?” The front door slid open with a slightly concerning wheeze.

Lennox quirked a brow at the door. “Is it safe?”

Errytt's booming laughter sounded strange through the tinny speakers of the cheap viewscreen. “Fuck you. Get up here.”

Lennox walked through the doors, striding to the elevator and taking it up to level two. It had been too long since he'd seen his friend. Seven months ago Errytt's parents had sent him out to Edgespace to learn a bit of responsibility. They still weren't speaking to him. So apparently he still hadn't learned it. Which was just like Errytt.

The door to room 298 opened before he even buzzed, and Errytt pulled Lennox into a forceful hug he enthusiastically returned.

“Good to see you.” Lennox pulled away with a grin.

Errytt slapped him on the back. “Good to see you too. Come in.”

He followed Errytt into the apartment and looked around in disbelief at the shabby, plain furnishings, the white, unadorned walls, and the flickering viewscreen on the main wall of the kitchen-living area. The whole thing was one open space, the living area and tiny kitchen. At the far end was a door that presumably led to a bathroom. That was it.

By the nine, the fucking toilet in his hotel suite at the Aphelion was larger than this. Okay, probably not, but close.

“Who are you? And what have you done with my friend?”

He threw himself down on the sofa, wincing as it groaned under his considerable weight. Neither he nor Errytt were small. Both of them were almost seven feet tall, broad shouldered, and well-built, typical for healthy males of their species. How on Ximia was Errytt squeezing himself into these tiny human spaces?

Errytt laughed. “I've just realized what's really important in life.”

Lennox rolled his eyes. “If you're going to try and tell me again about how your human girlfriend—”

“—Cassie.”

“Fine. *Cassie*—has changed you into a better person, save it.”

Errytt opened a cool drawer in the kitchen and pulled out two beers, handing him one. “Take this and shut up about Cass if you know what’s good for you.”

Lennox took the drink, swallowing a mouthful of the cold liquid. Errytt sat on the floor, putting his own beer on the tiny table between them.

“What are you doing here, man? You really want to live like this?”

Errytt shrugged. “No. I’m also not planning to give up Cass. So right now, I don’t have much choice. I’m working on it though.”

“Oh yeah? You’re really going to sweet talk your parents into accepting her?” That was about as likely as waking up cheerful in winter. Errytt’s parents were the sort of uptight aristos from old money who thought anyone who wasn’t from one of the nine families was beneath them. Lennox would know. They’d been giving him the cold shoulder ever since he met Errytt at Hagslaw Preparatory.

Errytt snorted. “I make my own way from now on. I don’t need their marks anymore.”

Lennox raised a brow, then his drink. “Well cheers to that! It’s about time you stood up to them. But lose the girl. You’re no fun when you’re all shut-in with a woman. I miss my friend.”

Errytt paused with his beer halfway to his lips and let out a low growl. “Watch it. If you’re going to keep talking like that, our friendship is done.”

He stared. Overdramatic much? “You’re kidding, right? It’s not like you’re going to mate her.”

“You’re damn right I am. Just as soon as I get my parents to see reason. Until then, this thing between us is as good as. So I don’t want to hear anymore bullshit about losing the girl. Ain’t gonna happen.”

Fuck.

Things were worse than he'd feared. Errytt was in deep. Way too deep. Lucky Ximian mating laws only permitted a union blessed by the couple's parents. There was still a chance he could rescue his friend.

Lennox was going to have to approach this carefully. Probably best to keep his mouth shut and his eyes open for a while. Get the lay of the land. He'd find the leak in Cassie's airlock soon, and then he could start working on getting Errytt to pull back a bit. One thing he wouldn't do was stand back and let his best friend make the greatest mistake of his life. He wouldn't let Errytt give his heart to a female only to have it broken when things inevitably turned sour. He only hoped he had arrived in time.

"So where is she then?" he asked, turning the conversation for now. "Not still at work?"

Errytt shook his head. "Nah, she's out on a girls' night with her friend. My guess is they'll be out for a while yet."

Promising. No doubt she was off flirting with some other guy while Errytt sat at home like a chump, sleeping through spring. Lennox had never met a female yet who could be trusted. Admittedly he didn't tend to go for girls quite like Cassie. The way Errytt had described her, she seemed more like the girl next door than a party girl, but at their heart, all females were the same. Every one was treacherous.

Errytt took another swig of his beer. "What about your love life then? Met anyone interesting?"

He snorted. "You know my rule. There's no love in the equation and that's the way I intend to keep things."

"Oh really? You better watch out, man. Everyone knows the last days of summer are always deceptively warm."

"I might be worried, but I'm pretty sure I'm not even capable of falling in love. It's pretty hard when you never sleep with the same girl twice."

Errytt just shook his head. "You and your rules. And since when do you sleep with anyone? I thought you always kicked them out before morning."

“I do.” Lennox took a long drink to give him an excuse to look away from the expression of pity on his friend’s face. What the fuck? This was not the Errytt he knew and loved. That guy used to be completely on board with Lennox’s rules. His way of doing things.

“How about your father, how is he?” Errytt went on.

Lennox scowled. “Same as ever. Still moping about Reiyana and pretending like he’s not. You know he still hasn’t seen anyone else? Not in all the years since she left. Not that I want him to shack up with someone new, but it’s not right to be completely celibate either.”

The heightened look of pity on Errytt’s face wasn’t unexpected. What floored him was when his friend shook his head, took another swig of beer and said, “Maybe one day you’ll understand.”

Not fucking likely.

Errytt must have read the stony expression on his face. He took another swig of his drink and changed the subject. “So what brings you all the way out here? You ready to commission that special build we talked about?”

Lennox smiled. “Yeah. I want to see what you can do. And I’ll admit, I needed some distance from Ximia. You know Dad’s going to push that archaic thirty and unmated rule?” He blew out an angry breath. “It’s ridiculous. A mate is the last thing I need in my life.”

Errytt’s loud booming laugh filled the small space. “Better find a female yourself then. If you don’t want him arranging a match.”

Lennox scowled into his drink. “Never. I’ll find a way out of this. I’ve already got my lawyers working on it.”

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TWO

Sunday night! Mirra slipped on her heels and trotted to the bathroom where her best friend Cassie already leaned close to the mirror, applying bright red lipstick.

Sunday night might not be everyone's preferred night to go out dancing, but since it was the only night of the week Mirra wasn't currently working, it would have to do.

She needed to let her hair down, rub up against some cute guys. Maybe take one home with her, depending on how well things went.

Mirra looked at Cassie as her friend leaned back, smacked her lips, and checked her reflection. "You know, Cass, I appreciate the fact that you're going over and above on your wing-woman duties, but you didn't have to dress like a nun!"

Cassie gaped down at her outfit. "A nun? Mirra, just because my outfit doesn't show both my nipples and my hooch at once does not make this outfit conservative."

Mirra snorted, blinking as she applied mascara. "Gotta show off the goods. I've got a limited window to close the deal tonight, and I'm planning on getting some action. It's alright for you, going home to that big gorgeous hunk of an alien. Some of us have got to work a bit harder for it."

Cassie shook her head. "Mirra, you are so beautiful. You could have any guy you wanted. All you'd have to do is smile at him. You don't need to dress like that to attract them."

"Doesn't hurt though, right?"

Cassie laughed. "No. I'm sure it doesn't. Either way, you look stunning."

Cassie had pulled her long, strawberry-blonde hair into a bun at the back of her head. With the high-necked black dress she had chosen, Mirra had to admit the effect was classy. It also helped that her friend had a whole new wardrobe of designer outfits, purchased before her alien boyfriend was disowned by his billionaire parents.

Mirra was making do with the same threadbare red dress she'd worn every night out since she arrived at Nova Space Station four months ago. It was actually an old dress of Cassie's, but since her friend had been about to throw it away, Mirra didn't feel too bad about taking it. Cassie had offered several times to lend Mirra her fancy new clothes, but Mirra felt bad. Her friend had already coughed up the money to pay for her ticket from Fortuna to Nova, a fare she could never have afforded by herself. She'd never been much good at saving.

Well, she was turning over a new panel now. New job, new life, new Mirra. Two jobs actually. She needed both if she had any chance of repaying her friend and saving anything for tickets for her family.

She gave one final spin in front of the mirror. The dress was short, exaggerated by the fact Mirra was about a foot taller than Cassie. She'd adjusted the front to show more cleavage. The end result, if not classy, was at least eye-catching.

Mirra's dark, shoulder length hair had a natural wave to it. She'd left it out to cover the fact she had no jewelry to wear with her outfit. She did have red lipstick and great legs though. Plus, the minute she'd got to Nova, she spent her very first pay on boob filler, so now she had great tits as well. Between that and the laser hair removal, people no longer instantly recognized her as the orbit-rat she was—or had been. It helped that her naturally olive skin wasn't pale, despite never seeing the light of a star, just like all people who lived in the orbiting slum city, Fortuna, where she and Cassie had both grown up.

“Let's go, let's go.” She practically tugged Cassie out of her tiny apartment, not even waiting to watch the door slide closed behind them. The place was a dump, but it was all she could afford right now. At the end of the street, they jumped on the ringrail and went over to the giant column of elevators to go up to level six where all the best entertainment venues could be found.

Nova Station pumped with energy at most times of the day or night. Sunday night was much the same as any other night

of the week, really. Maybe locals stayed in more, but anyone passing through the station would probably be out for a good time tonight. Business done, traders and shoppers might linger for the weekend, taking an extra day off to enjoy themselves.

As they neared the bar where she worked her night job, Mirra put her head down and kept to the other side of the street. The flashing signs at the front of Club Fantasy showed laughing girls in skimpy uniforms and half-naked men serving drinks.

Mirra walked on, hoping nobody she knew came or left and she could pass by unrecognized. She'd hate to run into one of her regulars on her night off. She hadn't exactly been up front with Cassie about her second job. As far as her friend knew, she worked in a regular bar serving drinks. Cassie would only worry if she knew Mirra was a hostess at Club Fantasy. Ridiculous. She had always been able to handle herself. Still, she didn't like to make Cassie worry.

She breathed a sigh of relief when they passed by without incident. They turned right down a narrower alley and walked on toward Eclipse, a night club. Loud music and thumping bass were already audible from the entrance.

They were just sipping their second drink of the evening when the messages started. At first, Mirra only rolled her eyes when Cassie glanced down at her wrist-com and smiled dreamily. Her friend typed a message and then switched off her wrist-com and looked up at her.

“What about that guy?” Mirra leaned closer to Cassie, gesturing with her head at a tall, human guy with the short sleeves of his shirt rolled up to reveal muscular tattooed shoulders.

“Huh?” Cassie looked down at her com again.

Mirra sighed. “Hey, I thought it was a girls' night out. Quit messaging Errytt.”

Cassie winced. “Sorry, sorry.” She shut off her screen.

Not ten seconds later she was at it again. Mirra rolled her eyes, shouting to be heard over the music. “I'm going to

dance. Come find me when you're done.”

Cassie nodded but didn't look up from her holoscreen.

Mirra swallowed the last mouthful of her drink and set the glass down on the bar. Then turned and headed toward the dancefloor. Slowing her pace and swaying her hips, Mirra walked close by Mr. Hot-and-Tattooed. As she neared him, she looked around, shooting him a sultry smile back over her shoulder. Then she continued on her way, slipping around a couple to find a spot where she could move.

Sure enough, she was only dancing for a moment before she felt a pair of warm hands at her hips. A deep voice by her ear said, “After some company, sweetheart?”

She nodded, grinding back against him to the rhythm of the music.

He moved well enough, holding her close and rocking his hips to the beat. But he said nothing more. It was loud and conversation would have been difficult. She could forgive that. But he didn't even try to pull her aside somewhere. After a couple of songs, she wasn't sad when he moved on to find someone else.

It wasn't his fault really. Ever since Cassie had started hinting at how great things were between her and Errytt, Mirra had been increasingly aware of just how good that sounded. One night stands had lost a bit of their luster, especially after they became readily available with her move to Nova.

Mirra looked around to see Cassie slipping through the press of bodies. As she got close, Cassie took her hand and leaned in close. “Hey, can we talk?”

She pulled Mirra across the room toward the bathrooms. Goddess, if Cassie was about to ditch her and go home to Errytt, she was going to lose her shit. Cass had promised tonight would be just the two of them, and Mirra was nowhere near ready to call it quits.

When the door closed behind them, shutting out most of the rhythmic pounding of the song, Cassie pulled Mirra over to

the sink. “Listen, I know I said we were going to have a girls’ night tonight, just the two of us—”

Mirra groaned. “Don’t even say it. You know I love Errytt, but I swear to heavens he needs to relax and not be so damn possessive. You’re allowed to have a night out once in a while.”

Cassie flushed. “It’s not that. I mean, you are right, of course. But tonight’s different. An old friend of his turned up unexpectedly and Errytt’s worried about him. Thinks he needs to lighten up. He actually asked if you would mind if he brought his friend out to meet us—to meet you.”

“Oh!” A smile crept over Mirra’s face. She had been begging Errytt—only half-jokingly—to set her up with one of his Ximian friends ever since he and Cass got back together. Would she like her very own polar-bear alien hybrid who was nearly seven foot tall, a wall of muscle and who could send her into heat and go all night long? Um, yes, please! “You’ve been holding out on me, Cass. Who is this guy?”

Cassie beamed. Bringing up her holoscreen, she flicked to a profile image of a tall male with the sort of dangerous smile that quirked up at one side. His silver hair was cropped close to his head around the back and sides, revealing deep black skin beneath, with a longer section on top that fell rakishly across his forehead. He had rounded bear-like ears and his dark eyes held a wicked spark that instantly made her pulse leap. His face was slightly elongated, like all Ximians, and silver fur covered his body. He even had sharp fangs revealed by his smile.

“This is Lennox,” Cassie said. “He’s an old school friend of Errytt’s.”

“He is hawt!” Mirra grinned. “Tell me he’s a billionaire too!” Her laughter trailed to a stop when Cassie nodded. “Holy fuck, you’re serious? I was only kidding. I guess it figures, though.”

“Only thing is, he’s not really a relationship kinda guy. Errytt wanted me to warn you.”

Mirra shrugged. “Whatever. They all say that, don’t they? Besides, I’m hardly looking for a relationship right now either. I’m too busy.” Was that the truth? She’d been telling herself that for the last couple of months. Still if this guy wasn’t interested in long-term, it hardly mattered. It was no different to what she’d come out tonight to find. “Sounds perfect. I’ll happily keep him company for a few nights while he’s at Nova.”

“So I’m forgiven for being a shitty friend then?” Cassie chewed her bottom lip.

Mirra shook her head. “Of course.” She pulled Cassie into a hug. “I get it, babe. If I had a hot alien boyfriend, I’d be ten times as bad. You know I’m just jealous, right?”

Cassie squeezed her back. “I know that’s rubbish, but I’ll make it up to you, okay? One hot alien boyfriend coming up!”

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THREE

Lennox rolled his eyes when they stepped into the crowded, dark interior of Eclipse and a busty human woman squealed and launched herself at Errytt. He might have known his friend was just making an excuse to see his human. Lennox knew a pussy-struck fool when he saw one.

“Well, I’m out. I did not come here to watch you make eyes at your woman all night.” He shot Errytt a glare that his friend either ignored or didn’t see since he was so busy doing exactly that.

He gave the human a curt nod. “Nice to meet you, Cassie.” He was about to turn and walk out of the nightclub when Cassie frowned.

“Oh, don’t go! I know it sucks being a wheel on a hovercar. But Errytt thought it might be fun to introduce you to a friend of mine.” She stepped slightly to one side, and Lennox’s attention was caught by a leggy human wearing a tiny red dress. She had the most perfect set of tits he’d seen in a long time.

Okay, interesting twist. Maybe it was worth hanging around after all.

Cassie’s friend gave him a slow, lazy smile as she looked him up and down the same way he’d just done to her. Better and better. Then he stopped himself. This woman was eyeing him up like a prime piece of real estate she’d like to acquire—permanently. Cassie and Errytt had probably put ideas in her head about setting them up together. Lennox did not do blind dates. He didn’t do dates. Not unless he had a fair idea they were going to end with a fuck and a commitment free goodbye.

Errytt said, “Lennox, meet Cassie and her friend, Mirra. Ladies, this gorgeous specimen is my good friend, Lennox.”

“Listen, I really have to...” He trailed off, glancing down at his wrist-com, fumbling with an excuse. Hells, why was he

even trying to make an excuse? There was no way this woman had him flustered!

“Don’t be shy.” The human woman stepped closer, placing her palms on his chest. Then she leaned up, pressing a kiss on his cheek that he returned automatically. She lingered a moment, her breath sweet as it fanned against his cheek, carrying a hint of alcohol. “No need to look so hunted. I promise you’re safe from me.”

She pulled away before he could ask what she meant, giving him another of those devastating smiles over her shoulder. “Come on. No doubt we’ve lost our seats at the bar.”

Cassie and Errytt followed her, leaving Lennox to trail behind like a little lost puppy. Not a good sign.

This gorgeous human had the wrong idea about him, didn’t she? She wanted a boyfriend. Or did she? He would just stay for half an hour. Just to be sure he wasn’t turning down an opportunity for a very promising evening.

As he shouldered through the press of bodies—mostly humans and Ardun, the cat-human hybrids—he only got a few odd looks. Apparently people in this part of the five systems were more used to mixing with other races than back home. When he made it to the bar, he found it just as crowded as the rest of the club. Lennox squeezed in next to Mirra, which placed him at the end of the group. Errytt leaned over Cassie and gave Lennox a wink from behind Mirra’s head. He should feel irritated with his friend trying to distract him with a pretty female. He still had every reason to think Errytt was planning to set them up together. But he had to give it to Errytt. It had worked. He was completely distracted.

His eyes fell away from Errytt’s smirk and back to Mirra’s pretty red lips almost instantly. He didn’t even try to fight it.

“What are you drinking?” He leaned down to ask her.

“Vodka tonic.” The way she tilted her head to the side giving him a nice view of that sleek neck wasn’t lost on him.

He dragged his eyes away, entering her order into the bot and swiping his ID. He should clear things up. Make sure she

knew how things stood. “Listen, Mirra—”

She laughed, the low, throaty sound almost lost in the noise of the bar around them. “I get it, Lennox. I’m not looking for anything long term either. Why don’t we both just relax and see how the night goes, yeah?”

So Errytt had let her know a little about him. Apparently this pretty human was fully on board. All the better. Shaking off his funk, Lennox smiled at her. “Sounds good, gorgeous.” He didn’t like that a few whispered words from her had turned him back into a fumbling cub.

She gave him another one of those tempting smiles. The ones almost good enough to make him forget rule number two: no kissing. Not on the mouth, anyway.

Fuck. Who was this wet dream of a female? She was damn near perfect the way every inch of her seemed created from his fantasies.

Well, she could have a better wardrobe. Now he’d had time to adjust to the sheer amount of smooth, shapely leg on display and those tits, he could spare the details some attention. It could be the light in here, but her dress was a little faded and worn. Still, he wouldn’t be looking at it when it was in a heap on the floor of his hotel suite, so it hardly mattered.

Cassie and Errytt acted painfully cute, snuggling and laughing together. Proper conversation was challenging in the crowded, noisy club. He leaned down to Mirra anyway, unable to avoid giving in to his curiosity. “So you say you’re not looking for anything long term. What exactly are you looking for then?”

Her face brushed against his as she tipped her chin up to answer, speaking into his ear. “Don’t tell me I have to spell it out for you. I hear such good things about Ximian males.”

A low rumble of amusement rose in his chest. He leaned back to raise a brow at her. “Oh, is that right? And you’re looking to see if the rumors are true?” The novelty factor. That angle he could accept. Plenty of human and Ardun females

were keen to experience the heat Ximian come induced. That and a Ximian knot.

Mirra smiled. “And are they?” She wrapped those red lips around her straw in a way Lennox felt all the way to his balls.

He grinned. “I guess you’ll have to find out for yourself.”

They finished their drinks. Mirra took his hand and tugged him onto the dance floor. The way she moved was exactly as he expected: confident, sexy. Lords, the way she moved! She danced as if it was just the two of them and he was getting a private show. Her body was even better in motion. She was tall for a human. The short dress and the way she swayed her hips emphasized her long legs and an ass he longed to squeeze. He moved closer. She smiled and pulled him up against her.

The stifling heat of the club had grown hotter now he was moving. He was sweating. Her hot little body pressed up against him was doing nothing to make that any better. There was no way he was pulling away from Mirra though. Every moment they danced heightened his anticipation for the rest of the night. Little tease knew exactly what she was doing to him too. It was clear in her tempting smile and the sway of her hips. Lennox watched as she lifted her arms above her head, eyes closed as she moved to the music.

When she opened them and gave him a sultry smile, he had no choice. Spinning her, he slid his hand to her ass and lifted her slightly so they could grind together in time with the beat. Mirra’s arm around his neck pulled him lower. He bent his knees so he could fit them together just the way he wanted.

By the nine, the way she moved was like he was already taking her right there on the dance floor. He was half hard just from the handful of her ass and her hot pussy grinding against his leg through the clothing that separated them.

It made him want to find a dark corner so he could push up her ridiculously short skirt and explore beneath it. Their mouths were a breath apart, those bright red lips calling his name. No wonder Errytt was so obsessed with Cassie if all human women were like this. Mirra was like a little laser. Her hot gaze burned into him and the curve of those lips had him

burning. Would she be demanding in bed? Would she tug his hair and direct his movements as he ate that delicious little pussy? Would she tell him exactly how she liked it?

Fuck, he hoped so.

He was sorely tempted to close the distance between them and take the kiss he was hungering for when he was jostled by a large shoulder. He released his hold on Mirra to turn and snarl at whoever had done it, only to find himself looking at his friend.

“There you are!” Errytt grinned at him while Cassie pulled Mirra into a hug.

Errytt continued to grin at him with a smug look. “We were just about to suggest finding somewhere quieter. Thought maybe you and Mirra could get to know each other better. But it looks like you have that sorted.”

He opened his mouth to tell Errytt to fuck off, thank you very much, when Mirra shouted over the music. “That’s a great idea. Let’s go to Set The Bar.”

He looked down at her in surprise. Had he misread her interest? She smiled up at him, taking his hand. “Gotta work harder than that. Besides, what’s the rush? I thought a Ximian could go all night?”

He almost growled then. The kind of growl that would flood whatever tiny panties she had on beneath her dress. The kind of growl to make her do exactly what he wanted. Little tease. She was playing with fire. Or maybe he was. This female was already in danger of putting him under her spell and he hadn’t even tasted her yet.

He leaned close to whisper in her ear. “Oh, we can go all night. But if you’re afraid you can’t keep up, I can let you delay a little.”

Even over the thick scents of sticky alcohol and sweaty bodies, he caught the hint of musky sweetness that signaled her growing arousal. The scent complemented the heady perfume of her natural aroma.

Let her stew on that.

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FOUR

Mirra felt the heat and power of Lennox's big muscular body close behind her the entire way to Set The Bar. It was only a short walk from Eclipse, but her body thrummed with excitement and awareness of his after their almost-kiss. Stars, the chemistry between them was off the charts. She hadn't felt like this about anyone in ages.

So why had she let Cassie and Errytt cock-block them?

She wasn't usually one to delay gratification. They were having such a nice time though, and this guy was a bona fide billionaire. Maybe he hadn't realized he was about to hook up with space-junk. She wasn't quite ready to take him home to her tiny shabby apartment and find out what he thought when he saw exactly how the other half lived.

It usually didn't bother her what guys thought of her home—or her. Not when she'd only push them out the door before morning anyway. She wasn't sure she'd be ready to push Lennox out quickly though. Especially if he was as good as his word about going all night. A shiver ran through her at the memory of his words, breathed against her ear. It conjured all sorts of images of being thoroughly fucked. The kind of fucked where you wake up a little stiff and sore in the morning. Or perhaps where you didn't wake up at all because you hadn't really slept.

Still she held back on calling it a night and whisking him away with her. A guy like this would probably invite her back to whichever hotel he was staying in anyway, provided she gave him a little incentive. And she was very much enjoying their banter.

When they entered the bar, they found one booth remaining. A tight squeeze with two Ximian males, but Errytt tucked Cassie up next to him on one side and Mirra slid in next to Lennox on the other. She squirmed at the way their thighs touched, making her hyper aware of his big warm body right up against hers. Her pussy slicked with excitement. If

this kept up, she'd ruin a perfectly good pair of panties before she'd even kissed the guy.

A service bot brought their drinks and Mirra sipped hers, feeling the pleasant buzz of several drinks over a few hours and the prospect of a really hot fling.

Lennox glanced at her, giving her a wicked sort of smile she couldn't interpret. When his large, hot palm slid up her thigh under the table, she just about forgot to breathe.

"So tell me more about these modified racers, Errytt," Lennox said.

Mirra shifted in her seat, spreading her legs a little wider and almost gasping aloud when Lennox's hand slid higher.

He appeared to outwardly ignore her, talking with Errytt and Cassie about their business building custom-made hotted up racers. Mirra knew the ins and outs of the business, which was lucky because Lennox's thumb made slow, tantalizing circles against her sensitive flesh. It was all she could do to stop herself from moaning with frustration. His hand was large enough it spread over most of her thigh as his thumb teased the hem of her dress higher and higher.

Just when he had reached the seam of her underwear, he paused at a buzz from his wrist-com. Glancing down, he groaned and removed his hand from her thigh.

"What is it?" Errytt asked.

"The old man. He will not quit hounding me about this arranged mating. Says he's got some oligarch's cousin's daughter lined up. It doesn't matter how many times I tell him I'm not interested."

Errytt snorted. "Believe me, I feel your pain. Maybe what you need is a human girlfriend. That shut my parents up."

Cassie elbowed him.

"Well, after a while."

Mirra expected Lennox to dismiss Errytt's idea out of hand. After all, Errytt had clearly meant it as a joke. Instead,

Lennox leaned forward on the table, hand scratching at the stubble on his chin. “That’s actually not such a stupid idea.”

She stared at him. Really? Was this about to be the luckiest day of her life?

If she was looking for a boyfriend. Which she was not.

But for a Ximian billionaire... she could make time.

Errytt grinned at him. “Not everything that comes out of my mouth is stupid.”

“Just most things,” Lennox shot back.

Errytt laughed.

“No. That’s perfect.” Lennox grinned at Errytt, then turned to Mirra with an adorably serious expression. “You’d be perfect.”

Across the table Cassie practically vibrated with excitement, clearly holding in a squeal Mirra could hear in her imagination. She flushed with pleasure and couldn’t hold back the smile stretching across her face until...

“How much do you want me to pay you to be my fake girlfriend?”

“Come again?”

He chuckled. “I always do. That’s not the point. You’re perfect for this. You won’t cause a fuss. It can just be purely business. Clean and simple.”

She just stared at him, trying to take in what he’d just said. Opposite them, Cassie sputtered in outrage and Errytt’s expression hardened.

Lennox paid them no attention. “I’ll pay you whatever you want. Name your price.”

“Oh my stars, did you actually just offer to pay her to be your escort?” Cassie’s voice had risen several octaves. Errytt bared his sharp fangs in a snarl directed at Lennox. “Hey, man. Don’t come here and insult my mate’s friend—”

“Wait.” Mirra held up her hand, shushing Errytt and Cassie. She tuned out their looks of horrified astonishment from across the table and focused in on Lennox. “You’ll pay anything I want?”

He narrowed his eyes. “Within reason. Name a fair price and I’ll pay it.”

She folded her arms across her chest, thinking for a minute. “Five hundred.”

“A month?”

“I was thinking more like a day.”

Lennox scoffed. “Five hundred a week. And I’ll cover any expenses. New clothes, shoes, that sort of thing.”

“What do you mean new clothes?” She glared at him. It didn’t matter that he was right. He didn’t have to be such a dick and actually say it.

He only shrugged. “You’ll want to look the part.”

Errytt began to protest again, but a nudge from Cassie silenced him. Mirra’s heart was beating faster just thinking about what five hundred a week would buy her. She could quit working at Club Fantasy. It would only take her three weeks to pay back Cassie for the price of her ticket to Nova. Then she could start saving for tickets for her family.

Mirra fiddled with the hem of her skirt. She could do this. It certainly wasn’t any worse than the work she did at Club Fantasy. Nothing Lennox could possibly want her to do would be anywhere near as ridiculous as the things customers asked for there. Hells, she’d been about to sleep with him for free.

The only difference was now she knew it was all for show.

Or had he picked her because he felt the same exciting spark she did? Maybe there really was more to it. Then she remembered his words. *Purely business.*

Still, it didn’t change the fact she needed the money and the work would hardly be unpleasant. In fact, she was struggling to see any downside.

“Would it involve traveling to Ximinspace? Or could we stay here?”

Lennox shrugged. “I have no plans to go home any time soon. Not while my dad is still set on this stupid match. Suits me fine if we stay here.”

She didn’t need to hear anymore. What more was there to ask anyway? Holding out her hand, she smiled. “Done.”

Lennox’s answering smile stretched across his mouth lazily, bearing sharp fangs. He shook her hand, his grip warm and firm. “Excellent. We can work out all the fine details and I’ll draw up a contract.” He slung an arm over the back of the seat. “We can tell my Dad that Errytt and Cassie set us up on the com, and we’ve been chatting for weeks. I’ll tell him I came out here to meet you. Come on. Finish your drink. We can go back to my hotel and make some vids.”

Cassie and Errytt had been silent through the rest of the exchange. Now though, Errytt stood, addressing Lennox in a clipped tone. “A word.”

Lennox sighed and rolled his eyes, but he got up and followed Errytt out of the bar. Cassie slid into the booth next to Mirra and took her hand. “I’m so sorry, Mirra. If I’d known he was that big of a prick, I would never have suggested we all meet up.”

Mirra gave her a breezy smile. She wasn’t really offended. If she was a bit miffed at his continued insistence he didn’t want a real relationship, that was on her. She’d known that going in. “It’s fine. It’s actually good. This way I can pay you back for my ticket—”

“I told you, there’s no need for that.”

She gave her friend’s hand a squeeze. “I know. And I told you, I’m absolutely paying you back anyway. You and Errytt are trying to start up a business. You need the marks. Besides, with how much he’s paying, I should be able to put aside something to go toward a ticket for Mom, Dad, and Dinah.”

“You’re sure you’re fine with this?”

Mirra nodded. “I’m not going to do anything I’m uncomfortable with. You know me.” Actually having tickets for her family within stretching distance was a dream Mirra had only indulged in a few times since coming to Nova. If she could keep this fake dating thing up long enough though, she would be able to afford it.

Maybe she wouldn’t give up the job at Club Fantasy just yet.

Cassie chewed at her bottom lip the way she did when she was stewing on something. “I still think it’s a bad idea...”

“You worry too much, Cass.”

“If it’s what you want. And you’re sure you’re fine?”

Mirra nodded. “Yeah. Absolutely.”

Cassie sighed. “Come on then. We’d better go find the guys before Errytt does something stupid to defend your honor.”

Mirra downed her drink and followed Cassie out of the bar, wondering where that sparkling fizz of excitement from earlier in the night had gone.

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FIVE

They made it out the doors and into the narrow alley just in time. Errytt and Lennox were squaring up to one another, speaking in heated voices. Their powerful forms were tense with anger and making the space in front of the bar seem even smaller.

“...not going to take her back to your hotel and make some scummy porn vid to leak on socials.”

Lennox bristled. “I never said anything about a porn vid, you asshole. I want a few innocent vids so I can change my relationship status and make it look like we’re serious. Fuck! What kind of prick do you think I am?”

Errytt huffed. “Even so, you can’t just come here and insult my mate and then insult her friend!”

“Like hells I did. It’s a business arrangement. Pure and simple. Where’s the insult?”

“You think a human’s not good enough? Is that it?”

“Her being human has nothing to do with it. Haven’t you ever listened to me? All females. They’re all the same.”

With a snarl, Errytt grabbed Lennox by the front of his shirt and slammed him back against the wall. To Mirra’s surprise, Lennox didn’t fight back, just let his friend haul him around. With a gasp, Cassie rushed over to Errytt and placed a hand on his arm. “Errytt. It’s fine.”

“It damn well isn’t fine.”

Lennox just laughed. From where Mirra stood, she didn’t see what was so funny. Errytt looked livid.

“No, it’s fine.” Cassie tugged on Errytt’s arm. “Mirra’s fine.”

With another rumbling curse, Errytt released Lennox.

“You’ll see it eventually. I only hope she doesn’t hurt you too badly,” Lennox said, voice clipped and cold. The two Ximians glared at each other for a moment more. Finally

Errytt shook his head. “Mirra can make up her own mind, of course, but you better check your attitude before you bother calling me again.” He turned to Mirra. “I wouldn’t blame you if you don’t want to go anywhere with this asshole. I’m very sorry I brought him to meet you. Do you want us to walk you home?”

She glanced over at Lennox who was watching her with a cool expression, looking for all the world like butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth. Nova Station was pretty safe at any time of night. There was always plenty of foot traffic, given that public transport was limited to the ringrail. Going with Lennox back to his hotel had been the way she’d planned to end her night anyway, though it was sweet of Errytt to look after her. He was good like that. One of the big reasons she loved him for Cass. “I’ll be alright. Don’t worry about me.”

Cassie reached out and squeezed her hand. “Call us if you change your mind. And send me a message to let me know you’re okay in an hour, yeah?”

Mirra nodded. “Of course.”

Lennox led her out of the narrow alley and out into the wider walkway lit by hundreds of tiny lights strung in trees that lined the road. Above them a false viewscreen imitated the night sky, though at eye level there were so many flashing lights and bright signs that it felt more like daytime. “Listen, Lennox. Maybe we should talk about exactly what you’re expecting here.”

“That’s probably a good idea.”

“Okay, well, for starters, exactly how um, *full service* are you expecting this arrangement to be? Like are you thinking that we would sleep together?”

His expression turned serious. “Ah. I’m afraid that’s off the table now.”

She blinked up at him in surprise. “It is?”

She wasn’t sure now where she wanted the night to end. When they’d been dancing at Eclipse, she’d been hotly

anticipating getting him home. She had thought they'd both been on the same page about where the evening would end.

Maybe it was because there was now money involved in the transaction. Did that make it weird for him? It was probably for the best to keep the boundaries clear. Keep things clean like he said. Besides, when she had sex, she expected to get pleasure from it too. Pretty hard to demand from your partner if you're the one being paid. That didn't mean she wasn't sad to have to give up on her hot alien fling though.

"Sorry to disappoint you," he went on, "but it would be completely against my rules."

Mirra snorted. "Rules? This I've got to hear. What, you don't sleep with employees? Cause I'm pretty sure I've heard that one before."

Lennox's hand pressed at the small of her back, directing her around a large group of Ardun walking in the opposite direction. The move should have annoyed her. It did annoy her. It also sent a skitter of excitement through her despite that fact and their conversation.

"I just find that it's best to keep a few things in mind to avoid getting fucked over."

They had stopped at the ringrail station to wait for the train. Mirra was about to ask what he meant by fucked over, but then the train arrived. The large plexiglass screens opened and the people at the station all shuffled forward to board. She and Lennox found two spots near the door, the crowd on the station forcing them to stand a little too close together for comfort. Not that Mirra minded pressing up against Lennox's big muscular body. He was so warm and solid, and her curves seemed to fit against him in all the right places. Even the fur on the backs of his arms where his shirt was rolled up felt soft and silky. Her body still remembered how good he had felt on the dance floor at Eclipse. Her pussy gave a little twitch just to remind her, and she still felt slick even now.

Lennox looked down, nostrils flaring and a gleam of amusement in his eyes. He leaned closer. "Trust me, gorgeous, I'm just as disappointed as you are, but maybe this is for the

best. I'm afraid I never sleep with the same female twice. I'd hate to be the best sex you ever had and then leave you wanting more."

"Ha!" The eyes of those around them flicked across to Mirra at her sharp bark of laughter. Oh, this guy was a gem. "How do you know *I* wouldn't be the best sex *you've* ever had? Maybe you'd be back for more despite all your rules?"

The lady next to Mirra stared fixedly at her holoscreen, but Mirra suspected from the twitch of her mouth she was listening. Not that she cared.

Lennox chuckled, his arm snaking down to her lower back and pulling her closer as the train stopped again. "Oh, I have no doubt you'd be amazing. Like I said, it's probably for the best we never find out."

Mirra rolled her eyes. She opened her mouth to tell him you never had any fun in life if you weren't prepared to break the rules now and then, but the bustle of people exiting the train prevented her.

They left the train, walked the few blocks to the elevator tower, and descended to level seven. Nova Space Station was laid out like a giant needle, nine enormous rings spinning slowly around the shaft. Each ring was a different level with different facilities. Level seven was accommodations. The height of this level left room for high-rise towers with hundreds of rooms.

Mirra was still eerily aware of Lennox's large, muscular body as they walked. She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt this aware of anyone. She really should not be considering trying to seduce him into breaking his rules though. He'd be the sort to want her gone straight away. If she played her cards right, he could be the best chance she had at saving the marks to bring her family to Nova.

Good sense had never stopped her from making bad choices before though.

She was bumped out of her thoughts as they approached the grand entry of the Aphelion Hotel, one of the most

upmarket accommodation options at Nova Station. The sleek white building towered over them and complicated light displays danced over the facade in intricate patterns. When they stepped inside the foyer, it was no less intimidating.

Lennox led her to the elevator then held the door as she stepped in. But she couldn't hold back the excited squeak she made when he pressed P for penthouse.

Lennox quirked a brow in her direction. "Something the matter?"

She flushed. "It's stupid. I work at the Pinnacle Hotel. I've been in the penthouse a million times. But I've never actually hung out with someone who stays in one. Well, apart from Errytt, but that doesn't count."

He grinned. "Glad I could pop at least one cherry for you tonight."

Goddess, was everything that came out of this guy's mouth an innuendo? Where did he get off being so damn sexy and flirty and shutting her down like that? No one who was this blatantly interested had ever shut her down.

One thing was for sure, if she thought she no longer wanted to pursue things with him, there was no question in her mind now. Now she wanted it. If only just to prove to him how stupid his rules were.

After the elevator opened and Lennox swiped his ID chip, they stepped into the large open plan space of the main room. It was decorated in whites with pops of bright colors in the cushions and the art on the walls. A bright throw on one sofa and brilliant pink and green tiles in the kitchen made her eyes zing from one sumptuous piece of furniture to the next. This was only one room. She knew there would be at least a few bedrooms and several bathrooms. There was probably also a private gym and possibly a garden.

Her first instinct was to rush around inspecting every inch of the space, lifting the rugs, fingering the plush cushions and being the uncouth orbit-rat she had been before she moved to Nova. But that was the old Mirra. Lifting her chin, she looked

around at Lennox whose lips twitched with a sardonic smile. She spread her arms. “Well, here I am. You’ve got me back to your hotel room. Or should I say, suite. If you’re not planning to have your wicked way with me, what exactly are you planning?”

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Struggling to maintain his cool exterior, Lennox gestured to the living room. “Make yourself comfortable. Are you sure I can’t get you another drink first?” Perhaps it would dull her too-sharp senses, and he’d have half a chance of bargaining his way into a decent deal.

Internally though, Lennox was kicking himself.

When he had gotten that message from his father and Errytt suggested a human girlfriend, he had opened his big mouth without thinking. *Be my fake girlfriend.*

Great idea, genius.

Now he had effectively made her untouchable, which was exactly like waving a red flag in front of his cock. He’d spent the entire night thinking about getting inside her. It was a serious miscalculation, the likes of which he hadn’t made in years. Nothing to do now but play it off and try to ignore the way he was still imagining what it would feel like to kiss her.

“Nah, I’m good,” Mirra said, waving off his offer of a drink.

“Good. I think it’s important for us to hash out all the details of this arrangement now so we know where we stand. Then I’ll draw up a rough contract for you to sign.”

“Sure.” Mirra shrugged. “That sounds smart.”

Right. The pragmatic type. How could he forget? She could have acted at least a little disappointed. Lords, he needed to stop goading her into thinking about it. He couldn’t seem to help it though. The scent of her arousal was a damn drug, and he was already well on the way to being addicted.

“Right. Well, take a seat.” He gestured at one of the seven sofas clustered in the large space. Mirra went to the nearest one and drew up her feet under her after slipping off her heels. He couldn’t help staring. There was something oddly domestic about the action, as if she felt comfortable in the space already. As if she were settling in.

He shook off that image. She wouldn't need to stay here. She'd only need to take some staged vids and message him openly on his socials. The rest could be left up to his father's imagination. The good thing about being in another star system.

He went across to another sofa opposite, stretched out his long legs, and kicked off his shoes. On the journey back, he'd been doing some quick thinking. As well as the decision that he couldn't sleep with her, he'd made a few other mental notes too. He'd never been around a female he found this appealing for any length of time before. Mirra was a complete firecracker. Hot body, devilish sense of humor, with a pragmatic twist to her personality. His initial attraction to her was amplified by the way she had moved against him in the club and the sparks that seemed to fly between them. He had been looking forward to getting her home, getting her under him, and getting her into heat. At which point he could have made sure it would be her begging for him and not the other way around. Then he would have her washed down, packed up and out the door just as the service bots made their first rounds.

Out the door and out of his head.

He shifted a little, trying to adjust himself when his cock gave an enthusiastic twitch just to remind him it was not on board with his rules.

Belatedly, he realized Mirra was politely waiting for him to elaborate. He cleared his throat. "Most importantly, I need content for my socials. Vids, interactions. You need to add me everywhere and send flirty messages."

"No problem." Mirra brought up her holoscreen, her fingers flicking across the screen.

While she added him as contact, he continued. "I propose two dates a week. We go out in public, get seen together, play the part, and take some vids. You catch my drift."

She tipped her head to the side, considering. "One date per week."

Lennox grinned. He had deliberately gone in with two, knowing she would bargain. “Fine. One.” He probably didn’t need to risk seeing her any more than that anyway. He only needed to make it look like he was dating her. Not actually date her. Maybe they could get away with just meeting at his hotel each week.

No, he needed images of them doing date-type activities. It had to be believable.

“I will message you the day before and let you know where to meet me, what to wear, and so on. If you need anything, I’ll transfer some discretionary funds you can use for new clothes and things.”

Mirra inclined her head but didn’t speak.

“On the nights we have our dates, you stay over here. You can sleep in the guest room. I already told you there’s no requirement for you to actually have sex with me. But it will look good for you to be seen leaving here in the morning. I’ll tip off a few videographers and they can film you, so word gets back to my dad and the media back home. Ideally I’d like a few stories to leak so that the family of the female he wants to match me up with gets wind of it too.”

Mirra raised her brows. “Media? Just how rich are you anyway? Are you some kind of celebrity?”

Lennox snorted. “Hardly. But since I hang out with several oligarchs’ sons, and I’m the youngest billionaire in Arrismar, it’s hard to go completely under the radar. Every rich matron and young gold-digger has me in her sights. This will be a good way of having them all back off for a while. So when we end this, we have to end it messily. That way I can pretend to be heartbroken for a good long while afterward and avoid all the fuckery.”

“Have you ever considered that you might actually like one of these girls, if you gave them a chance?”

“No.”

Mirra burst into laughter that surprised him. “I get it. I wouldn’t like to be told who to love either. I guess we have

that in common.” She sat up a little, leaning forward over the arm of the sofa. “When we’re out on these dates, I suppose you want to act the part, then?”

He shrugged. “Of course. It’s a shame that Errytt and his girlfriend know about the arrangement, but I’d prefer to keep it a secret from everyone else.”

“And how much touching is allowed?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if we’re dating, am I supposed to hold your hand? Kiss you? Grab your ass?”

Lennox laughed. “I’m not a hand holder. You can grab my ass if you like, but no kissing. That shouldn’t be necessary.”

Mirra raised her brows. “Not necessary? Do Ximians not kiss?”

“We kiss. I just don’t think *we* will need to kiss to make this work.”

“Fine.” She fell quiet for a moment before looking up at him again. “So you want me to stay over one night a week and go out with you somewhere. We take some vids. I post on socials. You want me to spend your money on new clothes and shoes, and you’ll pay me five hundred a week on top of that? Sounds easy. What’s the catch?”

“Other than that you don’t get to have sex with me?”

She scoffed. “Yeah. I think we covered that. What else?”

He frowned. “I don’t want you to see anyone else while we’re fake dating.”

Mirra narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean you don’t want me to *see* anyone?”

He held back a growl. “I don’t want you to fuck anyone else. Once this takes off like I’m hoping it will, it would be too easy for you to be filmed going home with someone and then my cover’s blown.”

Plus the thought of Mirra spreading those long shapely legs for some other guy made him want to crawl out of his

skin. It didn't matter that she wasn't actually his. The thought of being made to look as big of a fool as his father rankled.

It was Mirra's turn to scowl. "Right. So let me get this straight, you don't want to fuck me, but you don't want anyone else to fuck me either?"

"Is that going to be a problem, gorgeous?"

She leaned back nonchalantly. "No. But I hope your discretionary fund covers a fucking great dildo, because there are some things I won't go without, and regular orgasms are one of them."

Fuck. How was he supposed to keep himself from picturing her fucking herself silly with a monster dildo, her lush juices coating the outside of the shaft as she pumped it in and out of her tight little body with abandon?

Lennox suppressed a groan and shifted in his seat. "No problem. Like I said, get whatever you need."

She grinned. "Great. I'll forward you my review afterward, if you like."

He grit his teeth. "No need."

"So, we're exclusive then. Anything else?"

Lennox held up his hand to signal stop. "What do you mean?"

"I mean are there any other conditions you'd like to place on me?"

"No, I mean what do you mean we're exclusive?"

She scoffed again. "Well, I hope you don't think you get to sleep around if I don't. There's no way I'd date a guy who cheated on me."

"I think you'll find *I'm* paying *you*. Not the other way around."

Mirra just shrugged. "Suit yourself. You're the one who needs the fake girlfriend."

This was becoming way more painful than it needed to be, but the spark in her eyes lit up her pretty face and the quirk of those red lips made him want to stare at them for hours. Damned if he was backing out now.

He sighed. “Fine. I won’t fuck anyone either.” He brought up his wrist-com and entered some notes in a document quickly. “Here. Sign this, and I’ll show you which room you can use tonight.”

She shrugged and got to her feet, coming over to look at his holoscreen. Leaning into him, she made a hasty swipe with her palm and entered her signature. “So what about these vids, then?”

He had them stage a few images of her cuddling up to him with a drink in hand. At the right angle, it looked as if they were out somewhere. It would do for now. Mirra posted and tagged him.

“Happy?”

“Very. Are you?”

She made a face. “No. But since you won’t give me what I really want, I’ll settle.”

Lennox lifted a brow, and the words tumbled out of his mouth before he could call them back. “And what is it you really want?”

Mirra grinned, bracing forward on the back of the sofa until her ass was practically hanging out of her skirt. “A long slow fuck over the back of this sofa would be a good start, but since you said that’s off the table, I guess it’s just me and my hand tonight.” She actually waved a hand in his face. Then she stepped back, gesturing at the rest of the suite. “Lead on, Romeo. Show me this guest room.”

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SEVEN

Mirra sighed as she glanced again at her wrist-com. She was going to be late to meet Lennox for their first date, but Riath had called with a last-minute booking request from one of Mirra's best clients at Club Fantasy. Kyris always tipped well, and he'd been prepared to make a time that worked around her commitments. How could she refuse?

Only tonight, Kyris was feeling chatty. He had patted the arm of the reclining chair where he sat. Mirra dutifully perched there, leaning in so she could see his holoscreen. They were in one of the small private rooms at the back of the club, where hosts and hostesses took clients who paid extra for one-on-one time.

"Come on, this one's a really good one, and those nails still need a minute to dry."

She lifted a hand to inspect the brand new set of false nails he'd just helped her apply, complete with bright red finish. They were pretty fabulous. Kyris always let her choose her favorite color.

"Cyst or pimple?" she asked him.

"Cyst. It's a biggie."

She tapped her chin as she considered. "Five squeezes."

Kyris chuckled. "More."

"Seven."

"More!"

"Ten."

He pressed play. Mirra watched in horrified fascination as on screen, the doctor squeezed puss from a giant, inflamed cyst. Gloved fingers squeezed the skin nine times before puss finally stopped oozing from the wound. It was disgusting, but this wasn't even the main event of their private session.

Kyris sighed with satisfaction as the video finished.

“Where shall I start tonight?” Mirra asked, hoping to wind things to a close. She felt bad rushing Kyris. He was always so sweet to her, but she also didn’t want to be late for the first fake date with Lennox. Not that she was eager to see him. She certainly hadn’t spent every day of the week since they had met thinking about when she’d see him again. That would be ridiculous after the way he’d blown her off.

“You know Adlyn would never do this with me.”

That was the third time he had mentioned his wife tonight. Maybe they’d had an argument. “Are you sure? Have you ever asked her?”

Kyris sighed. “No. She’d tell me I’m disgusting. And I am, aren’t I? But I can’t help it. I just love it.”

Mirra patted his arm, waiting for him to turn and pull off his shirt. “You’re not disgusting. The heart wants what it wants, that’s all.”

“How’s a lovely girl like you still single, hey?”

Mirra held in her scoff. She felt a bit bad now for thinking the pimple-popping videos were so gross. It wasn’t Kyris’s fault. That’s just who he was. It just wasn’t her thing.

“How do you know I haven’t got a boyfriend?”

He leaned forward and she scanned his back. Sure enough, there was a big angry pimple just waiting for her attention. She began squeezing.

“Oh, so you have got a boyfriend, have you? Good for you.” He gave a little grunt as she squeezed another.

Kyris was quiet then, as he usually was. When she was finished, she wiped him with a sterile cloth and patted his shoulder again. “All done.”

He turned with a big smile. “You filmed it?”

She nodded. “I’ll send it now.”

“Thank you, Mirra. You’re a good girl. I hope he makes you very happy.”

She returned his smile, trying to make sure it didn't look brittle and forced. "Thanks, Kyris. You should ask your wife. What's the worst that could happen, right?"

He rubbed a hand over his face then pulled his shirt back on. "I'm not sure that's a good idea."

She walked him to the door. He turned back before stepping out into the main section of the club. "Will I see you again next week?"

"I'd like that, Kyris." Standard response. Use the customer's name, indicate a desire to see them again. She felt a little bad, but it wasn't all a performance where Kyris was concerned. Mirra hoped for his sake he eventually grew brave enough to let down his emotional walls and give his wife the chance to really understand who he was.

She didn't have time to dwell on that thought though. Glancing at her wrist-com she cursed when she saw it was already five minutes past the time she'd agreed to meet Lennox. Why had she ever thought she could squeeze in this client?

Bringing up her holoscreen, she entered a quick message.

Mirra: running late. Be there soon.

Lennox: Your hair looks fine. Remember this isn't real and I don't care. Hurry.

Dick! She couldn't resist shooting back a retort.

Mirra: You were the one who told me to make myself look good. Hope YOUR hair is up to scratch. I do care.

Rushing to the cleaning station, she sterilized her hands and scrubbed under her nails. Then she slipped out of her uniform and into the new body-hugging black dress she had bought on her first shopping trip with Lennox's money. She couldn't help running her hands over the silky fabric. It felt amazing. The way it clung to her hips and ass meant she had to skip underwear. Totally worth it.

She slipped on her new heels and re-applied her lipstick. Pausing in the bathroom to film a tiny snippet from just the

right angle to make her ass look amazing, she grinned to herself. Then she posted to her socials, hastily typing a quick caption: *out for a dinner date with my new obsession. How do I look?*

Flicking off her holoscreen, she darted out the door, giving a quick wave to Riath behind the bar. Seven minutes late and it would take five to walk to the ringrail. Couldn't be helped.

Her com buzzed.

Lennox: Did you pay someone to paint that dress on you? Are you even wearing underwear?

Mirra: I thought you didn't care.

Lennox: I don't.

Lennox: Where are you? I'd never date someone this disorganized.

Mirra: I'd never date someone this grouchy. Calm your crazy. I'll be there in ten.

It would be more like fifteen, but whatever.

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When Mirra spotted Lennox, he looked just as grumpy as she expected. His arms were folded across his broad chest in a way that pulled his lightweight shirt tight over delicious muscles. He had the sleeves rolled up and the collar open, revealing his silver fur. His dark eyes snapped to her as she approached and she felt the weight of his assessing gaze as it traveled over her body. The look was blazing and she chose to believe it held desire rather than anger. Though perhaps it was a little of both.

Mirra lifted her chin and gave a little extra swagger to her steps, swaying her hips as she moved and curving her mouth into a sultry smile. Hopefully desire would win out.

When she finally reached him she slid her hands up his chest, stretched up on her toes and pressed a light, lingering kiss on his cheek, right beside the corner of his mouth. He held perfectly still while she did it, giving nothing. When she pulled back though, he was smiling.

“I should be angry that you clearly have no concept of time, but I can’t be after that little performance. Keep it up and I might just forget about the fact that I’ve been standing here like a fool for twenty minutes.”

Mirra smirked. “The cost of dating someone who looks like me, I’m afraid. This much beauty takes time to achieve.”

“I’m fairly sure you’d look just as good the moment you step out of the shower. Perhaps better. But I will admit you look stunning tonight.” He gestured with a flick of his eyes to his right and she glanced to see a short human woman with her wrist-com raised in a suspicious gesture that looked a lot like she was filming. So the flirting was all for show, then? But there was no way they could be overheard at that distance.

“Shall we go inside? I hope they’ve kept our table.” He turned and led her through the black glass doors of the building and Mirra had only a moment to let his words about how good she looked linger like a caress over her skin before she saw what was beyond the door. The whole facade of La Mer restaurant was coated in a dark reflective surface so that passersby couldn’t see inside. The doors opened, revealing a rushing curtain of water.

She gasped. Would they have to walk through the water to enter the restaurant? Who would design an entry like that?

Lennox chuckled, turning back to see her hesitating. “It’s an illusion.”

“Huh?” Mirra still stared at the water, holding back so her entire outfit didn’t get soaked before they’d even had the entrée. It would show off her body but damn it, she’d spent time on her makeup tonight.

“The water. It’s not real.” He held out his hand, palm up and pushed it under the stream of water. No droplets splashed. The surface of the stream did not change at all. Unable to help herself, Mirra copied his motion, holding her own hand under the water. Sure enough, she felt nothing. The rushing sound of the droplets whooshed in her ears and the light danced off the spray in front of her, but he wasn’t lying.

The whole thing was fake.

A laugh burst from her. How perfect.

She stepped through the hologram and into a space that was just as breathtaking. Lennox followed closely behind and if it weren't for his large palm at the small of her back, Mirra would have frozen in awe just to stare around the enchanting design. Around the walls, enormous tanks held brightly colored fish and vibrant coral. The lights were dim and more holograms on the floor and ceiling made it look like they were walking both on water and beneath it. It was what Mirra imagined it would be like to go diving in the ocean.

Of course, she'd never so much as been swimming in a pool. Nothing that luxurious existed in Fortuna, the orbiting junk-yard where she had grown up. Since moving to Nova Station she'd dreamed of trying so many things she'd never imagined in her old life. This wasn't one she'd known she had wanted to try until now.

Lennox steered her toward a plinth which was actually another tank. Inside a brilliant blue fish with a long orange tail swam in tiny circles, blinking at Mirra through the glass as they came close.

“Good evening.” The maitre d', an Ardun female with pointed cat-like ears and a long tail, wore an elegant blue top with long, loose trousers that looked better than anything Mirra had in her wardrobe, even after going shopping and charging everything to Lennox's account.

“Good evening. I have a reservation.” Lennox swiped his ID over the panel in the plinth and the Ardun nodded.

“Thank you, Mr. Bekkin. Right this way.” She led them to a table situated between two of the largest tanks. The walls of the tanks were rounded, making Mirra's vision swim as she tried to look into its depths. It had the effect of blocking the view of the tables on the other side, even though the tank was clear, leaving patrons with a feeling of being secluded in an underwater grotto.

As Mirra stepped close to the table, a sensor pulled the chair out and tucked it back under her so that she sat with a gasp and a giggle. She looked around at the maitre d', expecting judgment. The female's face was perfectly composed, too disciplined to even react. Everything was so astonishing and so perfect. Mirra surreptitiously soaked in the beauty of her surroundings while trying not to gape like—well, like an orbit-rat on her first trip to a fancy restaurant.

Lennox sat in his seat with a lot more grace than she had managed, the corner of his mouth lifted in a smirk that made her own grin wider. “This place is amazing.”

“I'm glad you approve. Only the best for my girl.” His eyes drifted to the maitre d' still waiting politely by their table, her long brown tail swishing slowly from side to side.

“Can I fetch you some drinks to start, sir?”

“A bottle of your best iresco, please.”

“Very good, sir. Shall I send the menu bot?”

Lennox shook his head. “No. We'll do the degustation.” He turned to Mirra. “As long as you're happy with that, of course, Mirra?”

She nodded, unwilling to admit she had no idea what degustation meant. She was grateful Lennox was taking care of ordering so she wouldn't need to worry about that tonight. No need to look like more of a Ximian in the desert than necessary.

She almost laughed as she pictured the idiom with Lennox as the Ximian. Though in her mind's eye, she imagined him with that sour look on his face, yelling at someone over a vid-call to adjust the climate control.

“Something funny?”

She cleared her throat. “Not really. So you eat at places like this all the time, I guess?”

He smiled. “Nothing quite this unique. I thought La Mer might amuse you. I'm glad I hit the mark.”

“It’s brilliant. I never even knew there were this many types of fish.”

“Surely you still have fish on Earth.”

Mirra shrugged. “Yeah, I guess so. I’ve never been.”

Lennox leaned forward, resting one elbow on the table to study her. Relieved to see the gesture clearly wouldn’t be frowned on, she allowed herself to relax into a more comfortable position too.

She was doing it. She was out, eating in this fancy-as-fuck restaurant and so far she hadn’t made a total ass of herself. As long as they brought out cutlery and food she vaguely recognized, she figured she couldn’t mess up too badly from here.

He smiled. “So where are you from, then? Phithea? I hear the new colony is booming.”

She debated not telling him. She didn’t like to talk about it. That was the old Mirra. She was new, improved, never-looking-back Mirra. But lying about it rankled too.

“Fortuna.”

A service bot hovered in, placing two little plates with the daintiest bread rolls she’d ever seen beside them and a separate dish, even tinier than the first ones, with a little knob of butter on it.

Lennox looked at her thoughtfully. “Fortuna. I’ve heard of it. Where have I heard that name before?”

She snorted. “I doubt it. Hardly a highlight of Earthspace.”

“Where is it?”

Mirra picked up the knife closest to her right hand and cut the roll. It fell open along a seam down the middle as soon as she applied the knife and she took butter from the dish and spread that on. She nearly moaned when she took a bite and a subtle, herby flavor she hadn’t been expecting teased over her tongue along with the richness of the butter and the yeasty taste of the bread. “Ohmigoddess.” She put a hand up to cover her mouth when she realized she’d spoken with it full. “What

the hell did they do to this butter? And why is this the best thing I've ever tasted?"

Lennox's dark eyes lit with amusement. "I take it you don't eat at fine dining restaurants very often."

"You could say that," Mirra said, around another mouthful of bread and butter. "They'd better bring the mains, soon, or I'm going to eat your roll too. I'm starving."

Lennox pushed his bread toward her and she hesitantly reached out to slide the plate in front of her. She paused with her knife above it. "You sure?"

"Absolutely certain." His eyes never seemed to leave her face as she wolfed down the second bread roll. If he thought it was amusing or unladylike to watch her stuff her face though, that was his problem. When you grew up never knowing if there was going to be enough to go around, you didn't turn down good food when it was offered.

By the time the fourth course was delivered, Mirra thought she knew what to expect. But when the service bot put a little round glass cup down in front of her she blinked at it in confusion. Had the thing malfunctioned and served her something that had been taken out of the dishbot before the suds had been rinsed? What was that white stuff?

Lennox pressed the panel on the table and it lit up. Glancing down, he read, "Sea bass with cauliflower and fennel foam and pork lardettes."

"It's what now? Are you still speaking Universal Standard?"

He leaned closer over the table. "It's a little bit wanky, isn't it? I mean, foam... it's not really a food, is it?"

Mirra nearly snorted the foam she'd held to her mouth on the dainty little silver spoon. "Did you just say wanky? Are you even allowed to talk like that in a place like this?"

He laughed. Not the quiet chuckle or the smirk from earlier, but a genuine, hearty laugh that made her insides go all warm. And she was laughing too. She laughed so hard the

foam wobbled off her spoon and onto the table. Her attempt to retrieve it only made Lennox laugh more.

Eventually they stopped laughing and Mirra dabbed at the corners of her eyes with her napkin. “You’re a funny mix of things. I never know what to expect with you. I really thought you’d judge me for being so naïve when it comes to fancy restaurants and all this stuff.”

He shook his head and smiled. “I didn’t grow up rich either. I remember a time when I used to feel like I imagine you’re feeling right now. Like you’ve just been let in on one of life’s secrets and you can’t believe you didn’t know about it before.”

Scooping a bite of the fish into her mouth, she shut her eyes for a moment, savoring every part of the flavor. The feel of the foam in her mouth was surprising at first, but not unpleasant. Contrasted with the little crunch from the pork pieces and the soft, springy flesh of the fish, it was actually pretty damn good. She sighed with pleasure. “I will admit I thought someone was playing a joke on me when the bot brought this out, but it’s really good. Everything is so good.”

Lennox had put his finger on it with his description. This did feel like a whole new world unfurling in front of her just like the hothouse flowers on the food hall level. Sometimes on shopping trips, Mirra’s feet carried her to the flower section without really knowing why. She could spend hours just looking at all the different varieties. Their beautiful and strange shapes and vibrant colors. She never bought them. That was an indulgence even she couldn’t justify to herself. They might last a week or so before wilting and ending in the trash, as if she’d never spent the marks. Like the fish in the surrounding tanks, they were everything she never thought she’d see with her own eyes. Yet here she was.

There was no way she was going back.

Taking another bite of her meal, she made herself chew slowly. “So tell me more about this dirt-poor upbringing then. How does someone become a billionaire anyway?”

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EIGHT

Lennox watched Mirra bring another spoonful of the foam to her lips and suck it from her spoon. Those plump rosy lips wrapping around the metal of the spoon did more things to him than they should have.

Fuck! It had only been a week of being celibate and—what had she asked him again? About his childhood. Anything was better than staring impotently at the mesmerizing vision of her sucking that spoon, so he launched straight in. “Dirt poor is exaggerating. My parents were well off, but not beyond the ordinary. I grew up in an average middle class home in Arrismar.”

Mirra snorted. “Your ordinary is probably my extraordinary, but please continue.”

Okay, that was a comment that deserved unpacking. But perhaps not yet. He needed to remember where he’d heard about Fortuna before. He had a murky understanding that it was a human slum, but could it really be that bad? This was the thirty-first century after all. “I won a scholarship when I was ten, to attend the capitol’s premier boarding school. That’s where all Ximia’s most rich and influential send their children.”

Her eyes widened. “You must have worked hard to win that scholarship.”

He nodded. He allowed himself to think back briefly to that time in his life. It had not been pretty. “I did. There were only two places offered each year. And thousands of applicants. But I wanted it—needed it. My father...” He paused, rubbing a hand over his chin. Then he shook his head. “I needed to get away from my life at home. So I put everything into winning the scholarship, thinking that I’d make a new life for myself. I was determined to make it on my own, so I didn’t have to rely on my parents for anything.”

“You were ten!”

“Yes. But I was determined. And I did it, in a way. I lived mostly at boarding school, as much as I could. For the first few years at least. I didn’t even go home the first winter, just stayed while all the other boarders went home for the holidays. I learned pretty quickly that was a lonely, miserable way to spend a winter. On Ximia, we spend winter staying home, eating, spending time with family, and sleeping late. There are festivals. One to start the winter and one to usher in spring.”

Mirra nodded, quietly pushing away her empty dish when the bot came around, but she did not break the flow of his story. He wished she would, but somehow the words kept tumbling out, and she seemed to absorb them.

“The first year was lonely. After that, I did what I could to fit in. I finally made some friends. And I did the rounds of their families’ homes for a few winters.”

“Errytt?”

He nodded. “Errytt and Aice and Mack. The problem was, they were troublemakers.” He laughed, remembering some of the wild things they had gotten up to. “Always daring each other to do the next outrageous thing. I got caught up in it, of course. Nearly got expelled.”

“What happened?”

“We used to have these mandated cross-country runs every Saturday. One Saturday, we snuck off the path and into the female dorms while they were away on a camp. Stole their underwear. This was the first time the guys really let me tag along. Up until then, I was always the scholarship boy. The one who didn’t really belong. To prove myself, they had me carry all our stolen goods. So of course when we got searched on the way in from our run, I got busted. All the other guys, their parents used to make a big donation to the school every time they fucked up. Or their parents were on the board. So it never mattered. But me...”

“That’s terrible!”

Lennox laughed. The look of outrage on her face made something unfamiliar flutter in his chest. “Errytt figured out

what happened when I came back to the dorm in a foul mood. He pestered me until I told him what the principal had said. That I'd only get one chance. Every other time, if I got caught, he used to take the fall for me. The damn fool ended up nearly getting himself expelled despite his dad's money. But that's Errytt for you. Generous to a fault."

The rest of their main dishes came and went. Mirra listened, and he just kept talking, unloading things he'd never told anyone else. It felt good. Too good. When was the last time he'd ever actually talked to a female about anything other than fucking? He couldn't remember. His life was organized rigidly around the rules he had made for his own protection. Here he was getting sucked into complacency so easily.

He pushed away the last of his desert and shook his head. "Enough about me. What about you? Don't think I've forgotten to ask about Fortuna."

Mirra scraped her spoon around the edge of her dish. "Is that really what you want to talk about? There are a hundred things I could think about that are more interesting."

There it was. The evasive dancing around the truth. He had been expecting it.

Lennox was about to probe, just to prove to himself that he was right. She was avoiding answering him honestly. He opened his mouth to ask, but Mirra gasped, her eyes darting to focus on something just beyond his right shoulder.

"Oh, wow." She got up from her chair, eyes still fixed on the tank behind him. Despite himself he turned. Floating just on the other side of the glass was a large gray manatee. Its heavy-jowled face held a comically serious expression as it regarded them. Mirra rounded the table, pressing her palms to the glass and staring in unabashed wonder. "Oh, my goddess." The manatee drifted to the right, its large eye swiveling to find Mirra. She made a little squeak of excitement, bouncing up and down on her toes. "It's looking at me."

It wasn't the sight of the fish which caught his attention though. It was Mirra. Lennox couldn't take his eyes from her.

She was beautiful, of course. But the rapture on her face and the smile on those pretty lips. That was something else.

He stood and stepped close, longing to put his hands on her. He remembered the first night at Eclipse, that spark which had built between them and never discharged. It had been a mistake not to fuck her then. To get her out of his system. He'd never been in this situation before. Where he had wanted a female, but not had her and continued to see her. He'd never been forced to wonder what if.

Mirra reached out and took his hand, snapping him out of his spiraling thoughts. Lords, she practically glowed with energy. How jaded had he become that he wasn't the one standing there at the tank, face almost pressed against the glass thanking the heavens just to be where he was?

He needed to bask in her energy, her vivacity, let it recharge the side of him he had buried under work and ambition. Otherwise, what was the point?

She turned to him, turned that bright smile on him. He had moved so close that she had to tip her head back to look up at him and that laid out those lips for him like an invitation.

He couldn't.

Leaning in, he let his own lips graze the shell of her ear so he could feel her tremble. "Just remember, this isn't real." Was he telling her or telling himself? It didn't matter. It had the desired effect. She stiffened, losing a little of that captivating wonder.

Damn it. He wanted to nurse it back to life again. He couldn't be the one who crushed it. Not tonight. Balling his fists at his sides, he forced a smile. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

She smiled. "I kinda thought you'd say ugly, but I agree. I think it's beautiful. So serene."

Lennox scrubbed a hand over his face. He had to focus. They'd almost finished their meal, and he hadn't taken a single vid or posted anything. It had been too easy to slip into conversation, to enjoy her company. His arm seemed heavy as

he brought up his wrist-com and opened his holoscreen to take the vid.

Another long moment passed. Then the manatee turned and disappeared into the curve of the tank. Mirra let out a long sigh, and he wanted nothing more than to gather her into his arms.

“Shall we get the bill and walk back to the Aphelion?” By the nine, don’t think about taking her back to the hotel. Not like that. It’s just part of the arrangement. You’re only extracting a payment. Nothing more.

He turned away, touching the panel to bring up the bill. He swiped his ID without even really looking. Then he led her outside. If only they could really step outside, into the bracing fall air of an Arrismar evening. Everywhere on this damned space station was so fucking hot. He could suffocate it was so hot.

Mirra slipped her arm into his and leaned her head on his shoulder. The thundering of his heart slowed and the oppressive heat seemed to ease. He should have taken another vid, posted something to his socials to propel the myth he was supposed to be creating about dating her. After all, that was what he was paying her for, wasn’t it?

Only he didn’t. Instead he savored the feel of her walking with him. He enjoyed the scent of clover and sunshine that teased his nostrils when her hair tickled the fur on his arm. As if he could actually allow himself the luxury of falling for someone.

It was dangerous. It was fucking stupid, but he did it anyway.

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Having Mirra as a fake girlfriend was like stepping into someone else’s life. He’d had this feeling once before in his life. The day he’d started at Hagslaw Preparatory. Walking into the grand building with all the students in their tailored uniforms, attending individually paced VR lessons and then being put through his paces in the first of the ancient fitness

assessments that would form a background constant of his school life. The school dinners had been prepared by hand from fresh ingredients. The furniture that was nicer than anything in his home. All of it amazed him and yet was invisible to his rich classmates.

This time Lennox felt as if he was getting a taste of something even more seductive. An imagined world where you could believe in true love and fate, and all that crap he knew didn't really exist.

He was walking Mirra back from their second date—fake date—at another fancy restaurant where he had devoured her with his eyes while she moaned over the delicate tapas dishes the bot brought out one by one and dazzled him with easy, charming conversation.

It seemed far too real in those moments as he scanned his ID and ushered Mirra into the hotel suite. He cleared his throat. “We should take a few more vids. Post to socials.”

Mirra nodded. “Where would you like me?”

“In my bed.” Was it him, or had that come out rough and raspy as if he was picturing more than staged vids.

He followed her to the bedroom, trying to tell himself his heart was not actually beating faster. It was just his imagination. Mirra stood in front of the bed, watching him with a little smile playing at the corner of her mouth. “What did you have in mind?”

Pushing apart those naked thighs and tasting that sweet honey for myself. Coming over those perfect tits until you can't think for wanting my knot.

All things he would have said to any other woman standing there looking at him like that in his bedroom. Not to Mirra. He couldn't say those things to Mirra.

“You need to look well fucked.”

Mirra raised one brow. “Know anyone who could help with that?”

Yes. No!

“Weren’t you talking about purchasing something to take care of that?” *Do not picture her using the dildo. You don’t even know if she bought a dildo. She probably already has one.*

Fuck!

His brain must have short-circuited. Lennox could swear that Mirra was lifting the hem of that dress as if—

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

Mirra slipped the dress over her head and tossed it over a sofa chair that stood beside the bed. She wasn’t even wearing panties. Just a red item that was more lace than bra. The choked noise he made in the back of his throat when the beauty of her form hit him right in the sternum made her pause. Arms behind her, reaching for the fastener of her bra, she blinked at him so innocently he could have sworn she was for real.

“Something wrong?”

“We’re not filming a porno.”

“I didn’t pack an overnight bag.” She held out her hand, fingers making a clutching motion. “Gimme your shirt.”

Anything to cover that picture of temptation. Lennox stripped off his shirt with lightning speed and tossed it at her. She caught it, sniffed it and made an appreciative noise that should not have ignited a warm feeling in his chest right about the place his heart should be. She pulled it on, doing up enough buttons to make her halfway decent. More was the pity. Except the image she made now with his shirt halfway down her thighs, gaping open in the front only heightened that feeling he wasn’t going to name.

Lennox had never before loaned a girl his shirt. He was beginning to think he was going to have to add it to the list of banned actions. He liked it far too much. She smelled of him now. Of both of them combined, almost as if they’d already—

Mirra jumped up onto the bed, sprawling backward and letting the hem of the shirt ride up too high for comfort.

“Come on then.” She patted the mattress beside her. “Let’s do this.”

Swallowing thickly, Lennox let his body take him across the room, giving in to the pull of gravity she seemed to exert over him. He crawled onto the bed and lay stiffly at her side, staring up at the ceiling. By the nine, why had he thought he could do this? Every fiber of his being itched from the inside out to roll on top of her and really do the job properly.

Mirra sat and he glanced at her. She pushed her hands into the back of her rich, brown hair, mussing the waves. Then she flopped back down beside him. “I’ll start.”

She held up her hand, holoscreen activated and already showing an image of them lying together. She shuffled closer, twisting to sling a leg over his. He lay completely still, telling himself not to think about the fact that she still wasn’t wearing any panties.

“Aren’t you going to put your arm around me or something? Anyone would think you’d never done this before.”

“I haven’t.”

She shot back up and stared down at him, wide eyed. “Wait, what? Have you been bluffing this whole time? Are you a—”

“I’m not a virgin.” He hadn’t really needed to snarl that. He took a breath and said more calmly, “I’ve never been into cuddles in bed, or any of that cute couple shit. I told you. I don’t do girlfriends.”

Mirra shook her head, but she snuggled back in and curled against him like an askij, a ferret-like creature commonly kept as pets back on Ximia. She even pulled his arm out from his side and sort of tucked herself into his embrace. Lennox reluctantly let his hand fall into the dip of her waist. Instantly he regretted it. Too late to pull back now. That would only let her see what kind of reaction she was drawing out of him.

Mirra held up her hand with her holoscreen again. As the vid rolled, she leaned in and placed a playful kiss at the side of

his mouth just like she had done outside La Mer on their first date.

Holy hells.

When she had done it then, he'd been momentarily so stunned she had darted away before he'd had a chance to do what he really wanted to do. Now, he already had his arm around her, so he had no trouble tightening his hold, turning his face and taking the kiss he so badly wanted.

Her lips were cooler than his own—his body ran hot like all Ximians—but they instantly parted with such heat and passion it sent shivers of electricity right down his spine. Groaning he flipped them, nudging between her legs until he could nestle right into that sweet juncture.

Her legs spread wider, inviting him in. Mirra's arms strayed over his shoulders, her fingers pushing into his hair.

Her tongue slicked against his, her breath sweet and mouth inviting. He tasted her, felt the haze of pleasure eroding all the boundaries he had placed on his actions, eroding his senses.

His cock thickened between them, and she moaned, rocking her hips. Her legs wrapped around him, urging him closer. He could only obey. He ground down against her pussy, the hem of the shirt pushed up by a wandering hand. Now the only barrier between them was his damn trousers. They had to go.

It was when her hand joined his, tugging at the fastening of his belt that he halted.

What was he doing? He pressed his eyes closed and tried to breathe through the throbbing awareness that centered in his cock but permeated out to the rest of his body.

Mirra paused too. Her hand stroked over his hair, the gesture soothing. "Lennox, I like you. I can't believe it sometimes, but I actually like you. I know you have some crazy rule, but if you're worried things will get weird. They won't. We could just be friends. With benefits. I'm not expecting any commitment, but there's chemistry here, and I know you feel it too."

He paused. No way to hide his reaction now. It pressed heavily against her, right at the place he longed to drive it home.

It took a lot to get a Ximian hard. Which was good, because it also took a lot to get soft again. He could come many times without losing an erection. It took either a very long time or a good knotting. His knot would only swell once he sank his teeth and cock into a willing female.

Mirra had him worked up alright. She had done from the moment he'd spotted her in that club the night they met. It was no wonder he had reacted this way to the feel of her under him.

Mirra spoke, jolting him back into the moment. "Hey, it's not like you'd have to pay extra or anything."

"What?"

She laughed. "Not like I'd charge you."

He froze. His whole body went rigid. She thought he was worried about paying her. "You're not my damn whore, Mirra."

She bristled. "I know that. That's what I said. And even if I was a whore, would that be so fucking bad?" With an angry little huff she pushed at his chest, though he was too heavy for her to move. She growled. The sound was adorable, but that only pissed him off more.

"I don't share, Mirra. And I don't buy whores."

Another angry growl. "Oh what, you're too good for that or something? Goddess you're a pig. Get off me!"

This time, Lennox let her shove him away. She scrambled off the bed, storming across the room. At the door, she paused and looked back. Her hair was still all mussed—more so now. She still wore his shirt; the collar gaping open and threatening to reveal the lacy red bra beneath it. She glared at him. "You might think you're better than me because you're rich, or smart or because you've got a pole up your ass or whatever, but all bodies freeze the same in space, you pompous ass. Even billionaires. We all go out the airlock in the end."

She stormed out of the room, slammed a hand down over the panel to close the door, and disappeared from view. A second later, the door opened again and she shook an angry finger in his direction. “And yes, that was a fucking metaphor, because I know only orbit-rats end up in space, but the point is the same.”

This time when she stormed out, Lennox was left with a hard, aching dick, and a jumble of unpleasant emotions battling each other to get one over on him. This. This was the reason he had made the rules in the first place. So no female could get under his skin and fuck with his head.

Well, it was too damn late now.

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NINE

Great. Date night. Mirra tugged the neckline of her teal blue dress down just a fraction and took the vid. At least she looked good tonight. Her hair was up, a few ringlets escaping the loose chignon she'd done at the back of her neck. Her lipstick was bright and her heels were high, making her legs look amazing. She should be looking forward to tonight. Yet although she was growing far too addicted to the fancy restaurants and live entertainment, she wasn't looking forward to another awkward night with Lennox.

He barely said five words to her last week. The week before hadn't been much better. During the first date after their heated argument in his hotel, she seethed. But her anger burned hot and fast. Now, she could barely remember what she'd been mad about in the first place. Apparently Lennox was the type who liked to brood.

A message from her sister, Dinah, made her stomach tighten.

Dinah: Any chance you can spare another 100 this week, Mir? Things have been tight this month. Ma and Da told me not to ask, but you know how they are.

She frowned. She'd already sent through half her pay from the Pinnacle last month. The air filters in their pod had gone and they'd been running low on water and synth tablets. She'd thought things would be better for them all when she left home. Without another mouth to feed, money should have stretched further. Then her father had hurt himself on a dangerous scrap job and things had gotten real tight, real quick. She shouldn't have spent Lennox's marks on the new dress. She should have worn the old one and sent those home, too. It was too easy to forget how hard life was back on Fortuna when she was surrounded with just about everything she'd ever wanted. She had to stop sulking and focus on the reasons she'd taken the gig as Lennox's fake girlfriend: getting her family off Fortuna.

Flicking the vid up on her socials, she posted her usual predate message: *hot date tonight. Hope he likes my new dress.*

Moments later, a notification appeared that Lennox had seen her post. Then nothing. A full three minutes passed. Still nothing. Yeah, that's right. He thought she wasn't good enough for him. Mister big-shot billionaire clearly regretted his choice of an orbit-rat for a fake girlfriend.

Back to fuming, she opened her private messages and shot one to Lennox before she stopped to think about it.

Mirra: *Good enough to look but not for you to comment on? Or maybe it's too slutty?*

Stomping to the other side of the room she placed her glass in the dishbot. She was going to be late again. She'd probably pissed him off. Then she'd turn up late and he'd cancel the arrangement and find someone better. Someone he wouldn't be ashamed of. She hadn't even told him about her job at Club Fantasy. The job she'd secretly hung onto, knowing she'd eventually do something to fuck this up. If he thought she was acting like a whore now, imagine what he'd think of her when he found out about that.

Not that she cared. He could get spaced. There was nothing wrong with using your body just like any other talent or possession to make money if that's what you wanted to do. Just because she didn't want to work at Club Fantasy forever, didn't make it a bad place. It didn't make any of the hosts or hostesses worth any less than any other type of folks.

She had to care though, didn't she? She needed those marks.

Her wrist-com buzzed. A private message.

Lennox: *You look gorgeous. You always look gorgeous and you know it. I'm sorry. I told you I'm no good at this boyfriend stuff.*

Mirra stumbled backward and sat on the tiny gray sofa which squeaked under her. An apology? From Mr. Billionaire-A-Hole! He was writing something else.

Lennox: Where are you? Are you running late again? Let me pick you up.

She was, of course. She was also not ready for him to see her shitty little apartment. His compliment had almost been enough to make her look forward to seeing him again. No way she wanted to go back to feeling small and cheap.

Mirra: It's fine. I'm on my way.

Lennox: Come on. Let me pick you up. I want an excuse to show off my new toy anyway.

Okay, she would bite. She was too curious now not to.

Mirra: Fine. I'll meet you outside railstation 7a

Lennox: Done. Be there in 5

She hurried out of the apartment and down the two blocks to the station, looking around to spot him as she got closer. A flash of movement to her right caught her eye and she looked around.

Lennox balanced on a sleek silver hoverboard speeding across the open walkway. People around him glared or darted out of his way, but he just grinned, kicking the board to a stop in front of her and flicking the longer lock of hair from his eyes. He hopped down from the board and stepped close so she had to look up at him even with her extra height from the shoes. She'd still have to stretch to reach his mouth.

She glanced away, looking over at the hoverboard to stop herself picturing the kiss they'd shared in his hotel. The kiss he had ended.

“I didn't think hoverboards were allowed on Nova.”

He grinned. “There's no rule against them. Not yet, anyway.”

She laughed.

“Want to try it out?”

Now it was Mirra's turn to grin. “Abso-fucking-lutely.”

He put his hands at her hips as she stepped onto the board. She tested her weight and balance against the built-in stabilizers. It felt wobbly and precarious. Automatically she put her hands over his as he stepped up behind her. The board was big enough to accommodate both of them, but they had to stand close. So close he was pressed behind her, his larger body molding against hers as he bent slightly, keeping his hold on her.

The exhilarating feeling of being this close to him again ramped up all the unfulfilled hunger simmering since that night two and a half weeks ago. It had her pussy tingling and the breath rising high in her lungs.

Then he took off.

If she thought he would start off nice and gentle, she quickly reassessed that idea. Lennox kicked the board into motion, pulled her firmly against his body and used his own motion to guide her, keeping her steady. They swooshed down an open lane and around a bend into a narrow alley. The walls rushed past so fast she couldn't make out individual signs and images. Gasping with delight she moved with him as he rounded another corner. Narrowly they missed a pair of middle-aged ladies wearing stiff business gear, who shouted after them.

“Good, huh?”

“Ohmigoddess! This is great!”

A laugh bubbled from her as he righted the board again and zoomed down a straight stretch between tall gray apartment buildings. “Where did you get this thing?”

Her hair tugged loose from the chignon, her dress flapped against her thighs. She didn't care at all.

“Errytt.” His low voice rumbled against her ear and sent a shiver down her spine. She might have known Cassie's boyfriend had something to do with this. The business he had started was a company that fitted out modified racers. Of course he'd supplied the semi-illegal hoverboard.

“What else can it do?”

His grip on her hips tightened. “Let me show you!”

By the time he slowed and brought the board to a stop back at the ringrail station, all she could think about were his large hands on her and the way he made her feel giddy when he actually let down his walls and let himself have fun. A fun guy was there underneath all the bullshit, she just knew it. That was the real Lennox, if only he’d just let loose. He stepped down, then held her hand to guide her off. He kept hold of it as he stood facing her. “Mirra...”

“Mhm.” She tipped her chin up, her gaze drifting to his lips, which she knew were as commanding as they looked, but they also held a secret softness.

“I’m sorry... about the other night.” He sighed, brushing the hair that had fallen over his eyes out of the way again. “This is hard for me. But I never meant to make you feel... less.”

Oh. A strange flutter in her chest accompanied a melting of any residual anger until there was nothing but the awareness of where their hands touched and where their bodies did not.

“I know you’ve been angry with me—”

“I thought you were angry with me! You were the one acting all huffy.”

He frowned. “I was never angry with you, Mirra.” He sighed. “It’s hard to explain.”

He paused, looking like he was thinking quite hard.

Mirra said, “Listen, I don’t want things to be weird between us. Like I said. But I—”

A buzz from Lennox’s wrist-com made him flick down his eyes and he cursed. “It’s my dad. He’ll call back later.” He swiped to dismiss the call and inched closer. “You were saying?”

His dark eyes held hers and she tried to find the right words to explain how she was feeling. Lennox was infuriating. He blew hot and cold and always left her off balance. But the hot parts were really fucking hot. She so badly wanted to

explore them. Would he let her? “Lennox, I’d really like to see what—”

With a huff of irritation, he glanced down at his com again. “Let me just see what he wants.”

Was he dodging again? She might have thought so, except that he answered the vid-call still standing right next to her. “Dad. You have the worst timing. What is it that couldn’t wait?”

The image of an older male appeared on Lennox’s holoscreen. His hair was straight and fell over his eyes in the same style as his son’s, which made Mirra smile. Lennox’s father sported a short beard and lines around his eyes and mouth suggested he might have more tendency to laugh and smile than Lennox. He frowned. “Sorry, son. Am I interrupting something?”

“Yes. As a matter of fact, you are. Come on, Dad. What is it?”

The older male sighed. Mirra felt a bit sorry for him. Clearly it wasn’t just her getting the snappy treatment. “I’ve been trying to reach you about that match I messaged you about earlier this month. I really think this would be good for you. At least agree to meet the girl. She’s a very nice girl—”

Lennox cut in before his father could finish. “Dad. I told you. I’m not interested. In fact, I can’t take the match. I’ve met someone.”

The weariness seemed to lift from Lennox’s father’s face when he said the last three words. His eyes widened and his head lifted a little. “You have?”

Poor guy. He was so ready to believe it.

Lennox pulled her in against his body so she’d be visible on his cam. “This is Mirra. It’s actually her you’re interrupting. I’m just about to take her out to see a show.”

Lennox’s father’s eyes practically burst out of his head and his smile stretched across his face. “Mirra? So lovely to meet you. Lennox, you never said. How long have you been seeing

each other?" He didn't seem the least bit fazed she was human. A point in his favor.

Lennox looked over at her and Mirra smiled brightly at him, all the while feeling a little ashamed of the part she was about to play in deceiving his father. He was so damn excited. "We met online a few months ago."

"Mirra, you're the first female Lennox has ever introduced to his family."

Lennox muttered something under his breath. His father went on brightly, "I have to tell you, I've been ready to give up on Lennox ever finding love by himself. Lennox, you don't know how happy this makes me. This is serious, isn't it?"

Lennox shifted uncomfortably. "Uh, yeah."

His dad was practically hopping with excitement. The cam on his wrist-com jostled, making the vid hard to look at. "She's really it! Listen, I'm sorry to interrupt your date. I'll let you two get back to it. I'd hate you to miss your show."

"Yeah, thanks, Dad." Lennox was already reaching for the button to end the call.

His father leaned closer to the cam. "Hey, I'll call you later. In fact, no! No. This is more than that. I'm coming out there. I'll call off the match. The Draigrs will understand."

"Shit." Lennox cursed quietly and his hand tightened around Mirra. "Dad. Don't come all the way out here. Don't be ridiculous."

"No, no. I'm coming. This is a big deal, son. Mirra. Lovely to meet you. I will be there to meet you in person as soon as I can manage it."

The call ended. "Fuck!" Lennox released her and pushed a hand through his hair, storming away only to spin and come back. "Fuck! Now he's coming out here."

"It's fine." Mirra held up her hands, sliding them along his furry arms. "We just keep faking, right? He'll never know."

"He'll know."

“He won’t know. How will he know?”

“You don’t understand. He thinks...” He paused. “He thinks we’ve bonded.”

“Bonded?”

He pulled away and she let him, going with him to sit on a bench beneath a large street tree. Lennox leaned his forearms on his legs, leaning forward to stare at the ground in front of him. “Ximian males can get very attached very quickly. We bond to a female and when we do things get very serious. He thinks that’s what this is.”

She frowned. “Isn’t that what you wanted him to think?”

He blinked over at her. “Yes.”

This time when she put her hand over his, he didn’t pull away. “Then congratulations. All we have to do is give him a show while he visits and you’ve accomplished what you set out to. He’s already said he’s calling off the match.”

Lennox nodded. “You’re right. But he’ll expect...”

“What? Affection? I already agreed to grab your ass, right?”

He didn’t even crack a smile at her joke. “He’ll expect you to be staying with me. With us. He’ll be coming to stay in that hotel suite, and he’ll expect you to be there too. He’s coming so he can give me his blessing to mate you, I know it.”

Beneath the surface, Mirra’s heart sped up and she had to fight not to squeeze his hand. That term held more weight than it seemed. That was the way Errytt referred to Cass. His mate.

It was fake. It was only fake, and it was part of the agreement. They’d just found a happy, comfortable space again after the last time she’d gotten over enthusiastic and said too much, pushed too hard. She needed to back off, do what he wanted and collect that money. Her stupid thoughtless questions from before the vid-call dried up in her throat and she pushed them away. Forget it. He’d only put the walls right back up again the moment she got anywhere near something real anyway.

So she smiled. “That’s fine. Not a problem. Just tell me what you need me to do.”

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Lennox paced in the center of the living room, running a hand through his already tousled hair. “You’re sure you’re alright with this?”

Mirra nodded, her smile bright, her posture relaxed. She was cool as icy mountain air. It was only him freaking out. His father would arrive in less than half an hour. Maybe they should go over the arrangement one more time. “You clear about the expectations?”

Mirra chuckled. “Yes. I’m all clear.” She had arrived only ten minutes ago, but already she had changed into lilac yoga pants and a little cropped top that let him see exactly what the tight pants did for her perky ass. Luckily she was sitting right now, so he didn’t have to try to keep his mind off how much he longed to reach out and squeeze it. She had settled on the sofa looking completely at ease, while he continued struggling with anxiety that rose in his chest like a tight band of pressure. He wasn’t actually nervous about her meeting his father. This wasn’t real!

He cleared his throat. “We sleep in the same room. We put on a show for Dad while he’s around, but no kissing. No sex.”

Mirra rolled her eyes. “Lennox. I got it. Trust me. I’m not going to be molesting you in your sleep. You’re safe, okay?”

He grimaced. Could he say the same? All he’d done since they’d modified the terms of their contract was imagine having her in his bed all night. Imagined what she might wear as she slipped under the sheets beside him. He usually slept naked. He’d have to find something to put on. To be honest, he’d have to put on every pair of pants he owned to create a barrier thick enough to stop his cock from making the biggest fucking bulge she’d ever seen in the front of whatever he was wearing if she was in his bed.

A growl threatened to rise in his chest. He squashed it down. “Okay, sorry. I guess I’m a little anxious.”

Her eyes widened. Abruptly she untucked her legs and stood, coming toward him. She paused, standing close but not quite touching him. Her hands fluttered up as if she wanted to though. “Hey. We’ve got this. It’s only going to be a couple weeks, right?”

He nodded. Why hadn’t she touched him? Did she think he would mind?

She gave him a lopsided little smile that made his chest tighten with sweetness. Then saying nothing else, she turned and walked toward the kitchen. Lennox sighed. This whole situation was making him crazy. It was just the idea of having someone else in his space for so long. With no way to really let off steam. It had been weeks since he’d had sex. Jerking into his hand was never a good option. Once his body got that worked up, he needed to trigger his knot to release the buildup. He should have argued harder about her stupid rule about not hooking up with another female. Trouble was, he absolutely could not stand the thought of Mirra being with any other male. Not while she was his. Even if it was in name only.

So he was abiding by the rule. For now. If there was one thing Lennox was good at, it was rules. There had to be a loophole. If there was though, he hadn’t thought of it yet.

A buzz from his wrist-com came at the exact moment the ping from the internal computer sounded, letting him know someone was requesting entry to the penthouse suite.

“Fuck! That’s him now.”

Mirra handed him a shot glass. “Drink.”

Lennox eyed her. She held out the glass until he took it. Throwing it back, he let the familiar burn replace the anxious feeling. Mirra threw back her own shot and took the glass from his hand. “Go let him in. I’m not going anywhere.”

Pushing his shoulders back, Lennox walked to the wall panel and opened the entry request. Sure enough, the cam showed his father standing in the foyer of the hotel with the concierge at the front desk. “Mr. Bekkin, I believe you were expecting a visitor. Shall I give him access?”

“Yeah.” Lennox’s throat was dry and raspy.

His father grinned, oblivious. “On my way up, son. Can’t wait to see you both.”

Lennox forced a smile until the cam flicked off, then he cast a nervous glance back at Mirra. In his bedroom, she was stowing her bag in the closet and putting her things out around the room. He stared as she draped a big fluffy bathrobe over the hook on the back of the door. She turned. “What? I get cold cause you insist on having the climate control set to freezing all the time. I figured I’d be more comfortable this way.”

The bright pink bathrobe was possibly the ugliest garment he’d ever seen. It would cover her from neck to ankle. He was sorely tempted to insist she throw it in the trash.

At that moment, the door to the suite whooshed open and he turned to see his father stride in, throwing his arms open wide. “Lennox. Got a hug for your old man?”

His father pulled him into a hug before he could even respond, tousling his hair in the way he hated. He pulled away, smoothing it back, and glanced over at Mirra. She watched them with a broad smile on her pretty face. As he looked around, she came over.

“Mr. Bekkin. It’s so nice to meet you. Lennox hasn’t told me much about his life back on Ximia. Do you think he’s shy?”

His father grinned at her and pulled her into a hug that went on a few beats too long. He was making it awkward. Lennox was about to snarl at his father, when he released Mirra. “You don’t have to be so formal with me, Mirra. Call me Aedard.”

“Oh, thank you. Lennox and I were just about to open a bottle of iresco. Would you like a drink? Have you eaten?”

Lennox watched as Mirra smiled and led his father over to the kitchen and served him a drink, chatting with him about lords knew what. His father seemed completely captivated by whatever Mirra was saying. He was nodding and smiling like

one of the little delfir flowers that grew on the grasslands back home turning toward the sun. She glanced over and directed some of that sunshine his way. He had to fist his hands at his side to keep from grinning back when his whole body heated under the force of it.

It was fake. Just like all of this. Why couldn't he remember that? Maybe because she did everything with such vigor it felt genuine, even when it wasn't. It couldn't be that Mirra only ever did things she really wanted to do because that would mean on some level it was real.

Shaking himself out of that black hole of trouble, he strode over to accept the glass of iresco she held out for him. Lords, how long until he could shove his father down the hall into the guest bedroom and close the door of his own bedroom and have Mirra all to himself again? All night. In his bed.

He glanced over at his father who was waiting expectantly as if he had just asked him a question. "Huh?"

His dad's eyes flicked across to Mirra and he smirked. Since when did his father start smirking? He couldn't help feeling like he had lost control of the situation.

"I asked how long you're planning to stay here in Edgespace, Lennox."

He rubbed his chin. He hadn't originally planned for this trip to be a long one. He had cleared his schedule for a few weeks to give him time to tackle Errytt's problem. Since he'd only just convinced his friend to speak to him again, he'd actually been working. He had found it surprisingly convenient to conduct business from Nova, given how easy it was to access human legal advice and do business in this part of the five systems.

"Well, I've actually got some business here which will take at least a few more weeks to wrap up," he said. In fact, he'd begun the process of a business acquisition he never would have accomplished from home. All sorts of red tape existed for Ximians trying to do business in Earthspace, but human officials were so much more willing to open doors when you

used human legal representatives and Earthspace-based banking. A useful thing to know.

Belatedly realizing he should factor Mirra into the picture, he added, “And of course now that I’ve met Mirra face to face, I’m not in any rush to return to Ximia.”

His father gave him a knowing smile that he tried to feel good about. It was what he was aiming for after all.

They sat in the living room with their drinks, Lennox and Mirra on one sofa, and his father on one opposite them. Mirra’s cold toes found their way under his thigh as she squirmed a little closer, still holding her drink. When he glanced over in surprise, she wriggled them and grinned at him until he set down his drink and took one slim foot in his large hands. The unabashed moan she let out when he made a fumbling attempt to massage some warmth back into her icy foot made his cock twitch. He shifted uncomfortably, but it was too late to back out now. His father was watching with undisguised interest.

She kept doing it too. Each time he rubbed a thumb up the arch of her sole or the ball of her foot, she sighed or hummed in her throat until he was definitely hard and very distracted.

“Huh?” He looked up to find his father making that irritating smirk again.

“You seem tired. All I’ve done all day is relax in the cruiser, but I’m sure you and Mirra are keen to get to bed.”

Was it his imagination or was there a flicker of amusement in his father’s usually serious eyes as he said the word ‘bed’?

“No, don’t be silly—” Mirra waved away his father’s suggestion.

Lennox dropped her foot and stood quickly, pulling her to her feet. “Actually yes. I’ve had a long day with lots of vid-calls. If it’s all the same to you, I’ll show you the guest room now, and we’ll head to bed.”

He wasn’t even looking at his father as he said it. He was too focused on the way Mirra’s mouth parted into a little o of surprise and the way she stumbled against his chest when he

dragged her up. She clung to his shirt for a moment longer than necessary before stepping back and collecting the glasses.

“I imagine it’s down this hall somewhere, is it?” His father was already walking in the right direction.

“Yes. That’s right. Do you need anything?”

“Oh no. Don’t worry about me. You won’t even know I’m here. I’ll see you both in the morning.”

The door closed behind his father and Mirra snorted with laughter.

“What? What is so funny?” He glared at her.

“Well, now he thinks you couldn’t wait to get rid of him so you could get your hands on me, doesn’t he?”

He blinked down at her stupidly. Fuck. It was true, wasn’t it? That was definitely what his father was thinking. Hadn’t he been thinking the very same thing?

“Too bad you’re a terrible actor, or we could give him a bit of a show.”

His throat felt thick as he swallowed. His cock gave another twitch. “What do you mean?”

In answer, Mirra giggled loudly. “Lennox! Your father will hear. Stop that!”

He froze as his cock jumped against the fastening of his pants. Lords, that sound. The worst part about it was that it was a fucking brilliant idea. Only, how in all the mythic hells was he supposed to carry through with it without setting himself up for a sleepless night of torture?

Apparently she wasn’t finished. Mirra gasped, giggled again, and then let out a long moan. “Oh baby, that’s not fair. You know I love it when you do that.”

Fuuuuuck!

This had to stop. If he didn’t put an end to her little performance, he’d be hard and aching for hours. Acting on instinct, he snatched her into his arms and stormed toward the bedroom. “Enough.”

Okay there had been a growl at the end of that word and yes, he should not have done it. Mirra shrieked and clung to the shirt at his back. He had made the mistake of putting her over his shoulder and as his growl took effect, he felt the shiver run through her and then he almost stumbled. The force of her arousal scent hit him through the thin layer of her stretchy yoga pants with her pussy that close to his face. He growled again before he could force it down. His cock throbbed against his pants. Any hope of containing his own excitement was a lost cause.

Mirra moaned and clutched handfuls of his shirt. Another wave of scent.

By the nine, she was so receptive to it. How easy she would be to growl into a puddle of blissful submission. The idea of her flushed and dazed with pleasure had his claws tightening on her ass. He reached the bedroom and tossed her onto the large bed. She let out another long moan. This time he wasn't sure if it was part of the performance, or if it was a result of his reckless growling.

“That’s enough, Mirra.”

She blinked up at him, a little smirk telling him she was doing it deliberately. There was nothing fake about her arousal though. She couldn't fake that reaction to him. There was also nothing fake about the enormous tent in the front of his trousers where her eyes dropped a moment later. Her smirk stretched into a self-satisfied grin. She flicked her gaze back to his face, licking her lips slowly. He didn't know if he wanted to wrap his fist around her throat and wipe the smile off her face, or bury his face between her thighs and do it that way.

Breathing hard, he turned and tore off his shirt. “If he knows what’s good for him, he’ll have earplugs in by now. You can give it a rest.”

When he turned back she was pouting up at him. “If you say so. I’m sure we could find other things to do. Something more substantial than a little teasing.” Her eyes had dropped again to the bulge in his trousers.

He sighed, flinging himself onto his side of the bed and rolling away to face the wall. “Go to sleep, Mirra.”

He felt her turn and pull the blanket over herself. “Suit yourself.”

When she stopped fidgeting and her breathing finally turned slow, Lennox continued to lie rigidly still, his hands tucked into his armpits to stop him doing something he would regret.

Many hours later, he was still repeating a silent mantra *off limits, off limits, off limits*. Mirra rolled, a little whimper escaping her in her sleep, and then the scent which had been tormenting him half the night blossomed to a whole new level of cruel.

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ELEVEN

Mirra was having the most delicious dream. Well, it was about to be delicious. She was teetering right on the edge. In her dream, Lennox kissed along the inside of her thighs, right to her outer labia, leaving her groaning each time he skipped over her pussy. His breath was hot on her skin and his open mouth kisses left her writhing.

She was vaguely aware of it being a dream. As it continued though, the dream merged with reality as she rolled over. Spreading wider, she clutched at a pillow that smelled like Lennox. Mmm, that crisp, smooth scent with a hint of something darker beneath. It made her slip her hand between her thighs, unable to wait any longer for friction over her clit. She still wore her yoga pants. She had to push beneath the tight waistband to get access. When she did, she found her folds swollen and slick with need. The first slide of her fingers past her clit felt amazing.

A low groan amplified her need until she was gasping, sliding her fingers up and back along her sensitive nub. Then she froze. Another groan, deep and resonating. Not hers. A large body in the bed beside her. Yet she still had on her clothes.

Ah, yes. That's right. The previous night came flooding back. Lennox throwing her over his shoulder and tossing her onto the mattress. The way that growl had shivered across her senses right down to her clit. The huge, throbbing bulge in his pants.

He still hadn't touched her!

It had been such a bad idea to bait Lennox last night. All it had done was increase her torment alongside his. Trouble was, she hadn't been able to help herself.

She rubbed faster. Should she stop? She should probably stop.

"Got hot and bothered working yourself up for me before, didn't you?" His voice was low and gravelly. When she

blinked open one eye she saw him bracing his head on his hand and watching her with deep, dark eyes.

“Yes.” Nothing in their agreement to stop her touching herself. Right now, she was so wound up she definitely needed to come. Another slow glide past her clit made her breath hitch in her throat.

He tensed. “Do you need to come?”

“What does it look like?” She continued to rub herself, ignoring his stare.

Lennox pressed his eyes closed for a moment, then his gaze snapped back to hers, a hundred times more heated. “Then let me make you come.”

She paused her movements. “But I thought you said—”

“I’m not going to touch you. I can still make you come. Tell me you want it.”

“How—” Her words ended in a moan as another low rumbling growl shot straight through her core and tingled over her clit.

Lennox’s eyes blazed and his mouth parted slightly as he watched her. “Take off the pants. Let me watch how that pussy comes for me even without a lick of that blushing little clit.”

Lifting her hips, she hurried to obey, too desperate by this point to even think about questioning this further. If this arrogant alien wanted to make her come, he could be her guest.

Pants off, she spread her legs and reached for her clit again. Lennox grabbed her wrist, holding it by her side as he hovered over her, not touching anywhere else. “I told you I was going to make you come, didn’t I?”

“Yes.”

“Then you leave it to me.”

She whimpered, pussy throbbing with unfulfilled need. “Hurry.”

He chuckled. “Greedy girl. I’m sure I should have put something in the contract about keeping your hands to yourself. Now the scent of that lush honey is all over your fingers and all over my bed and I’ll probably be hard for the rest of the week.”

“Then why don’t you—”

Another long low growl made her cry out. Her body seized with pleasure, back bowing and muscles clenching. She hadn’t come, but she’d been close. Another second of that sound!

“We’re not doing that. But I need you spent. I need you to stop making us both crazy. Is this what it takes?”

“Aahh, Lennox, just make me come already. Goddess, I need it so bad!”

“How bad?”

She whimpered, rolling her hips, fighting his grip on her wrist. He was too strong of course. “You prick. You know how bad.”

“What were you dreaming about?”

“What?” She could have screamed when he dipped his head to breathe across her throbbing pussy, the tiny wash of sensation nowhere near enough.

“Tell me what you were dreaming about and I’ll make you come.”

She gasped as he blew air across her clit again. “You!”

His rumble of satisfaction wasn’t quite a growl. Goddess, why wasn’t he growling again? She’d do anything! “You! Fuck! You were going down on me.”

“Good.” The grin that bared sharp fangs was wolfish, dangerous. “Now you can come for me.” This growl was so forceful it might have shaken the floor and the bed. It may as well. She felt everything in her shaking and twitching as her body finally released. The long rolling orgasm left her heart pounding and her body limp as synthed noodles.

Wide shoulders pushed her thighs wider and Lennox dipped his head again. She thought he was going to taste her. Thought for sure that black tongue would flick out and lick up the moisture he had created. But all he did was inhale deeply, his head right above her cunt. His muscles tensed, shoulders bunching and biceps flexing. Then he pulled away.

“What about you?” she mumbled dreamily. The growl must have done silly things to her brain cells.

Lennox rolled over with a huff. “Go shower.”

The nerve!

But she found herself doing it. Instead of giving him a piece of her mind, Mirra flopped to the side and off the bed with a sigh. Still floating on a tide of pleasure, she stumbled to the bathroom and obeyed.

When she came out, he was gone.

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The more she thought about it, the more it bothered her. Since when did she just roll over and obey orders? The orgasm had been good, but she’d had good orgasms before. It hadn’t reformed her personality!

Shaking her head, she took a final swig of her extra large coffee and dumped the empty cup in the nearest bin where it would be washed and returned to the coffee cart. She had snuck out of the penthouse that morning after hastily throwing on her work uniform for the Pinnacle Hotel and shoving the one for Club Fantasy into a little carry bag.

She flicked up her holoscreen and sent a message.

Mirra: Double shift today. Be back late. Don’t wait up.

No reply. What had she really expected?

Mirra went to sit beneath a large tree with waxy green leaves that grew from a planter in the center of the walkway. She didn’t need to be at work for another two hours, but she hadn’t wanted to stay at the penthouse. Not feeling so gloriously melted on the outside, while there was still a big knot of icy resentment in her heart.

Lennox was impossible. The guy was like a top secret military research facility. Completely closed off. He hadn't even been able to concede he wanted her last night, though it was obvious he had. Why wouldn't he let himself do what he clearly wanted to do and just fuck her?

For a moment she let herself believe he had taken care of her needs this morning because he actually cared about her. Or her comfort at least. Then he had turned it into some sort of exercise in control, the way he did with everything. What the hells happened to this guy that he felt the need to do that? Or maybe he really didn't care. But that didn't ring true. There were two sides to Lennox. The guy who had booked La Mer to make her smile, who had turned up on the hoverboard to take her for a joyride and apologized for being a dick, and the other guy. The guy who kept insisting that none of this was real.

Not for the first time, she wondered what it would be like to feel the heat that Ximian come induced. To feel so desperate with need for someone that it turned you into the most primal version of yourself. What would it feel like to be able to do that for someone else, but never experience it?

She sighed. She'd probably never know the answer to any of those questions. Bringing up her sister's ID, she opened a vid-call. It had been too long since she'd checked in. Guilt hit her immediately when Dinah answered and she spotted the telltale tightness around her mouth and black circles under her eyes.

"Hey, Mir. How are you?"

"Hey, Di. I'm doing really well. What about you guys? I'm sorry it's been so long since I called."

Dinah waved away her apology. "Don't be silly. I bet there's so much going on out there. I can't believe you've found time at all!"

"Of course I have. I miss you guys."

Dinah's big dark eyes gazed soulfully into the cam. "We miss you too, Mir."

Throat tight, Mirra glanced away for a moment, unwilling to get emotional in a public place. “So what’s new? Did Sarai have that baby yet?”

Dinah shook her head. “No. Says she’s about ready to burst. What about you? How’s your hot new alien boyfriend?”

Mirra fidgeted with the hem of her skirt. It didn’t feel good lying to Dinah. Di would understand as soon as Mirra could tell her the truth and she knew her sister wouldn’t blame her. It still didn’t feel good. “Yeah, he’s good. I still can’t believe he’s really interested in a girl like me!”

He insisted that he wasn’t. Why was it so hard to believe him? She was still picturing that enormous bulge in his trousers last night which said he was. At least on one level.

Dinah grinned. “What are you talking about! You’re amazing. He’s lucky to have you.”

“Thanks.” Mirra smiled. “Hey, I’ve got some extra marks this week. Should I send more?” She had been eyeing some eyelash extensions, but that was nowhere near as important as making sure her family was okay.

Some of the tightness around Dinah’s eyes eased. “That’d be great. Ma and Da are pretty much feeding Darina and Jax. They’re always on that game these days. You know I heard a rumor that Phantom Media switched off the screen time monitor? Bastards already have us by the throat. Half of Fortuna will be zombies by next month, you mark my words.”

Mirra grimaced. Phantom Media was the company responsible for the virtual reality game, Real Life, that had taken off in the last six months. The game itself was fine, but it was the way people got addicted to it that was so concerning. Cassie’s parents, and Darina and Jax had already spent hours glued to their coms before Cassie left for Nova Station almost a year ago. She hated to think how things were now if the company had switched off the function that forced gamers to take a break every five hours. But of course Phantom Media didn’t care if space-junk like them rotted away behind their screens in the name of their bottom line. The big guys never cared about people like them.

Bitter bile rose in her throat and she wished she'd had something more than coffee for breakfast. "Someone needs to stop them from doing that. I just wish there was something we could actually do about it."

Dinah nodded. "I know. But didn't you say your new boyfriend is some bigshot alien businessman? Surely he knows someone who could help? Could you ask him?"

Could she? It would be another way to test what kind of guy he really was, even if she got nowhere. It was worth a shot.

"Yeah, leave it with me." She picked at imaginary lint on her white uniform skirt. It wouldn't hurt to ask. If he said no, she'd just leave it. She gave Dinah a bright smile that only extended as far as the corners of her mouth. "I'll ask him. Hey, I'd better go. Nearly time for work."

The lie was no worse than any of the other things she was lying to her sister about. Suddenly she wasn't certain if her cool control could last. Dinah nodded, and Mirra ended the call with a request for Dinah to pass her love to her parents. She'd have to call them later when she didn't feel like she was about to burst into tears.

It was fine. They were fine. She hadn't abandoned them. She was working on a solution. Somehow things would all work out.

Mirra spent the next hour wandering the produce section not really shopping for anything. She had somehow become someone who was lying to everyone around her. She just needed to push through the next month. Keep her head and save hard. Things would be okay.

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TWELVE

Lennox wasn't that surprised to find Mirra gone when he returned to his bedroom after his workout. He should have felt relieved. Instead, he just felt like someone had punctured a hole in the walls of the station and it was venting atmosphere.

She was going to be angry when she realized he had growled her into submission along with her orgasm. It was an inescapable effect of a Ximian growl. One reason it was so taboo unless you had the express permission of your partner.

Well, he had asked her if she wanted to come, hadn't he? And she had wanted it. He'd done her a favor, but left himself in agony. So why was guilt gnawing at his gut about having left things that way between them?

His father was unreasonably cheerful at breakfast. Lennox choked down some smoked fish and a coffee and tried to smile and play along with whatever his father was talking about. Eventually though, his father paused and frowned at Lennox. "You and Mirra having a falling out or something, son?"

He sighed. "No. Not really."

"Not really, or no?"

Lennox shrugged. It wasn't an argument. She hadn't been capable of arguing with him the way he'd left her.

"Where is she anyway? Still asleep?"

He shook his head. "Work."

"Well, what are you waiting for? Go buy her something nice and surprise her at work. If you let her catch you on the back foot, you've already lost. Even if she's not mad, it doesn't hurt to win some points."

"You think so?" His father didn't know the relationship wasn't real, of course. But perhaps there was no harm in distracting Mirra from the growl with a pretty gift. Maybe if he acted quickly, she wouldn't even be mad. It would make living together in close quarters a lot easier. The only reason he was worried about it.

He stood, collecting the breakfast things. “That’s actually not a bad idea.”

“What do you know? Your old man knows a thing or two after all.” His father grinned at him. “Go on. Go make her happy. A female like that is worth hanging the moon for.”

A female like Mirra was worth buying a moon for if she was as genuine as she seemed. The danger was the longer he spent around her, the more he got sucked into believing maybe she was.

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It took him several hours to choose just the right gift. When he walked past the shop and the glittering silver bracelet caught his eye, he knew he had found the perfect thing. The bracelet was a gaudy riot of red gems set in star patterns. It was flashy and eye-catching and reminded him of the unabashed joy Mirra took in dressing to show off her stunning figure. It made him smile immediately.

Just as the bot was gift-wrapping it for him, his wrist-com buzzed. Lennox glanced down, hoping foolishly to see Mirra’s ID. Of course it wasn’t her. She was working. She had a double shift today, which meant she would be on until at least 2300. It was really shameful the way the Pinnacle rostered their staff on so many long shifts. They clearly needed to hire more people. Mirra always seemed to be working. He had half a mind to tell her to drop some shifts, but he didn’t think she’d take that well. After all, he wasn’t going to be around forever to fund her lifestyle. Their arrangement had an expiration date.

He sighed. The call was Kaeler, the human lawyer he’d been working with on the Phantom Media takeover. Accepting the package, he pocketed it, stepping outside the shop to answer the call. “Kaeler. I’m just running an errand. Can I call you back in a few hours?”

Kaeler’s expression was firm. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, Mr. Bekkin. Ms. Deysa’s getting jumpy. To be honest, I think she’s in talks with someone else and she’s stalling. I think we should up our offer.”

Lennox frowned. “What? Who would she be talking to? Everyone knows Phantom Media is hemorrhaging marks. They’re dead in the water and losing value. They should have approached me before they cut their customer protection measures. That was a clear giveaway.”

Kaeler looked hesitant. “I heard a rumor that another Ximian company was interested. One of my colleagues had a vid-call yesterday from a Mr. Nasqu, asking about Earth law on foreign investment and ownership.”

“Fuck!” That bastard was the sole reason he was looking into the purchase of Phantom Media in the first place. There was no way Lennox was going to let Ilex get his hands on the one chance he had to bring Nasqu Media to its knees.

He ground his teeth. “Raise it to fifteen mil, but no higher. I’ll never turn around a profit at this rate and it needs to be quick.”

Kaeler nodded. “Understood. I’ll manage it.”

He was forced to spend the rest of the afternoon on calls, reassuring his bank that the purchase was going ahead, shoring up investors who he had already confirmed, and calming anxious nerves. This was the biggest takeover he’d done in a while, but it should have been simple. It was just the added factor of working with so many new people. He had to admit that the personal side to his motivation was making it hard to view it clearly.

By the time he could head to the Pinnacle Hotel it was almost 2000. Later than he’d hoped. Maybe Mirra could get off early and he could take her somewhere nice for dinner. Lennox had just rounded the corner of the block when he spotted a familiar shapely figure hurrying out the door of the hotel. He squinted. He hardly needed to. The way she moved those hips and flicked those dark waves from her face, he already knew it had to be Mirra.

What was she doing out so early? She’d said she had a double shift and wouldn’t be back at the penthouse until late. Was she lying? Avoiding him?

His fists clenched at his sides. Was she meeting someone else in violation of their agreement?

Keeping his distance, he tracked her all the way to the elevators. She was definitely up to something. If she had finished work early, she wouldn't need to use the elevator. They were already on level seven with all the hotels. She could just come straight home. It was possible she was simply going to level two for some food, or going shopping on level three. If she really was meeting someone, they'd be heading to level six where all the main entertainment venues and restaurants were. Unable to follow her into the elevator without being discovered, he waited, allowing people to move around him in the crowd until she had disappeared behind the doors.

Heart pounding faster, he hurried to the nearest available elevator and slammed his hand over the panel, selecting level six and closing the doors in the face of a woman with two small children hurrying with a bot full of bags. He ignored her scowl.

When the elevator doors opened on level six, he sprang out, looking around frantically. Was he wrong? Maybe she was just off to treat herself to a new pair of shoes or something. He was certain he'd transferred more marks to her account the other day. Yet she hadn't bought any new outfits for weeks.

Through a group of young women dressed in bright colors, he spotted a dark-haired woman hurrying away.

Damn it.

She *was* sneaking around, meeting someone behind his back. She was going to fucking hear about it. Right after he put a stop to it.

Storming down the wide street, humans and Ardun still darted out of his way or crossed to the other side to avoid him. He was sure he looked almost as livid as he felt. Mirra walked quickly, checking something on her holoscreen, then resettling a little bag over her shoulder. She must have brought a change of clothes for her hook up. It made him even angrier to picture which of her tight little dresses she had tucked in that bag.

Dresses that his marks had paid for. By the time he got close to catching up with her he was seething.

Then she did something he didn't expect.

Mirra turned suddenly into a seedy-looking club with a bright flashing sign out the front. Club Fantasy. The sign showed images of women dressed in lacy lingerie leaning over tables and men in tight shorts with bare chests handing drinks to smiling customers. Beneath the name, the place promised, 'all your fantasies made real'. It did not look like the kind of place you went to meet a hook up.

What the fuck was going on here?

He was still gaping at the sign when she slid through the open doors. Shaking himself, he hurried to follow, only to find the entryway empty when he stepped inside. A middle-aged woman with bright purple lipstick to match her bright purple hair greeted him with a smile from behind a desk. "Welcome to Club Fantasy. Is this your first time? We don't see many Ximians even in this part of the five systems. I feel like I'd recognize you if you'd visited before."

He almost growled in frustration. Where was Mirra? Tamping down his anger, he stepped toward the desk, forcing a smile. "No. I haven't been here before. Did you see a young woman come in just now?"

The purple-haired woman's smile brightened. "You're after a woman to spend some time with? We have so many friendly hostesses here just waiting to meet you. Would you like to take a look at who's in tonight?" She twisted a holoscreen menu toward him with a list of profile images and names. He turned to scan the space for doors. Then he turned back and stared. The bottom image on the right was a face that had no right to be on a fucking menu. Mirra's bright red lipstick and rich brown waves were as captivating as ever, even in holoimage form. From the menu she winked, twisting to let viewers catch a glimpse of the high cut briefs, the only excuse for pants she had on.

"Exactly what is it you offer here?"

The woman smiled. “What is it you were hoping for? We like to be flexible. Everyone’s fantasy is different. Usually guests begin by enjoying the bar area where our hosts and hostesses can mingle, and you have a chance to meet and talk and find out if you connect with anyone. After that, we have private rooms and a range of services can be negotiated. I should let you know that there are cams up in all our spaces and if a host or hostess calls a stop to anything at any time, it’s one of our house rules that you respect that boundary.”

Not meeting someone. Meeting a hundred fucking someones who were paying to do stars knew what to her when he couldn’t bloody touch her. Private rooms? Negotiated services?

Over his dead body.

He pointed at the screen. “This woman. She’s working tonight?”

“Sure. That’s Mirra. She’s beautiful, isn’t she? She’d be happy to come have a drink with you. Would you like me to ___”

“I want her.”

“Fantastic. Mirra’s just come in, so if you give her a minute, I’ll let her know you’re waiting. Can I show you to the bar?”

“How much to have her in a private room for the rest of the night?”

The woman’s eyes widened. “All night? Sir, I think I should let you know we don’t offer *full* services here. This is just a place to meet people and have some fun. If you’re looking for a brothel, I can recommend—”

“I’m looking for *her*. Can you do it or not?”

To her credit, the woman’s smile stayed fixed on her face throughout the whole exchange. “She is really something, I agree. Why don’t you follow me to the bar and I’ll request Mirra host you in a private room just as soon as she’s had a chance to freshen up. Your first drink is on the house.”

Lennox let the woman lead him through a small door. He had to duck slightly to go through. When he entered the bar, he saw it was actually a variety of partially concealed booths all adjoining a central bar where scantily clad staff mixed drinks or collected trays to take to tables. A quick scan revealed that none of them was Mirra. He grit his teeth, but followed the purple-haired woman to a table.

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THIRTEEN

Mirra was just tugging up the pair of lacy red briefs with black ribbon that formed part of her work uniform, when there was a knock at the door of the shower room and Riath entered, her features drawn and tense. “I’ve got a prickly one for you tonight, hun. Can you do it?”

She sighed. Brilliant. It had been a long shift at Pinnacle, her feet were tired, her lower back ached and all she wanted to do was go home and crawl into bed and dream of Lennox. Maybe if she pretended to have another hot dream about him, he would growl her into another orgasm tomorrow. “Why, what’s their deal?”

“New customer. He wants you in a private room all night.”

“Did he say what he was looking for?”

Riath shook her head. “No, and he seemed pretty wound up. You want me just to set the security bot on him?”

“No.” She slipped on her heels. She had turned around situations like this in the past. Sometimes all they really wanted was someone to listen. That was one thing she could sympathize with. “Which room?”

Riath’s face broke into a grateful smile. “You’re a total angel, babe. I owe you an extra Christmas bonus this year, okay?”

She smiled back. “Yeah. Sounds good.”

“Room F should have whatever you need, but you make sure and ring the buzzer if you need anything, and don’t hesitate to call it if it feels off to you.”

She nodded. “Yeah, I know. Thanks.” She turned to head out the door, but Riath stopped her. “Mirra? He’s Ximian. I’m not sure if you have any experience, but—”

“Ximian?” A freighter slammed into her sternum.

Riath nodded. “Yeah. Is that a problem?”

“It might be,” Mirra mumbled. Who else could it be? To her boss, she said, “No. It’s fine.”

Riath held her arm, searching her face for a moment more before releasing her. “Be careful.”

“I will.” Mirra walked down the hall in slow motion, the click, click of her heels matching the accelerated thump, thump of her heart. It had to be. If he had requested her specifically, he’d already seen her profile vid. He knew it was her. The question was, how had he found her? And just how mad was he going to be?

She got her answer in the steely set of his broad shoulders the second she opened the door.

“Hi.” What else was there to say?

“Hi?” His voice was glacial. “Fucking, hi? That’s all you have to say for yourself?”

Lennox folded thick arms across his barrel chest, emphasizing the power in his muscled form. He was sitting, thankfully, so at least he didn’t tower over her. Mirra had no doubt he could unleash all that power at a moment’s notice though. She wasn’t fool enough to think she could even hold her own if he decided to get physical. He wouldn’t do that though, would he?

She lifted her chin, refusing to be intimidated. “Well, usually I greet customers and ask them about themselves, but I guess you and I are a bit beyond that, huh?”

The air practically vibrated with tension. “And how many customers do you greet each night while I think you’re cleaning rooms at the Pinnacle?”

Despite everything, her spine straightened and her cheeks flushed with heat. What the actual fuck? Not like they were really together. It was all fake. Even if they were, what right did he have to dictate what she did with her time? She tried to remind herself he was technically a paying client, but she couldn’t keep the fire from her tone. “What’s it to you?”

“What’s it to me? What the fuck do you mean, what’s it to me? We have an agreement.”

She glared down at him. “Yeah. We do. I pretend to be your girlfriend and in return you pay me and pretend not to think I’m scum. That about sum it up?”

A little of the hostility dropped from his expression. “Scum? I never once said you were scum, Mirra.”

She folded her own arms over her chest, mirroring his posture. “You didn’t have to. I’m an orbit-rat. I know what people think.”

A choked sound rose in his throat almost as if he were about to growl, but he set his jaw, and the sound cut off abruptly. “You think that’s what this is?”

She spread her hands wide. “Then what is it? Please enlighten me.”

He did growl then. The prick! Gripping the arms of the reclining chair with both hands, he looked as if he was about to launch from his seat. The sound traveled down her spine and tingled in her clit just like always, but she fought it. She knew what it would do to her, and now was not the time.

His voice was so deep and dripping with anger. “You want to know what this is? This is me letting you know that you’re mine. And while you’re mine, no one else gets to *think* about touching you.”

No fucking way!

Mirra stepped forward, leaning over him before she even realized what she was doing. “Oh, I’m yours, am I? Except you won’t touch me. You don’t even want me.”

His eyes blazed with fire, and a tic started in his strong jaw. “Didn’t stop me from making you come this morning, did it?”

Her pussy throbbed at the memory, and she huffed with irritation. The flare of his nostrils and the satisfied smirk on his face told her it had not gone unnoticed.

Damn him.

“Well, if that’s all you’ve got, please excuse me. There are other customers outside who might actually tip me tonight.

Some of them might even be okay with touching.” She turned to go, fuming at her loss of control and the way her body wanted him even when it was clear he wasn’t feeling the same. No amount of marks and help for her family was worth him making her feel this way.

An iron grip around her wrist stopped her. “Not so fast. I’ve paid for you all night. You’re not going anywhere.”

She turned, holding that fiery gaze. “Really? Is that right?”

He released her, leaning back in the chair once more as if he owned the place. He probably could. He probably could spare the change to buy Club Fantasy without even blinking. Lennox smiled. “Yeah. That’s right. So make yourself comfortable.”

Challenge accepted, asshole.

She let the feral grin stretch over her face as she looked him up and down very slowly. She saw the moment it dawned on him she was not backing down. He set his jaw. They faced off for another few heartbeats.

“Yeah. I think I will.” Mirra stalked until she stood in front of him. Lennox held perfectly still. Turning, she straightened her shoulders, wearing nothing but the lacy underwear which was her work uniform. “Mind if I sit?”

“Fine by me.”

Mirra settled in his lap, bending and giving him a nice view of her ass on the way down. Then she spread first one leg then the other, so that she straddled him, facing away.

Lennox continued to grip the arms of the chair, not touching her. She leaned back a little further, arched her back, and pushed out her breasts.

“It’s so nice to sit down,” she whispered in her most sultry voice. “It feels so good.” She leaned her head back until she lay against his shoulder, letting him cop an eyeful of her tits. His body was rigid beneath hers. All except for the place where it counted.

“Normally I’d be worried about what you might like. I’d be asking you what I could do for you. But since we’ve already established you don’t want anything, and since you’ve already paid to have me all night, I think I might just suit myself.”

Teasingly she ran her palms up her thighs and over her belly. She cupped her breasts over the lacy bra, squeezing and plumping them, until she knew his gaze was fixed there.

Better.

Then she thumbed her nipples. “Mmm. Maybe I need to come. Maybe you didn’t leave me satisfied this morning.”

At her neck, Lennox sucked in a breath. Large warm hands crept to her hips. She pretended not to notice.

“Oh, so that’s the game we’re playing is it? Admit it. It was good this morning. I knew you’d be begging for more. I just didn’t realize it would be so soon.” His bragging would have been more effective if his voice wasn’t so rough with need.

Mirra smiled. “Oh, I’m not begging. I can do it myself just fine. But I thought you might be wondering who I picture when I do.” Increasing the torment, she rocked her hips, grinding in his lap. His hands tightened and she felt the prick of his claws against her skin.

“It will be me. From now on you’ll picture me and only me, every fucking time.”

“How do you know?” She gasped when his hot breath fanned out over her ear and his cock stirred against her ass. “How do you know I’ll be thinking of you when it’s not your hands touching me? It’s not your hard cock I’m riding until I’m completely spent?”

His control must have snapped then. Thank goddess, because hers nearly had. Lennox’s hands slipped over her belly, pulling her closer as he grazed sharp teeth over the sensitive places on her neck. She would have reveled in her victory, but she was far too busy relishing the feel of his mouth and hands on her.

Mirra moaned as his tongue lapped across her pulse, licking up to her ear as he tugged the lobe into his mouth. “From now on you don’t think about anyone else.” His voice was raw and needy. Her cunt clenched as hot palms cupped her breasts, pushing her own hands aside. “You’ll think about *my* hands and *my* cock, because no one else gets access to your body. No one else will make you slick with honey.”

Mirra gripped the backs of his hands, pushing until his grip on her breasts tightened, until he was squeezing and pinching at the nipples. “I am—” She broke off as he thrust upwards, rocking his full erection against the crease of her ass. “I am thinking of you. I’m not thinking of anyone else. But I need more than that.”

His hand left her breast. She whimpered. In the next moment, he moved it up to grip her throat. He was gentle, the pressure just enough to let her know he meant it. It made her feel unbearably hot in the cool air of the private room.

“Lennox, please. I need more.”

His next breath rasped against her ear. “So do I, gorgeous.”

His hand fumbled between them. Then he lifted her slightly and she felt his hard thick cock slip between her thighs until she was riding it over her panties. All his anger seemed to have evaporated in the heat between them. Heavens knew hers had. She slid back, bringing him to just the right place. “Oh, goddess, please. Don’t keep holding back.”

She rolled her hips, arching her back to move over him. Lennox kept his hands at her waist, guiding her and speeding her rhythm. The head of his cock rubbed her over and over, but it still wasn’t enough.

Reaching between her thighs she pressed him closer, holding him against her clit as she continued to move. That was it! Right there. So good. “Are you going to make me come? Are you going to come with me?”

He groaned, hips rocking beneath her. Against her palm, his cockhead was already coated with moisture. His skin was

hot and smooth and so black it was shocking in contrast to the silver of his fur.

Slipping aside her panties, she felt the first slick glide as skin moved against wet skin and she moaned.

He grunted. “Are you sure that’s what you want? It might already be too late, but—fuck!—if you’re not sure, you need to stop now.”

“Not sure?” She choked out a laugh through the building tide of pleasure. “I’ve wanted this since that first night. You’re the one doing the clam jamming. You saying you’re going to give it to me?”

“Mirra, haven’t you worked out by now I’ll give you whatever you ask for?”

His words sent her floating. Or maybe it was the frantic rubbing of their bodies in a rhythm that felt almost practiced. It was so perfect. It was so good. So right.

“Here? Like this?” He was panting against her face, groaning and holding tight to her waist and throat. “You better be sure.”

“I’m sure! I’m sure! I can’t wait for somewhere else.”

“I can’t either.” With a few more frantic thrusts his body spasmed under her. “Fuck.” His hands gripped her tight. “You fucking undo me, woman.”

White ropes of warm come spurted from the tip of his cock against her palm and over her belly. With another guy she would have been disappointed, but from everything she knew about Ximians, this was only the beginning.

She thought she was ready. She thought she knew what she was in for. Hadn’t Cassie described the feeling of being in heat, the growing urge to be filled more than you’d ever been filled before?

It was nothing to being there in that moment.

The come was still cooling on her skin when the first flame stirred inside her. It began in her nipples, spread through her

belly, and centered quickly in her throbbing clit and empty cunt.

She was close. She had been close the whole time she had been rubbing against Lennox. Now he released her, tearing at the fabric of her bra until he had bared her to the cool air. Scooping come from her belly, he rubbed it around her breast. She gasped. The heat grew. Sweat dampened the back of her neck where his hot breath now felt like a cool breeze.

Then he pinched her nipple hard and growled. “Come for me.”

She did.

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FOURTEEN

Lennox still throbbed from the last throes of his first orgasm when Mirra came. Holding her against his chest as she did was even better than watching her that morning. Pliant in his arms, her body trembled and shuddered as his growl traveled through her.

By the nine, he hardly needed to do anything to get her hot. She had been writhing against him even before he'd given her a drop of come. She was so responsive. What if he could keep this gorgeous human so addicted to what he could give her she'd never look at another male?

A foolish idea.

This whole thing was madness. He couldn't help it. She drove him crazy. So much so he'd stormed in here ready to stake a claim and fight off anyone else who dared to look at her.

Mirra was already moaning again by the time he brought her down from the first orgasm. Shifting his erection away from her cunt, he slipped his hand between her folds to press gently against her clit. Fuck, she was wet too. So much wetter than a Ximian female would be without being fully juiced.

Was this humans in general, or just Mirra? He could barely remember the few times he'd been with a human woman before. They had been nothing compared to this. Nothing matched the driving, consuming need he felt to possess this female. To make her body sing to his tune, to have her at his power. He had to regain control. It would be so easy to be completely and utterly at her mercy.

Hells, if she had asked him to cut off a limb he might have done it. Anything to end this dreadful longing. He had never begun a night with any female wondering if one would be enough. Never dreaded the feel of his knot swelling at the base of his cock. He was in too deep already, but he couldn't bring himself to care. He just needed to have her once. Then this terrible urge to possess her would fade.

He damn well hoped so, because if it didn't, he was in uncharted territory.

“Do you feel it yet?” he rasped. She must. Her scent was everywhere. The air was thick with it.

Mirra nodded. “Oh, I feel it.” She reached behind her, searching for his cock again.

It twitched, ready for more. He was going to have to hold back a little here or he'd end up driving her out of her mind with lust. Or draining himself dry before he could knot her. Not a worry he'd ever had before. He didn't even think it was actually possible. Or he hadn't, until now.

Mirra stood, slipped the red panties over her hips, and kicked them off. She discarded her ruined bra and stood before him completely naked, completely beautiful, and completely unashamed.

Perfection.

His eyes roved from the smooth curves of her shoulders over expanses of hairless olive skin to plump rounded breasts. Her flat stomach was a touch too thin for comfort. Not that he was picky, but he hated the way her ribs were slightly visible where the curve of her waist dipped in.

It called for more eight course dinners and finding what her favorite treat was so he could stock the penthouse with it. Stupid. He wasn't keeping her.

“How many times can you come?” Mirra slid her hands over her belly down to the enticing strip of dark, neatly trimmed hair that pointed the way to his destination. Her fingers toyed at the apex of her slit and she smiled at him. That smile was so dangerous, it took a few seconds to form words.

When he was able, he replied, “I think a better question is, how many times can you?”

She laughed. “Who's keeping count? I've just never been with a guy who can keep up before.”

He smirked. “I'll keep up, gorgeous. You just make sure and tell me when you're ready for my knot.”

Her eyes dipped to where his cock jutted from his open trousers. In his haste, he hadn't even bothered undressing. Now he stood and hurriedly unfastened the shirt, stripping it off along with his trousers.

"I should probably have warned you that there are cams fitted in this room." Mirra glanced upwards at a spot on the ceiling where a tiny fixed cam protruded.

He shrugged. "You think I care who sees how hot I get you?" He fisted his cock, loving the way her tongue darted out to wet her lips as he did.

Mirra grinned. "That's what I hoped you'd say." She stepped closer, scratching nails through his fur and down his abs. Finally she pushed his hand aside to close her own fist around him.

His head fell back and he allowed himself a moment to sink into the bliss of her touch as she pumped him slowly. When her hand reached his cockhead, she squeezed gently, drawing a guttural groan from his lips. When he opened his eyes again, he saw her gather some of the moisture from his tip and bring it to her mouth. She wrapped her lips around her fingers and sucked. Lennox could swear he felt it down to his toes.

Gripping her neck, he pulled her close. He dipped his head to capture her mouth before he even realized what he was doing. He caught himself just in time to divert and kiss her neck instead. All the while his heart pounded in his chest and he struggled to climb out of the fog that had overtaken his brain. Mirra stroked him again, lifting her fingers to her mouth to taste.

"Be careful, Mirra, the more you take, the hotter you'll get. You should take it slow."

"Fuck that!" She dropped to her knees and grasped him firmly, eyes alight with her intent. He had to laugh. He might have known she would jump straight in without a thought for the consequences.

So be it.

If she wanted a sound fucking, then that's what he would give her. Lennox thrust his hips into her hand as she jerked him. Her rhythm was fast and commanding, just the way he liked. "You like it hard and fast, gorgeous?"

She nodded, not taking her eyes from the swollen tip of his cock.

"You want to burn for me?"

"Already am." Looking down, he saw her hand between her thighs, rubbing that greedy little clit as she worked him.

No way. That job was his.

A fierce growl erupted from his chest and Mirra's rhythm faltered. He took over, hips thrusting, hand closing over hers to bring him closer. She shuddered, already on the edge of another orgasm.

"I'm close, gorgeous. You want more? Come and take it."

She opened dazed eyes and licked those pretty lips again. Then she sucked him into her hot little mouth, sliding right down until he hit the back of her throat.

Holy fucking stars, she did not play games with what she wanted.

Mirra sucked his cock, milking him even as her hands slid around his thighs to grip his ass. Mouth stretched wide around his girth, she hummed her satisfaction and he came undone right then.

He probably should have pulled back. No way she needed the whole load. But damned if he could pull away from the slick feel of her lips and tongue. So he pushed a hand into the base of her thick hair and held on for dear life, praying his legs didn't give way beneath him.

When he could think again, he tugged gently until she withdrew. He wiped a stray drop from the side of her mouth where he had spilled over, then he helped her to her feet, catching her up when she stumbled.

Mirra moaned. She stretched up and he lifted her until her legs wrapped around his waist and that wet little cunt fit right

against him.

Her breathing was ragged. She gripped him tight with her legs. They were pressed so close together Lennox could feel the way her stomach clenched and her muscles tightened as she rolled her hips. “So empty. So ready for you to fill me up.”

Lords, yes.

When he held her ass and brought her down over his cock, they both moaned. How long had he waited to be right here? It felt like forever. Her little cunt hugged him so tightly it was a miracle he didn't come again. Instead, he staggered to the wall, braced her against it, and found a way to fight through the rising tide of his own pleasure and see to hers.

There was nothing passive or gentle about the way she took him either. Holding tight to his shoulders, Mirra clung on, riding him as he pounded into her. She urged him on, breathless words spilling from her lips as she approached another climax.

As her walls squeezed him tighter and she came around his cock, he choked out a curse and spilled into her again. Then it all became a blur. Their bodies moved together perfectly, the rhythm shared for their mutual pleasure.

Mirra's hands tightened in the hair at the back of his neck and he ground against her clit. She moaned. He drew out and slammed back into her. All the while her sweet cries filled his ears. “Yes, yes, yes. Goddess, yes. Keep going.”

Her smell was thick in the air. Her slick dampened her thighs and his as the wet sounds of their bodies slapping together filled the room.

At some point he stumbled back, sitting again in the chair. Next thing he knew, Mirra was riding him. Her head thrown back, those perfect tits bouncing, she leaned back, gripped his thighs and drove them both over another crest.

When she opened her eyes again and looked at him, he knew what she needed before she even had to ask.

“You ready for my knot, Mirra?”

She nodded. She hadn't stopped moving, but her movements had slowed. Now she ground down over him in small circles, whimpering with need.

A little tremor ran up his arm and into his fingers as he gently brushed aside the hair at her neck. When had this moment turned tender? Hadn't this been rough and hot, just like they both wanted? He couldn't bring himself to increase the pace. She was too sweet just like this, lost in the moment, trusting him to take care of her.

Lennox's gaze dropped to Mirra's perfect neck, to the place he would mark with his bite when he triggered the knot to end her heat. The thought of his claim on her skin did more than rouse the thickening section at the base of his cock. It roused a swelling of his heart, as if the organ had somehow grown a size larger while he was inside her.

When he spoke again, his voice was a little rough around the edges. "Gonna bite you now. Then you'll feel it swell. You ready?"

Mirra responded by tipping her head further to the side to give him access. "Please!"

Sinking his teeth down into that perfect olive skin, he was struck by the way she gave herself to it. Most females were a little hesitant about their first bite, their first knotting. Mirra had no fear that he could smell. Only the rich scent of her arousal perfumed the surrounding air. She sighed as he deepened the bite, tasting tangy blood.

She could be demanding. She could be fiery. She could be infuriating, but at just the right moment, she could also be the sweetest fucking thing. That combination had him shook right to his foundations.

Unable to focus any longer, Lennox gave in to the sensations. The salty, tangy taste of her blood filled his mouth. He held her hips, lifting her, guiding her to move over him a few more times. Her sweet little pussy took all of him. Pleasure coiled in his spine. The gasping cry she gave, plunging down over him in jerky motions, made him grip her

tight. Then she was clenching, milking, stretching wider for him as his knot swelled and locked them together.

With a final burst of pleasure, he slumped back in the chair and caught her against his chest as she fell forward. Lennox cradled her there and stroked her hair back from her sweaty forehead. When she lifted her head and dropped a lazy kiss right over his lips, he didn't pull away like he should have done. Instead of turning his head to the side, he opened, parting his lips to taste her sigh and greet it with his own.

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FIFTEEN

Mirra lay against Lennox's broad chest dreamily listening to his heartbeat slow. Her head rose and fell with his breaths and a gentle hand smoothed over her hair.

They were still locked together. Her pussy was stuffed full of his swollen knot, though she could feel come leaking out as it began to soften. She could probably move now. Except she never wanted to.

That had been perfect. Best sex of her life perfect. Passionate, heated, bone-melting sex, but also surprisingly tender. The way he had watched her so carefully, checking in with her to make sure she was okay. The way he had known just when she reached her limit without her even having to put it into words.

With Lennox she didn't have to hold back or pretend to be something she was not. How ironic that the person she felt most able to be completely and unrepentantly herself around was the alien she was faking a relationship with.

He didn't even seem to care she was hot tempered or impulsive. In fact, if she wasn't mistaken, it only made him like her more.

"Lennox?" she mumbled against his fur.

"Hmm?"

"You said a lot of things just now."

"Did I?"

"Uh huh. And I was just wondering if you—"

There was a *tap, tap tap* from the door. Riath's voice called through the panel. "Mirra? Is everything alright in there? If I don't hear you check in, I'm sending in the bot."

Lennox tensed, claws pricking against her bare flesh. She snorted. Goddess only knew how much of that Riath had witnessed over the cam. She couldn't even regret one moment of it.

“The bot?” Lennox hissed.

“The security bot. She’s making sure you didn’t attack me or force me.”

“What?” Lennox stiffened beneath her, nostrils flaring.

“Cheesy fries with mustard!” She called out loudly.

Lennox blinked at her, and she giggled. “My favorite food. It’s a way of letting Riath know I’m okay.”

“Just what sort of place is this?”

She was prevented from answering when Riath’s cheery voice sang out from the other side of the door again. “Oh, good. I just came to let you know you can finish up and head home. Your shift ended fifteen minutes ago.”

Shit! Glancing down at her wrist-com, she saw it was true. Talk about losing track of time. Gingerly extracting herself from Lennox’s lap, she stood on shaky legs and hobbled to the washer. It was only a tiny space for rinsing off in case things got messy. A much needed space, since Mirra could already feel sticky spend dripping down her thighs.

She had just wet a little towel and begun cleaning herself off, when a large hand closed over hers and stopped her.

“Let me.” Lennox curled around her from behind, his body warm in the cool air of room F. The brush of soft fur against her back and ass sent shivers down her spine.

“It won’t send me into heat again, will it?” She laughed weakly. Would she survive another heat straight on the back of that one?

Lennox chuckled against her neck. “No. After a knot, it changes. It’s like the antidote, I suppose.”

She released the cloth and spread a little wider so he could wipe her gently. As he did, he slipped his other arm around her waist, which supported her weight, and she could have sighed. Where had this sweet male come from?

“I don’t like the thought of you needing a safety procedure like that.”

Mirra shrugged. Riath's rules were part of what kept her working at Club Fantasy. She took good care of her staff. "It's fine."

"No. It's not fine."

He was being so affectionate she didn't like to spoil the moment with an argument, so Mirra brushed off his comment and focused on the blissful post orgasmic feeling that hummed through her veins.

When she was clean, she found her bag and slipped back into her Pinnacle hotel uniform. Lennox had dressed while she had. Once she tidied the room, she pressed a hand over the lock function on the door panel and led him back out toward reception. His hand was at the small of her back when she paused by the front desk to say goodnight to Riath.

Her boss's eyes drifted from Lennox, back to Mirra, an unspoken question in her puzzled expression. "Thank you so much for choosing Club Fantasy tonight, sir. We hope you enjoyed your visit."

Mirra hurried to interrupt Riath who was no doubt busy worrying about her. "Riath, this is Lennox. He's my... boyfriend." Goddess, they were still faking if nothing else. Only now she wondered if there was more to it than their arrangement.

Riath's eyes bulged. "Your boyfriend?"

"That's right." Lennox stepped closer until she felt his heat all up her back.

"Mirra, I can't complain since he paid in full, but you know there are cheaper ways of getting a night off to spend with your boo, right?"

She laughed. "It's complicated. I'll fill you in another time."

Riath shook her head. "Okay then. If you're sure you're alright?"

She nodded. "I'm fine. Thank you."

“Thank you. I’ll have your pay ready for you tomorrow as normal.”

“Good.” Lennox’s hand tightened around her hip.
“Because that’s the last shift Mirra will work here.”

“What?” She snapped her head around to glare at him, but he ignored her.

“It is?” Riath looked backward and forward between them.

“No!” Mirra sputtered.

“It is,” Lennox said firmly over her.

He put his arm around her shoulders and turned her toward the door. Though she fought him, he was far too strong. She was pulled along with him as he herded her out of Club Fantasy. “You can’t just quit my job for me!” she spat when they stepped into the street.

“Looks like I just did.”

Mirra finally managed to pull away, ducking under his arm and putting a little distance between them. “I’ll just go back in there and tell her you were joking.”

“No. You won’t.” He grabbed her arm when she turned to go. “Unless you want me to storm in there every night and haul you out again. I told you, no one touches you but me. No one fucking thinks about touching you!”

His words were heated but though he held firm to her arm, his grip wasn’t bruising. He must be holding back to keep from hurting her. Desperation shone in his turbulent expression and that cooled a little of the fire in her belly. She stopped pulling against him and sighed. “It bothers you that much?”

Something passed across his face. Guilt? Anxiety? It was too quick to tell. “It does.”

“Who hurt you?”

“No one.” He snatched his hand away as if she had burned him. The rules, the possessive fit of jealousy. Pieces started to fit together in Mirra’s imagination.

“Who hurt you?” she asked again more softly. Stepping close again, she reached out.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Lennox turned his back on her and began walking toward the station.

Mirra hurried to catch up. Should she push a little more? He’d already revealed more than she suspected he’d intended to tonight. Perhaps she should ease off a little. She couldn’t resist one more question. “What now?”

Lennox sighed without looking around. “I will pay you whatever you were making there on top of what we already agreed. The marks don’t matter. I just can’t take it.”

He sounded so forlorn. Internally shaking her head at herself, she caught up with him at the next corner. “Fine. I’ll tell Riath I’m not available for a while, okay?”

“Okay.” There was a pause. “Thank you.”

Mirra forcefully tamped down on the sweet warmth that rose in her chest at his words. It was just the aftereffects of world-shaking sex. That was all. She was just feeling all mushy right now. In the morning she could argue with him some more. She stifled a yawn.

Lennox frowned. “Are you alright?”

“It’s been a long day. And you were quite something back there.”

His frown deepened. “Can you walk? Should I carry you?”

She chuckled. “Don’t be silly. It’s not that far.” It wasn’t. It still felt like miles and miles by the time they stopped to wait for the train to pull up. They stepped on board and she had never been so grateful when Lennox muscled his way to an empty seat and pulled her into his lap. His strong thighs were solid and warm under her legs and it was easy to lean back against his chest and enjoy the feel of him holding her close. Oh, she could get used to this.

When they reached their stop, he lifted her to her feet and helped her out through the press of people. The walk back to the penthouse was a hazy blur of happy thoughts. Lennox’s

father was nowhere to be seen when they arrived. She was grateful. Her eyelids were heavy and all she wanted to do was flop into bed. Lennox ushered her into his room. When he kneeled at her feet to help her with her shoes and her heart did a little tired flip. She grinned up at him. He froze by the side of the bed.

“Come to bed.”

“I’m not tired yet.”

A warning alarm flared to life in her brain. Keeping her smile in place, she patted the mattress. “Come anyway.”

His dark eyes flashed with amusement. “Ready for more so soon? I thought I wore you out.”

Mirra laughed. “You did. Now I want you to hold me.”

He stiffened. “I’ve got work to wrap up before I come to bed.”

She sighed, rolling to her back. “Fine. Will you give me a kiss then?” She batted her eyelashes playfully at him and pouted.

He shook his head. “Mirra, we have an agreement, remember. No kissing.”

What the actual fuck?

It hadn’t been her imagination back at Club Fantasy. He had been happy enough to kiss her then.

Lennox turned to leave the room while Mirra was still processing that remark. Everything had been so perfect and then suddenly the walls were back up. He was as closed off to her as ever. What had happened?

....

Mirra woke to her alarm and a cold, empty bed. Blearily she reached over to the nightstand and silenced her wrist-com. Then she sat up and looked around. No Lennox. His side of the bed didn’t look as if he had slept in it.

Whatever this was, she needed way more caffeine in her system to fully deal with it. With an irritated little huff, she

threw back the covers and got out of bed. She slipped into some yoga pants and an old top once she had used the bathroom. Then she opened the bedroom door and went out into the generous open space of the living area and kitchen. Still no sign of Lennox.

Daylight simulators were already switched on. The space was bright with artificial sunlight and virtual landscapes played on all the wall panels. Aedard gave her a warm, pointy toothed smile as she padded over to the coffee machine and slipped a cup under the dispenser.

What the hell? Where did Lennox get off storming into her workplace, saying all those things to her, making her feel like that, and then just ghosting her? She was going to find him and give him a piece of her mind. Right after she brushed her hair, had a coffee, and made sure she looked absolutely devastating, of course.

“Morning,” she mumbled to Aedard.

“Morning. I made myself scarce last night cause I thought you and Lennox might need some time alone after you made up whatever argument you’re having. But it seems to me that foolish boy hasn’t done enough groveling yet. Would that be about the size of it?”

Mirra shrugged and lifted the steaming cup to her lips, taking her first sip. She sighed. “I don’t even know where he is today. I can’t work out what’s going on with him.” It was bordering on too honest, given their arrangement, but right now she couldn’t bring herself to care.

Aedard nodded, refilling his own cup. “Want my two marks?”

She grunted. “Why not?”

She shuffled over to one of the large sofas and sat, tucked up her feet, and cupped the coffee with both hands. Aedard joined her, sitting in a sofa opposite with his own drink.

“We had a pretty big falling out when Lennox was about ten. About the time he went off to that fancy school.”

Mirra nodded into her coffee, staring at the dark surface of the liquid. That sounded similar to what Lennox had told her at La Mer.

“It was also about the time that his mother left me.”

She blinked up, focusing on Aedard as she took in what he had said. His slightly elongated, bear-like features creased into an expression of worry.

“Reiyna hadn’t been happy for years. I knew it. I just chose to ignore it. So when she left me, it was a surprise. It shouldn’t have been, but it was.”

“What happened?”

“I think he’s always blamed me for it in a way. It’s probably not completely unjustified.” He sighed, scrubbing a hand over his short, silver hair. “The long and short of it is she left me for another male. She renounced the mate bond and took up with someone new.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. That’s horrible.” Coffee half-forgotten, she watched him, hoping he would elaborate. She knew there had to have been something making Lennox so hostile to relationships.

Aedard nodded. “It was horrible. Most of all for poor Lennox. He was at that age where you feel things very deeply. Didn’t talk to either of us for months. He applied for that school, won the scholarship, and went off and created as much distance as he could.”

Mirra made a little hum of sympathy in her throat. “He told me he applied because he needed to get away from home.”

“So he has talked to you about this then?”

“Sort of. He never told me about his mother. Does he keep in touch with her now?”

Aedard shrugged. “Truth is, I don’t know. He won’t talk about her with me and she and I don’t communicate.”

Mirra sipped her coffee, feeling more than a little sad for this broken family. Her own family meant so much to her she

couldn't imagine cutting herself off from them like that. Yeah, they'd used to fight, back when they all lived in cramped quarters on Fortuna, but fights were a natural part of life. You fought with the people you really loved. The people you trusted not to hold it against you later. That was just how life was.

Aedard continued. "I think in a way he never got over it. Ever since then, he's always had a pretty unusual attitude to relationships. I thought he would grow out of it. When he was so successful in his business ventures, and he still hadn't found a special someone, I tried to set up a match for him, thinking maybe he would grow to love a female over time. I'm not sure what things are like for humans, but many matches are arranged on Ximia. It usually works out well."

Mirra wasn't sure how to respond. The thought of an arranged match seemed so alien to her, but clearly Aedard had been doing it out of love. She had always believed those sorts of things to be politically motivated, but perhaps there was more to it than that. "Then you won't be sad if he doesn't mate a Ximian female?"

Aedard smiled. "I just want him to be happy. But it seems like my son has other ideas."

She snorted. "You think he's trying to make himself unhappy?"

"I think he's been trying for years so hard to sabotage his own love life that I'm not sure he knows how to get out of that pattern."

Yeah. Sounded about right to her. "Well, fuck that." She stood, belatedly realizing perhaps Lennox's father might not be so willing to forgive her foul mouth, but Aedard only grinned up at her.

"That's the spirit."

She turned back toward the bedroom, already scanning the room for her shoes. Then she turned back. "You don't happen to know where he would have gone, do you?"

Aedard shrugged. “In my experience, he throws himself into work to avoid dealing with personal issues. But that’s about as helpful as I can be, I’m afraid.”

She grinned. “I’ll go hunt him down.”

“Good. You do that. And when you do, be sure to tell him what a stubborn fool he is.”

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SIXTEEN

Lennox tapped his claws against the desk in the tiny office at the back of Errytt and Cassie's workshop at the space port. It was stuffy and uncomfortable as hell and he barely had room to move in here, but it was better than staying in that penthouse with temptation right under his nose.

He was losing it. Losing his fucking mind after one taste of Mirra. He had never thought of himself as the sentimental type. He'd never thought he was missing anything by keeping to the rules he had devised for his own protection.

One taste of her kiss though, and he'd turned into an emotional sap. He'd turned into his father. He'd been unbelievably tempted to let her pull him into bed so she could wrap herself around him. Give in to the urge to care for her and cuddle her and let her completely worm her way in. Last night he had wanted nothing more than to give into her demands. Which was exactly why he hadn't done it.

It would be far too easy to get attached. His ridiculous jealousy last night had proved he was already in danger. Then it would be a matter of time before she left him crushed. No way anything that felt so good could last.

Lennox stood, stretching his legs after sitting at the tiny human-sized desk in the back office of the workshop for too long. He walked out into the huge hanger where the modified racer Errytt was building him sat in pieces, along with various equipment and tools on shelves. The place was chaotic. There was no discernible order to where the tools were kept, or how things were stored, as far as he could tell. It was a complete contrast to the tidy office where everything was neatly ordered and tucked away. It was clear which part of the workshop was his friend's domain.

Maybe Cassie was actually good for Errytt. She certainly seemed to bring a little more structure to the way he operated. There was no denying that Errytt had been working hard to build his business. Lennox had been skeptical at first when Errytt had approached him for a loan. Of course he had given

him the marks. He would not deny his friend help. It was nice to be the one able to offer it for once. If he was honest though, he hadn't really expected the business to be a success. But talking to Errytt over the last few days, it seemed like things were going well.

A ping from the wall panel by the door surprised him. He had been expecting Errytt and Cassie back from the extended lunch break they'd taken. He wasn't sure why they would ring to enter their own workshop though. Still, he moved toward the panel until he came close enough to see the vid image of who was waiting on the other side of the door.

Mirra! Her face was creased into a scowl and her hands were cocked at her hips as she glared into the cam. "Open up, Lennox. I know you're in there."

He froze, staring at the panel. What was she doing here? He wasn't ready to face her after last night. Perhaps if he just ignored her, she would give up and go away.

Another ring. "Lennox. Don't be such a baby. Stop ignoring my vid-calls and talk to me."

He glanced guiltily at his wrist-com where sixteen missed calls sat unanswered.

"Open up, or I'm going straight back to the penthouse and telling your dad the whole truth about everything."

He slammed his hand down over the panel. "The fuck you will."

The doors slid open to reveal Mirra, her arms folded across her chest. "I knew you were here."

He cursed. This human saw through him far too easily.

"Well?" She tapped her foot as if she was waiting for something.

"Well, what? Say what you have to say and then leave me alone."

Mirra gave him a pitying look, shook her head once, and then she stepped through the doors. "Oh no." She unfolded her

arms and planted her hands against his chest, giving him a shove. “This goes beyond words.”

Confused, he let her shove him back toward the little office at the rear of the workshop. Beyond words. Was she after a repeat of last night? That didn’t seem to match up with her snarky demeanor. He couldn’t ignore the way his cock gave a little twitch inside his trousers at the thought though.

No. He wasn’t going there again. It had been a mistake last night. He would not let her goad him into it again.

She pushed him through the door to the office and down into the chair squeaking under his weight. Then she climbed into his lap and wrapped her arms around him.

“What are you doing?”

“What does it look like I’m doing?”

“I don’t know. From where I’m sitting it looks like you’ve completely lost it.”

Her arms squeezed tight around his middle and she pressed her head to his chest while he awkwardly held his arms out to the sides. Mirra just stayed there. She wasn’t moving, wasn’t trying to kiss him or run her hands over his body. She was giving him a hug. Just a hug.

What game was she playing now?

His fingers twitched. His arms grew tired. He patted her quickly on the back. “Okay. Well thanks, I guess. I’m actually pretty busy, so—”

“Shhh.” Mirra snuggled closer and rubbed the tip of her nose through the fur at his collarbone. Why did that feel so fucking good? It was all he could do not to close his arms around her and press her close. Not to lean down and inhale the clover and sunshine scent of her hair.

“Look, Mirra—”

“Shhh. Let it go. Whatever’s made you this way, can’t you try to let it go for a few minutes, and just have a hug?”

A hot crawling sensation swept over his skin. She thought she was going to fix him. As if he was some kind of puzzle to be solved. Lurching to his feet, he tried to push her off, but she clung to him like mold on the walls of a space station. “That’s enough, Mirra.”

“No. It isn’t.”

“I’m telling you it’s enough.”

“Why? Because you’re scared?”

“I’m not scared!” Wasn’t he? His heart thumped against his ribs so loudly she must hear it with her ear pressed against him. His hands shook with the effort of not grabbing her ass, not holding tight to her, making sure she never let him go. It was like a sick need had taken hold of him. Something he hadn’t known he’d wanted and suddenly couldn’t bear to be without. His eyes grew misty. “Let go.”

“No!”

“Let go, Mirra!”

She raised her head to look up at him. “Or what?”

A growl rose in this throat and he forced it down. He couldn’t growl her into submission, because then he’d never know if what she said and did was real. Then again, it wasn’t possible to ever know. Unless you could see into another person’s soul, you never knew what they were really thinking, feeling. There was always a chance—

“Or what, Lennox?”

Something in him snapped then. Her constant pushing. The insistent, earnest look in her hazel eyes tugged on something buried within him. “Or I do something I can’t take back,” he muttered.

His lips crashed against hers before he could think to stop. Her mouth opened and she welcomed his kiss as if she’d been waiting for it. Damn it, they both had.

He firmly closed his hands around her ass and lifted her, adjusting the angle to search her more deeply. She moaned, clutched him close, and gave more to him. At some point he

staggered to the racer and sat her on the nose. Then he concentrated on really devouring her mouth.

She was perfect, of course. Her body molded against his, mouth and tongue caressing him. Mirra had this way of tipping her head to the side at just the right angle to let him capture her lips again and again.

It was a mirror of how he pictured plunging into her. It was firm and sure and rhythmic, until he was lost in it. It was also tender, searching. All the things he never let himself feel, but he couldn't seem to hold back when he was with Mirra. So he kept his eyes pressed closed, afraid to fall into her even more if he opened them to find her watching him, looking into a heart he thought he had walled off.

It was Mirra who broke away from the kiss, panting. "Tell me what we're doing here."

He tried to capture her mouth again, but she twisted away.

"Lennox! Talk to me. There are a lot of things I don't mind being fake: my nails, my lashes, my boobs, but not this. This fake relationship is turning into something way too real. So you have to tell me what it is you want, because the way you touched me last night didn't feel fake to me. And the way you kissed me just now definitely wasn't fake."

He stared at her, body alive in all the places they were touching. "Don't do this, Mirra."

"Do what?" She pushed. She always had to push.

"Don't ask me questions I can't answer."

She stiffened in his arms. "Why can't you answer? Who the hell is stopping you?"

"I don't do this. This is exactly why I don't do this. Because I can't do feelings and serious conversations and futures. I can't do any of that."

"I think that's bullshit!"

He snarled, pulled away, leaving her sitting there on top of the sleek nose of the spaceship. "You don't know me. You don't know anything about me."

“Because you won’t let me!” Mirra slid down stalking across the floor as he retreated. “You don’t let anyone in, do you?”

“Why would I? All that will earn me is humiliation and heartbreak.”

She stopped. Lennox kept stumbling backward for a couple of paces until he realized she wasn’t pursuing anymore. “You really think that, don’t you?”

He glared at her.

She shook her head. “Then I feel sorry for you. Because you’ll never know all the good things you could be missing out on. You’ll never have the courage to try.” She turned and walked toward the doorway.

“Where are you going?”

“Home.”

“We’re not done here!” He had no comeback against her argument, but he sure as hell wasn’t finished. Now that she was walking away from him, he itched to have her in his arms again.

“Oh we’re done.” She didn’t even bother turning back to face him. “So I’m going to go get my stuff from the penthouse and then I’m going home. And I’m not coming back.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I’m done.” She finally turned, right in the doorway and gestured wildly at the distance between them. “I’m done here, with the fake dating. Because while you’re doing a bloody good job of protecting your heart over there, I’m in very real danger of having mine crushed. So I’m out.”

She stormed out the door while he still stared across the workshop at the place where she had been. The door swished shut and he was still staring. Lennox was still staring minutes later, mind in turmoil when Mirra’s words sunk in.

What a fucking disaster. The girl who was supposed to be a safe bet had turned out to be the wildest, messiest encounter he’d had in years. He kicked a tool he couldn’t even name up

across the floor. It collided with the wall with a ringing clang and fell to the floor. He threw another and another. The workshop was an even worse mess than before and he couldn't stop.

Mirra was the girl who was supposed to be immune to feelings. He had been up front with her from the start and what did he get? This disaster of a situation that was the complete opposite of what he'd asked for.

With a roar he slammed his fist into the side of the racer. It hurt like crazy and hardly even left a dent. He cursed.

"Wouldn't have given you the access code if I'd known you were just coming here to wreck the joint." Errytt's familiar voice jolted him out of his impending meltdown as a large hand clapped him on the shoulder.

"I'll buy you a new one when I'm done here," he grumbled, turning to face his friend.

"That's not always the answer, man. Want to talk about it?"

"No." Lennox stooped to pick up a laser cutter from a pile of things on the floor, looking around for a spot where it might belong.

Errytt chuckled. "Okay then. I guess you get to listen to me talk about how great things are with Cass then."

"Maybe I'll just trash the place and not buy you a new one, if you're going to be an ass."

Errytt only laughed. "I figured that's what you came here for. That or you need some advice about your female."

"Yeah, like I need a kick in the balls."

That earned him a raised brow. "So a lot then?"

"Fuck off."

They picked up a few tools in silence while Lennox wondered if he could handle Errytt's smug look if he actually asked for his advice.

"You want to know the best thing about having a mate?"

“No.” But he did, didn’t he? He pricked up his ears and waited for Errytt to continue, while studiously not looking at his friend.

“I actually look forward to the knot. I mean, don’t get me wrong. You always look forward to a good knotting, right? But now, after is almost as good as the knotting itself. It’s not awkward and you’re not worrying about how long you’ll be stuck like that. You just enjoy.”

Lennox rolled his eyes. Only so much mushy feels he could take from Errytt. Only so much of that uncomfortable feeling in his chest that felt a damn sight like jealousy too.

“Okay, I’ll talk.”

Errytt tossed a wrench into a container of tools with a clang and brushed hands over his oily overalls. “Brilliant. Shall I break out the alcohol now, or later?” He was already moving toward a little cool drawer and retrieving two beers. He handed one to Lennox who took it without drinking.

“She wasn’t supposed to get attached.”

“Ah, but who could resist falling for your charms?” Errytt laughed, taking a long swig of his drink.

Lennox glared at him. “I did my best to keep things simple. I explained the rules. She just seems determined to break them every chance she gets. And what’s worse, she makes me want to break them.”

Errytt nodded. “That I can understand.”

“But she’s going to get hurt. She said as much. Said we can’t keep doing...whatever it is we’re doing.”

“Hmmm.”

“I don’t want to hurt her, but I’m not ready to stop.”

“Huh. Sounds like you might have already broken the rules yourself.”

He sighed. “Just about all of them. And I’d do it again.”

“Then why not, man? Fuck the rules. If there’s one thing I know, it’s that sometimes you’ve gotta take a chance. Break

the rules. If it's what you want, go after it. Things will work themselves out. You'll see."

Lennox sighed again, finally opening his beer and taking a drink. The malty flavor washed over his tongue and he rubbed a thumb over the cool surface of the can while he thought.

Perhaps he was looking at this all wrong. The advice Errytt had given him was basically the same thing Mirra had been advocating all along. Her spirit of adventure and her spark had drawn him to her. Those were the qualities he admired most about Errytt as well. The ability to launch recklessly into new ventures with his whole heart.

It was the very opposite of the female he remembered when he pictured his mother. She had been closed off, secretive. She had been bitter and reserved. Exactly what he had somehow managed to turn himself into.

By the nine! He hadn't turned into his father at all. He had spent the last twenty years turning himself into *her*!

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SEVENTEEN

The walk from the warehouse to the Aphelion hotel felt like it took him back across the twenty years since his mother had walked out on them when he was ten. Except instead of feeling young again, Lennox felt as if twenty more years had been added to his life. When he swiped his chip and entered the bright, sumptuous space, he just felt tired.

Mirra hadn't wasted any time. One look into the closet in his bedroom told him she had been and gone.

He felt his father's presence behind him and turned to find the older male with a somber expression on his face. "Want to talk about it?"

He sighed. There was one thing he had to know. "Why aren't you more angry?"

His father frowned. "What would I be angry about?"

"I mean about Reiyana. Why weren't you more angry? If it were me, I'd have been livid. It's like she took a part of you with her when she left."

His father rubbed his chin. "I suppose she did, in a way. We'll always be connected because we have you. Even if we don't speak anymore. And I was angry at first. At her and at myself. But I never wanted to show that to you."

"Why not?"

"Because if nothing else, she's still your mother, and she deserves your respect."

Lennox shook his head. "No. She's not. She walked away from that the day she walked out."

His father put an arm around him and gave his shoulders a squeeze. "I hope you get past that some day."

Impossible. He didn't say that though. He was unwilling to spoil the fragile warmth between them with more bitterness. "So why'd you try to set me up with a match? After going

through all that? I'm not saying I want it. I'm just trying to understand."

Aedard pulled back to look at him for a long moment. "Because no matter how things ended, I don't regret it. Those years with your mother were some of the best years of my life and more than anything, it gave me you. And I want very much for you to have that."

"I'm not missing out on anything I need." The words were automatic. But beneath them he suddenly had the feeling of stepping out onto an icy road. The world under his feet that had always felt so solid now felt treacherous. He could tell himself he was fine. He was self-sufficient. He didn't need anyone else. It didn't change the fact that picturing the rest of his future without anyone to share it with hurt more today than it ever had before.

His father watched him quietly.

Had he made a mistake letting Mirra walk away? It sure felt like it. Well, there was only one thing to do about it now. But chasing after her meant leaving himself open to the possibility she would reject him. No one ever rejected him. He never gave them the opportunity. In order to win the greatest prize, sometimes you had to take a risk. If he could do it in business, he could do it in his personal life too.

"I've got to go," he said, suddenly.

His father smiled. "Something you need to take care of?"

He nodded. "Yeah. I might not be back tonight. In fact, I hope I won't be back. But I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Yeah. I'll be here. Go get her, son."

••••

It had taken more convincing than Lennox expected, to get Errytt and Cassie to give him Mirra's address. In the end they'd given in when he said he'd stalk Mirra at work if they didn't. They hadn't been happy about it. No doubt they were already calling to warn her he was coming. He stormed down the narrow street, five shopping bots trailing in his wake with the things he had hastily ordered. The bracelet he'd bought her

the day before was still in his pocket, since he'd completely forgotten to give it to her once he'd spotted her leaving the Pinnacle Hotel. He only hoped the gifts would be enough—that *he* would be enough.

Moments later he was buzzing her apartment repeatedly, heart thundering in his chest and hands shaky over the panel.

Mirra's scowling face appeared on the viewscreen. "This had better be good, Lennox. Because I meant what I said."

He squinted at what he could see of the apartment behind her, taking in the single boxy room and the bed that took up most of the space. "It might be bad actually."

Her eyes narrowed. "What?"

He rubbed at his neck, glancing behind to assess the amount of things each bot was carrying. It definitely felt like he had gone overboard. "Well, I'm not sure all the flowers I bought are going to fit inside that tiny apartment, so yeah. It might be bad."

"Flowers?"

He nodded, feeling like a bit of a fool. "Yeah. Flowers."

The only thing keeping him from turning and fleeing was the moment her scowl changed into a smile. Laughter broke over her features. A second later the door pinged and slid open.

He had definitely miscalculated. That became clear as soon as the bots tried to hover into the elevator. Only three of them fit.

Mirra stood in the doorway of the elevator when it opened on her floor. She hardly even waited for the doors to open before she launched herself into his arms. Laughing in surprise, he caught her up and she planted kisses all over his face.

"You're not angry?"

"How can I be angry when you brought flowers? No one ever brought me flowers before."

He smiled against her mouth. It was too much. It made him wish he had a few more firsts to give to her. “Which one is your apartment?”

She pointed him toward an apartment on his left where the door stood open. As soon as they entered, the bots started piling up bunches of flowers by the door. “Stupid things.” He was about to kick them out of the way when Mirra struggled out of his arms.

“Don’t! They’re so beautiful.” She bent, gathering as much as she could carry into her arms. She looked around the apartment and turned back to him with a rueful smile. “And my apartment is so not.” She hurried to the kitchen, dragging out glasses and cups of all shapes and sizes. None of them seemed to match. When she filled one with water and stuck the first bunch of flowers inside, Lennox realized what she was doing. Then he bent to help.

“I don’t even have a vase.”

“I’ll buy you one.” He looked around. “I’ll buy you a hundred. I think I’ll have to.”

She laughed. “That’s not the point. Look at this place. What must you be thinking?”

Lennox looked, his eyes flitting over the apartment before returning to Mirra. It was trite, but he’d hardly noticed it. He’d been too wrapped up in her smile and her joy. It felt stupid to say so though. “Should I send the other two bots back to the shop?”

“There’s more?”

He nodded, feeling even more ridiculous, but Mirra grinned.

“Don’t send them back! I don’t care if we cover every surface of this place with flowers. I want them all.”

Lords, she was bright sunshine off white snow, this female. So brilliant it hurt to look at her. Within two short strides, he had her in his arms again. She giggled and clung to him as he brought them to her tiny bed and crawled on top of her. The

bed creaked in protest. “The door is still open!” Mirra laughed. She wasn’t pushing him away though.

He kissed his way over her collarbone and down her chest between her breasts. He longed to tear off the shabby green dress she wore so he could taste her skin, but he could probably wait until after the last two bots delivered the rest of the flowers and they could close the door. “Let’s start over. If you can forget the fact that I was a dick to you for the last six weeks.”

“No. That’s not true.”

He pushed up her hem and kissed up one thigh. “It is.”

“No. You were only a dick about ninety percent of the time. You did take me out for some nice dinners.”

He started to growl against her skin but checked it. She still shivered. “Mmm. Keep doing that.”

“No. I don’t want this to be because I growled your brain into your pussy. I want this to be real.”

Mirra pushed up on one elbow, looking at him with an adorably serious expression. “This is real, Lennox.” She took his hand, guiding him to her mound as she slipped her panties to one side. “I don’t think I’ve ever been more real than the way we were last night.”

As soon as his fingers slid between her folds, he found her slick and hot. He groaned. “So wet.”

Mirra nodded. “Always. Even when you’re being a dick, you still get me wet. And when you’re like this.” The way she looked down at him, biting her red lips was enough to finish that sentence. It was almost enough to finish him!

“Where are those fucking bots?” As he glanced around the last two bots were piling the remaining shopping atop the mess in the doorway. Not a moment too soon. He needed his mouth on that pussy and that honey on his tongue. Leaping up, he strode to the panel. The door closed with a satisfying hiss. Finally he had Mirra to himself.

He turned and drank in the sight of her spread out on the bed. “Panties off.”

Lifting her hips, she quickly obeyed.

“Leave that dress on for now. I want to rip it off you.” He flexed his claws, picturing it.

“Dick.” Laughter filled her tone.

“You like it.”

“Maybe.”

When he reached the side of the bed, he grabbed her ankles, hauling her toward him. Then he kneeled, bringing his mouth to her cunt and taking his first taste. Mirra wrapped her legs around his shoulders, and he sank into her sweetness, the salty edge to her flavor driving him on.

When she dug her heels into his back and lifted her hips to bring his mouth to the place she wanted him, his cock surged in appreciation. Normally he would slide his fist over his shaft, milking out a load of come quickly to get her nice and ready. He paused with his hand closed around his cock.

What would it be like to knot a female who wasn't in heat? A female who was fully lucid and one hundred percent in control like he would be?

“What are you thinking, Lennox?”

Delving inside her tight little cunt, he was gifted with yet more moisture. “This perfect little pussy is so slick already. You don't even need juicing. Can you take my knot without my come?”

Mirra gasped. Then her voice came out breathy and full of laughter. “Won't know unless we try.”

Yes! It was like this female read his mind sometimes. Sex without heat took a very different mindset. There would be no rushing this. He would need to go slow, make sure he spent time making her ready. His cock throbbed against the seam of his trousers. He would have to be careful.

Ducking his head again, he worked more thoroughly over her pussy, concentrating on the places that made her gasp or sigh. When she fisted a handful of his hair, he paid thorough attention to the hood of her clitoris until the swollen bud fully emerged. Flicking his tongue across the sensitive nub made her buck.

“Ah! Too much. Lower!” She guided him to a new place. When he found just the right way to work her, he settled into a new rhythm. Sucking gently over the whole area made her cry out and moan his name. He did it again and she urged him on. With the sounds of Mirra’s praise ringing in his ears, he slipped a finger inside her, coaxing her wider.

She grew frantic. He increased the speed and pressure of his movements. Had he ever paid this much attention before? Every slick sound and shuddering moan was like a fucking medal he had worked to earn. Mirra’s thighs locked around his ears. “That’s it. Just like that.”

She was close. She had to be close. Sure enough, moments later she let out a long, keening cry and her pussy contracted in brief pulses around his finger.

Lords, he had to be inside her. But this was only the beginning. Even inside her he still had to hold back. Still had to work to bring her to the point he needed her. That little pussy needed to open wider for him before she’d be ready for knotting.

Time for the ugly dress to go. His claws made short work of the faded fabric. Then he lowered himself onto the creaking bed and nestled between those strong thighs.

By the nine! Sweet torture. The tip of his cock slipped inside without him meaning it to. She moaned, clutching at his fur and he was lost. With a snarl, he pushed into her, feeling her walls giving way to him as he went deeper. Deeper, and she cried his name again. “Move! Oh goddess, please move. You feel so good. I can’t wait.”

Holy hells, he was not going to last.

“You going to take all of me, gorgeous?”

“Mmm.”

“That’s it. Take more. Take it all.”

She cried out. He kept going.

Pleasure teased down his spine and tightened his balls. He paused, squeezing his eyes closed as he took a long breath to steady himself. When he opened them again, Mirra was watching him, hazel eyes locked on his face. He brought himself closer, bracing on his elbows so he could kiss her slowly. He almost forgot to move. The feeling of breathing her in, of joining with her was more intense than he had ever experienced before. “You hug me so tight.” For a moment he wasn’t even sure if he was talking about her snug pussy or something more.

She hooked her ankles around his hips, holding him close. He lost himself in rocking gently against her, pushing her down against the bed and grinding against her clit. All the while, he fell into the gaze he couldn’t look away from, loving the way her lips parted on a gasp and grazed against his in a kiss that wasn’t quite a kiss.

Had he known it could be like this?

He had fucked countless females. He’d fucked them hard, demanding pleasure and nothing more. He never thought about what he might be missing.

This wasn’t fucking.

He was moving unbearably slowly, the pleasure still rising to tug at his core and drawing his balls tighter. Every tiny motion made him hyper-conscious of the way her walls hugged his cock, or the way she shifted to take him deeper.

It still wasn’t deep enough. Lennox pushed Mirra’s leg up and drove further, leaving them both gasping. Could it ever be enough? Impossible. It didn’t stop him thrusting long and deep, reaching for something he couldn’t name.

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EIGHTEEN

Lennox buried himself so deep Mirra swore he touched a spot inside no one had ever touched before. That was trite. He was big. Maybe the biggest guy she'd ever been with. She hadn't really ever catalogued it that carefully. It wasn't really about his size.

It was the way he angled to stretch her further. It was the way he drove down slowly against her clit as if he knew just what he was doing to her. More than any of that, it was the way he covered her and stared so fiercely into her eyes as if he might lose his way in the dark somehow if they lost contact. A scrapper with a gassed out tank, drifting off into the void.

I'll catch you. She didn't want to break the spell, so she kept silent, but she said it to him without words as she held his gaze. She clung to his fur and breathed his name.

He hit a sensitive spot and she clenched, greedy for more of what he was giving. He swore, hips jerking into her. "Mirra, you feel so fucking good. I'm not sure I can last."

She kissed him, dragging his lip between her teeth. "Then don't. It's not like you have to stop after you come. And I can take the heat."

He shook his head. "Not this time. This time I want you with me all the way."

She nodded, understanding. "I'm with you. What do you need?"

"Need to give you my knot. Need you to stretch for me. Can you take it?"

That delicious stretch. The way he would hold her after. She grinned. "Yes, please!"

"And I need you to come again. I want you screaming my name by the time we're done."

Oh yes! "Then give it to me faster. Harder."

He groaned. Then he set his jaw and lifted himself over her on powerful arms. “You ready, baby?”

Goddess, was she ever! “Give it to me.”

Lennox thrust into her with a brutal slap. Their bodies made erotic sounds as he increased his pace. It shook her breasts. It shook the bed. Her poor flimsy reconfig bed creaked and groaned along with them as their movements rocked the joints where it folded down from the wall.

Fuck the bed.

All she could think about was the way his thick flesh filled her up. So good. So damn good. And he had more to give her. The feeling of his knot swelling inside her was a dim memory colored with the haze of the lust of her heat. What would it be like when she wasn't in heat? She couldn't wait to find out.

Lennox was clearly riding the edge of his control. His glorious muscles were tense beneath his silver fur. Sweat dampened it until it clung to every perfect ridge and dip. Savage grunts escaped his lips and hot puffs of breath fanned her face. He never once looked away.

He was so beautiful, this male. So vulnerable here in this moment with her. It scared her a little. She hoped he wouldn't snatch it away when he came back to his senses and realized how much he had shown her.

Lennox groaned, the tendons in his neck straining. “Mirra, are you close, baby?”

“I'm close. Keep going.”

Cutting off his growl, he slipped a hand beneath her ass to lift her. The new angle was so good. Her eyes closed and she threw her head to one side. “Just like that. Just like that. Oh keep going, I'm going to—”

One more powerful thrust and there was a crack and groan from the bed. Above her, Lennox roared, his claws digging into the flesh of her ass.

The sting of his claws, the harsh guttural cry from his chest and his knot swelling inside her, pushed Mirra over the edge.

She tipped into a floating, weightless breath. Her gravity cut out for a moment and she was suspended. Then she crashed into a dip of pleasure so powerful it felt like falling for many strung out minutes.

When she blinked her eyes open again, she was at a strange angle. Her head and shoulders were hanging over the side of her bed and the whole bed had tipped to one side. Lennox's firm grip held her steady. His brow was furrowed. "You okay, baby?"

"Mmm. Yes. What happened to my bed?"

His expression tightened and he looked away. "Ah, I think —"

A jolt and a crash and her feet righted themselves until they were in line with her head again.

"—we broke it," Lennox finished.

She snorted. That turned into a full-blown laugh when he continued to frown down at her. "We broke the bed and you don't think that's even a little bit funny?" The laughter made her clench and Lennox sucked in a breath.

"Careful, Mirra. I would have said it's not possible, but if I come again now, I don't know what happens."

She squirmed a little, relishing the full feeling of his knot stuffed inside her, holding them in place. The bed had crashed completely to the floor. Lennox maneuvered them and rolled her on top of him, holding her against his chest. He sighed. "I'm just glad you're okay. I thought for a moment there..."

She lifted her head to look at him. "You thought you broke me and not the bed?"

He nodded.

Mirra laid her head back on his warm chest. "Silly. Takes more than a little knot to break me."

"Little?" He pulsed inside her, stretching out inner walls already feeling highly sensitive.

She kept her moan in check with difficulty. “Mmm. I’ve had bigger.”

“Liar.” A firm hand on her ass pushed her down, impaling her further until she gasped at the pleasure-pain.

Laughing breathlessly, she clutched a handful of his chest fur and tugged. “Okay, you win. You’re huge. Best cock I’ve ever seen.”

Sliding a hand up her naked back he practically purred. “Damn right. Now stop thinking about any other cock but mine.”

“Is that what we’re doing then?”

His tone lost some of its casual warmth. “What? Is what what we’re doing? Ximians don’t share. *I* don’t fucking share.”

“Relax.” She smoothed her hand down his muscled pectoral. “I’m not seeing anyone else. And I’m not thinking about their cock either. You don’t have to share me with anyone.”

Lennox relaxed. “Good.”

“Then we’re doing this? For real?”

“We are.”

She nestled closer. “And how long for? How long are we being real?”

He said nothing for such a long time that she looked up again and found him frowning down at her. “I don’t know.”

Mirra smiled. She wasn’t sure she would have been able to trust him if he’d said something romantic, like forever. “Good answer. As long as you’re not putting any rules and limits on it, we can wait and see.” If she were expecting a ring and a proposal after one—no two—rounds of really hot sex, she was searching the wrong scrap. Never mind that it would be completely out of character for her. Still, she couldn’t help hoping that *I don’t know* didn’t turn into *it’s over* any time soon. She could get far too used to being held like this by this prickly, intelligent male with a heart of gold. It was too

intoxicating to think she'd been the one to see through his shields and find the Lennox underneath.

"I almost forgot!" He reached behind him to his discarded clothing and pulled out a beautifully wrapped package. "I got this for you yesterday, but with everything that happened, I didn't end up giving it to you."

Taking it from him, she unwrapped the film until a blue box fell out onto his chest. He smiled down at her anxiously as she opened the box. She gasped. "It's beautiful!"

"You like it?"

"I love it!" She tossed the box onto the bed and put the bracelet onto her wrist, turning it this way and that to admire the sparkle. "You've been paying attention. Or was it just a lucky guess that I love red?"

"I had a fairly good idea. Besides, something about it just reminded me of you."

Snuggling into his chest again, she willed this to be real. Don't be some stupid fantasy. Don't be the universe setting her up for a massive fall. This guy. This version of Lennox was more beautiful than she knew what to do with!

He stroked up and down her spine, and she was drifting to sleep on his broad muscular chest when a buzz from his wrist-com made her blink open her eyes in surprise.

He swore. "I forgot all about this vid-call. Do you mind? I have to take this or the takeover could fall through."

"I don't mind." She wriggled, but his knot was still almost fully swollen. "Uh, but what about your—?"

He held up his com and answered before she finished. "Kaeler. I've got you on audio only. I'm a little tied up right now. Can I call you back in ten?"

Mirra snorted her amusement into his furry chest at his use of the term tied up. It was now officially a term she'd never use again without a smirk on her face. Lennox held up a finger to his mouth to shush her.

“I’m afraid it can’t wait,” the voice on the com said. “I’ve got Ms. Deysa on the other line saying she’s going to need another hundred thousand, or she’s opening talks with Nasqu Media.”

A low rumble vibrated Lennox’s chest and sent shivers through Mirra’s body. She bit her lip to keep from moaning. “That asshole. Do you think she’s bluffing?”

The other person sighed. “No. I don’t think so. Or I wouldn’t have called.”

Lennox swore. “Fine. Up the offer, but you let her know that’s my final figure. I’m not going higher than that. And if she walks now, that’s the last I’ll ever do business with her or any of her affiliates.”

“Understood, Mr. Bekkin. I think you made the right call.”

“You better hope so.” As Lennox cut off the call, his knot slid free with a wet slurp. When Mirra would have rolled off him, his firm hand held her in place. “Where do you think you’re going?”

Mirra giggled. “I guess nowhere if you’re going to keep being cute. What was that all about?”

He huffed. “I’m supposed to be buying out a company today. The deal is already supposed to have been signed. But they’re playing a last minute gambit to get more marks.”

“Mmm. And you want this company pretty badly from the sounds of it.”

He sighed. “I do. And I’m sure they’ve seen through me. I ordinarily wouldn’t do business this way, but buying Phantom Media could be my one chance to put Nasqu Media out of business. And I certainly can’t let those bastards get their hands on Phantom Media if I don’t buy it.”

Mirra gripped his arms, heart rising into her throat. “Did you say Phantom Media?”

Lennox nodded. “Yeah, that’s right.”

“You own Phantom Media?”

He shrugged. "I'm about to."

Her head was spinning. "Then you can save them!"

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NINETEEN

Mirra clutched at Lennox's fur. How could she not have realized she was fake dating—now actually dating—the one person who held the power to really make a difference at Fortuna? It made her feel guilty for not asking him about it before, like she had said to Dinah she would.

“What do you mean, save them?” Lennox narrowed his eyes.

“The people. Back at Fortuna. The ones addicted to Real Life.”

“Addicted? Don't you think you're exaggerating just a little?”

She sat up, not caring about the wet patch forming beneath her or the broken bed, or anything else. She saw a shuttered look she had grown to know and hate. “No. I'm not exaggerating at all! If you had seen them, you would understand.”

Lennox watched her another long moment, pushing himself up to rest on one elbow. “This is important to you.”

Just like that, he was back, compassion returning to his dark eyes. She let out a long, shaky breath. This was going to take some getting used to. “Yes. This is very important to me.”

He frowned, smoothing a hand down the fur on his chest. “This takeover and the success of the business is important to me. I need to turn the business around in under a year and have it making a profit. Real Life is one of the reasons I think I can do that. Tell me more about why you think people are addicted.”

“The people I've seen. The ones really addicted. They lose focus on everything else. They don't work. They hardly sleep. They're living off government synth tablets and charity water.”

“So they're playing a game all day, not working, and taking handouts? Doesn't sound like much of a problem to me,

except for the Earth government.”

Mirra held back a groan of frustration. “No. You’re not getting it. It’s not just a game. It’s like an illness. They don’t even talk to each other or anyone else. Cassie’s parents, they were my neighbors back home. They were some of the first people to be sucked in. They just sit there. Day in, day out. They hardly even look up from their screens.”

Lennox shrugged. “If they don’t have the sense to stop, what do you want me to do about it?”

“Phantom Media used to have screen time controls set up within the game. It used to prompt people to switch off after a certain amount of time. But recently they shut them off. At the very least, you could switch them back on. But I think Real Life itself should shut down after a set number of hours. It’s not healthy for people to be on it constantly.”

“Mirra, that might be a nice idea, but it’s not good business. That won’t take Phantom Media out of the red. I need eyes on screens so advertisers will pay more to run ads through Real Life. I don’t need to be shutting willing players out.”

“Then you don’t care that you’re just screwing people over?” She pushed a shaky hand through her hair, fighting down a tightness in her throat.

Lennox sat. “I’m not doing anything yet. I haven’t even bought the company yet.”

“But you will. And it doesn’t matter what I say, does it? At the end of the day, it’s all about profit and getting even richer. God, you’re such an asshole.” She started to get up, looking around for her dress when she remembered he had ripped it. Lennox’s warm hand on her arm made her look back.

“I’m not trying to be an asshole, Mirra. And it’s not really about getting richer. It’s complicated, but I have my reasons for wanting this and they’re not financial.”

She glared at him, pinching her lips together to keep from slinging more insults around.

Lennox's thumb rubbed small circles over her skin.
"Mirra, I don't want to make you sad. Tell me how I can fix this."

She sighed. He was actually trying. "I just wish you could see for yourself how this is affecting people."

He smiled. "Well, that's easy."

She blinked. "It is?"

"We'll go to Fortuna and you can show me."

We'll go to Fortuna. Like it was nothing! When the journey had taken her whole life and help from a friend to save for. But of course for him it was nothing. Goddess, he probably owned his own spaceship. They wouldn't even have to book passage in a cruiser.

She shook her head, a smile creeping over her face.
"Would you do that for me?"

"Of course I would. I'd do anything in my power to keep that frown off your gorgeous face."

She couldn't help laughing. "You'd do anything in your power to make sure you keep getting in my pants, you mean."

Lennox grinned, pulling her against his furry chest before rolling on top of her. He nudged between her thighs. "I think you'll find you don't have any pants. Or any dress. So I'm pretty sure that's not the reason I'm doing this."

She laughed. His thickening length against her thigh turned her laughter into a little moan of pleasure. "So you're not interested in getting inside this tight little pussy again, huh?"

Grasping his cock, he rubbed his cockhead through her sensitive folds. "I never said that." A tiny thrust of his hips had her gasping. Her pussy was completely slick from their combined juices and even the small amount of friction felt amazing.

"Are you sore?"

She shook her head. "Not at all."

"Are you still angry?"

“No.” Lifting her hips she chased more contact, which he denied her.

“Then if I growl, you won’t hate me later?”

She groaned. “No. Goddess, no. I love your growl.”

Lennox dipped his head to kiss along her neck and a low, teasing rumble hummed against her skin. “Even when it turns your brain to mush and makes you do exactly what I say?”

“You just think that because I’m nice to you. But you won’t make me do anything I don’t already want to do.”

Another louder rumble, almost a growl. She shivered.

“Is that right?”

“Yeah. That’s right.”

He drove his cock through her folds, nudging against her clit as his growl ripped through her body. Tremors shook her legs and curled her toes. Every muscle clenched and released and she came in a rush of sticky wetness with a gasping cry.

Her clit still throbbed from her orgasm when Lennox’s chuckle penetrated through the thick fog clouding her mind. “Get up and get rid of those flowers,” he said, quietly.

What? The flowers he’d just bought. Surely he didn’t want her to—

Her legs carried her off the bed and toward the kitchen, where rows of glasses filled with flowers still sat. She had actually opened the waste chute, when his next command stopped her. “Don’t, Mirra. I didn’t mean it.”

She paused, rubbing a hand over her eyes and feeling a tingle in her pussy just from the deep bass of his voice. What was she doing with the flowers again?

“Come back to bed,” Lennox said softly.

She turned and walked back toward the bed. He took the glass of flowers out of her hands and placed it on the floor, then he brushed a lock of hair from her face. “You see? I need you to know that I’ll never do it if you don’t want it. I’ll never take advantage of you. But I also needed you to know that I

could. So you understand what I'm asking for when I ask if you want my growl."

She nodded slowly. That seemed to make sense.

He bent and pressed a kiss to her forehead and she smiled. That felt nice.

"Come and let me help you shower. When it's worn off, you can tell me if you still don't hate me."

She let him lead her to the tiny bathroom and stood languidly watching him squeeze into the tiny space and switch on the water. He was still naked. As he bent over to squash into the tiny human-sized shower, she got a great view of his firm ass and muscled back.

Yep. She was one lucky girl.

She was even more sure of that moments later when he ushered her under the warm water and kneeled with the door of the shower open so he could wash her. She could have done it herself, but it was so nice to have him take care of her, she didn't bother brushing him away. She just stood staring dreamily at the ugly green bioplas of the shower walls until her brain rearranged itself back into focus.

She stared down at Lennox on his knees beside the shower. "You're really worried I'll hate you, aren't you?"

He looked up at her sheepishly. "Did I make a mistake?"

She shook her head. "No, but I'll admit I underestimated it. Did you do that to me before? The first time you growled at me?"

He winced. "Sort of. That time I was a little more careful. I didn't give you everything. But it probably had a similar effect, yes."

"I wondered why I didn't argue with you more."

He rubbed his large hands up her thigh, lathering more soap over her skin. "So do you hate me?"

"No. I like that you were honest with me. And it probably won't stop me asking you to do it again." She grinned. "I like

the result too much.”

His face relaxed into a smile, and he continued washing her gently. When he turned her to reach her back, his thumb rubbed over her shoulder blade, over the tattoo she’d had done when she first arrived at Nova.

“What’s this?”

She looked back over her shoulder. “It’s a kangaroo.”

He chuckled. “Okay, but what’s it for? You have a thing about kangaroos?”

She laughed. “Not really. But someone told me once that they can’t go backwards. Used to be a thing on early postmodern Earth apparently. Some government symbol.”

“And you’re deeply interested in historical politics so you decided to have it scarred into your skin?”

She smirked. “Hardly. But I like the idea. There’s no point looking back at the past too much. You can’t go back there. So an animal which can’t move backward seemed appropriate. I love my new life and I never want to end up back on Fortuna. So I had the kangaroo tattooed on me to remind me to make this work.”

“Hmm.” His thumb rubbed across the tattoo and then down her spine.

Mirra smiled. “And yes I know it’s a bit silly to say that a historical symbol is a good reminder not to look back at the past, but whatever. I still like it.”

He stood, pressing a kiss to her shoulder. “I wasn’t thinking that.”

“Then what were you thinking?” She turned to face him, looking up at his wistful expression.

“That I wish I could think a bit more like you sometimes.”

She laughed. She laughed even harder when she had finished her shower and she got to watch a seven-foot alien squash himself into her too-small shower. Then she dried herself and let Lennox tuck her into the broken bed while she

snuggled against him and wondered how she'd somehow landed on her feet with everything she'd ever wanted.

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TWENTY

Lennox pressed a finger over the control panel, turning the treadmill up. Hopefully pushing himself to run a little faster would kick his brain into gear. It was getting harder and harder to focus in the mornings. As winter approached back on Ximia, his instincts were telling him to slow down and conserve energy. This was the time of year to enjoy sleeping late and eating too much, any excuse to stay in and get cozy. It was not the time of year to travel. But what could he do? Each day it was becoming clearer how much Mirra had invested in this trip, even if she didn't say it.

Lennox ran faster, switching his focus to controlling his breathing, keeping up with the demanding pace of the treadmill, ignoring the burn in his chest. That just told him he was working hard enough.

He'd never been a fan of winter. Not since the year his parents split. Each year he pushed harder, fought his instincts, trained his body to resist the hybrid DNA that urged him to hibernate.

It might have been his imagination, but it was particularly difficult this year.

Now that he had Mirra, all he wanted to do was make excuses to keep her in his bed all day and close himself off from the rest of the world. So of course, like an idiot, he fought harder to maintain his usual routine. It felt dangerous to do otherwise—to let himself give in to it. Right now he had everything he wanted. How long would it last? Not forever. Nothing lasted forever. When he had thrown out the rule book, he'd resigned himself to getting hurt. He'd told himself he could handle it.

The more time he spent with her though, the more he realized how badly he had underestimated how much it was going to hurt when she eventually broke his heart.

Breathing hard, he put his head down and powered through the last ten minutes of the workout. Then he pressed a hand

over the panel and brought the machine to a slow stop. He brought up his wrist-com. Two and a half hours until they arrived at Fortuna.

Opening a message, he typed what was on his mind.

Lennox: Hey, how are things? I think I owe you a proper apology. And a beer. When I get back to Nova, I'd like to really spend some time with you and Cass. Get to know her properly.

*Errytt: I'd like that. What's changed? Not getting the feels are you? *smirking face**

Lennox laughed.

Lennox: Yeah. Something like that. But don't tell anyone. I'm not ready for the universe to know my dirty secret.

Errytt: Hey, man. Don't do that to me. You know I keep nothing from Cass.

Lennox: Tell her and die. I haven't even said anything to Mirra yet. It's too soon. I could be wrong. I might just be sick.

Errytt: LOL Yeah. You got it bad. You've got a week.

Fuck! What on Ximia had possessed him to admit that to Errytt? The idea of telling Mirra what he was feeling both terrified and excited him. He wasn't ready to jinx what they had by blurting it out before he'd figure out exactly how to frame it. It wasn't like he wanted to put a wreath on it and make it permanent. Was it?

Mirra was still asleep. When he entered the bedroom, all he could see of her was her foot poking out from beneath the huge comforter she insisted on wrapping herself in each night. He crept toward the bathroom on quiet feet. Just as he got to the doorway, she pushed back the covers from her face and blinked up at him, hair adorably tousled and eyes still sleepy. "Hi."

"Good morning. We're almost there. I'm just going to take a shower."

"Come back to bed."

“I’m all sweaty.” And it was hot in here. Had she turned the climate control up?

Mirra threw back the covers, revealing perky breasts and a bare pussy that practically called his name. He groaned. He loved and hated that she didn’t wear anything to bed. It made getting up hard and staying up even harder. Well, one part of him was very much up and staying up. She grinned, eyes dropping to where his erection tented the front of his gym shorts. “Good. Come and make me sweaty too.”

“If I come back to bed now, we’ll be there all day.”

“Mhm. And the problem with that would be?”

“I thought you wanted to show me Fortuna. Plus I have work to do today.”

Mirra rolled her eyes. “Fine, fine, Mr. Bigshot Billionaire. Go have your shower.” She flung the covers aside completely and launched out of bed. “I can be flexible. I like shower sex too.”

He groaned and adjusted his cock as it pulsed against his hand. Mirra slipped around him and dashed to the shower, switching on the water and darting beneath the spray. “Ha! Too slow. Now you have to stand on the cold side and I get the hot water.” She emphasized her words by splashing water out into his face.

He gave her the tiniest growl. Just enough to make her scent ripen. “Be careful, or I’ll make you stand on the cold side until I’m finished.”

She bit her lip, sliding her hands up to pinch her nipples. “You’ll have to growl more than that if you want me to move.”

Lennox slipped into the convenient distraction, telling himself he had time. Besides, he needed longer to make sure he composed just the right words.

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An hour later, they made it out of the shower and Mirra struggled into yoga pants and a sweater, tying her hair up in a messy bun on top of her head. Lennox left his chest bare, only

bothering to tug on some shorts. He'd already turned the climate control up as much as he could stand to keep Mirra from freezing.

It always made him smile at night when she got cold and tucked her icy toes under his legs or pressed her face to his back and snuggled close. Of all the stupid things to like about someone. Cold toes would not have ever been on the list of things he would have expected to bring him joy, but somehow, with Mirra, they did.

He didn't like it when she got cold outside bed though, and he couldn't warm her up as easily.

She went straight for the synth machine and started making coffee. Leaning over the counter in a way that had her rounded ass on display for him in those tight pants, she scanned the menu panel. "Congee or bacon roll?"

"Neither."

She turned, rolling her eyes at his expression of disdain. "You're so fussy. You can't afford to be such a snob if you're going to survive at Fortuna."

He sighed. "Synthed food sucks. You can't deny that."

Mirra shrugged. "I can't even really tell the difference."

He stepped up behind her, placing a hand on each hip and pulling her back slightly so her ass rested against his groin. "That's because we still need to work on giving you an appreciation for the finer things in life."

She smiled back at him. "Oh, I appreciate fine things. And I am more than happy for you to take me out to all the fancy restaurants once we get back to Nova. But for now, synth food is all we've got."

"Maybe I'll just eat you instead."

She wiggled her ass suggestively threatening to make him hard again already. "Be my guest. I'm hungry though, so I'm making congee."

With a last squeeze, he released her and stepped back. When had he gotten so starved for touch that he could hardly

keep his hands off her? It had been like this since he'd finally admitted this was more than a fake arrangement.

He followed Mirra to the table where she set their bowls of food. Instead of bringing up his com like he should have, and getting some work done, he sat and ate the savory porridge and watched Mirra type messages on her socials.

When the computer beeped and announced they were approaching planetary orbit, Mirra straightened in her seat. Her eyes met his. "Are you sure you want to do this? Maybe this is a bad idea."

Lennox slipped his hand under the table to rest it on Mirra's thigh, feeling the tension in her muscles. "What are you worried about?"

She sighed. "That you'll see the shithole where I come from and be disgusted. That my family will do something stupid and embarrassing. That you'll hate it."

"Do you want me to like it?"

"No! Even I hate it. Of course I hate it. That's why I left. Nobody likes Fortuna. But I don't want you to hate it." She laughed, the sound tight and lacking its usual warmth.

He caught a clue. "You don't want me to see it and hate you?"

"Yes." Her voice was smaller than he had ever heard it. He could relate. What could be worse than being exposed—really exposed to someone else and having them reject you after seeing who you really were?

"Hey." He pulled her into his lap and pushed his hand under her sweater, stroking her shoulder blade over the spot where her tattoo was. "Remember this?"

She nodded.

"You've moved on. You're not going back. This is just a temporary visit. You don't have to be embarrassed. Of Fortuna, or your family. I still remember what it was like to be the scholarship kid with nothing when all my friends had

everything. Believe me. None of it could make me want you any less.”

Mirra sighed and laid against his chest while he continued to stroke her back. “Tell me that again when you’ve seen why they call us orbit rats.”

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There was no directory in the nav system. Fortuna wasn’t mapped in the same way as cities in the rest of the five systems. Instead a complex warren of tunnels, pods and hubs woven in intricate, interconnected knots around central power discs, covered with solar panels.

The exterior of the structures was made up of a mishmash of colors and materials scrapped and repurposed from the floating junk dumped when ships about to enter Earth’s gravity vented unnecessary weight. Coupled with the floating junk spaced out of the hundreds of thousands of pods, the place resembled a giant insect hive.

The viewscreen flickered with bright flares as hundreds of tiny objects were repelled by the shields of the ship.

“There.” Mirra pointed toward a bright orange hub at the far right of the viewscreen. He directed the nav system to head in that direction, squinting at the objects that floated past. A smashed door panel drifted beside a sewage tank. A school of wrist-coms went by like colorful fish.

“It’s best not to look too hard at the junk.” Mirra’s voice had an edge to it that made him turn and look. Her expression was blank. She stared straight forward into the viewscreen. “Sometimes you see things you can’t unsee.”

He was about to ask her what she meant, when he remembered her comment about everyone being spaced in the end. The fur on his neck rose with an unsettling prickle. He kept his eyes on Mirra. “The Earth government just leaves all this trash here like this?”

“Where do you think most of it comes from?”

Lennox frowned down at her. “You mean they actually transport it up here? Why not just incinerate it?”

Mirra shrugged. “That costs marks. And after the climate crises of the twenty-first and twenty-second centuries, they had to find other ways that didn’t pollute as badly. Each ship that leaves Earth has to take an allotment with them to vent on their way out. And you pay a tariff on anything you bring in, which encourages ships to dump here before they enter the atmosphere. Welcome to Fortuna, the biggest recycling bin and waste dump in the five systems rolled into one.”

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TWENTY ONE

“Suit up,” Mirra called from the hall as the computer announced it was stabilizing oxygen to allow them to dock. “Some of these docking tunnels are old and it’s always best to be safe.”

Lennox’s jaw tightened and his fist clenched at his side. Mirra had grown up with this sort of casual danger surrounding even mundane activities. She was fine. She would be fine, but the thought of how precarious her life had been had him on edge.

He strode to the storage locker in the cargo bay and pressed a hand over the panel to open it. Selecting two spacesuits, he tugged his own on over his clothes. Mirra dashed in from the hallway a moment later, holding up a cool store container. “Sorry. Almost forgot this.”

Squinting through the frosted surface he tried to make out what was inside. Fruit by the looks of it. “You’ve been holding out on me. I thought we ran out of fresh food two days ago.”

She gave him an apologetic little grin. “These are presents. We ran out of the other stuff, it’s true. But I was saving these. My family’s never had fresh fruit before.”

He gaped, then quickly schooled his expression back to neutral. She was already self-conscious about her background. No need to make her feel worse. He’d just never realized things would be this different.

It struck Lennox just how much he’d underestimated the differences in their origins as they stepped out of his space yacht and into the docking tunnel. The thing was worn and dim. Flickering lights only illuminated part of the space, leaving patches in dank darkness. He hadn’t activated his helmet—that would only be necessary if there was an emergency—so he heard the door of the spaceship hiss shut behind them. He was ashamed to admit he felt uneasy when the door shut out the last connection to normal life and he finally stepped into this new world.

Not Mirra's world. Her world was now firmly back in that space yacht, back with him on Nova, and perhaps even on Ximia when he eventually returned home.

They hadn't discussed that far into the future yet.

The door opened with a concerning squeal, followed by a shriek and flurry of movement. In front of him, Mirra was collected by a whirlwind of arms and kisses, two high-pitched human voices were trying to outdo each other to see who would make the most ear-splitting sound. A male voice carried through the squeals. "Hey, kiddo! Good to see you."

Lennox hung back as Mirra was enveloped in a sort of four-way hug by three humans he assumed must be her mother, father, and sister. Then everyone's eyes turned to him. He stood a little straighter. Then he thought better of it. It was a small space. So small the top of his head already grazed the ceiling. Would they find him intimidating? Too alien? Would they approve?

He shouldn't be worrying about those things. It wasn't like they had talked about mating or anything that serious. But his heart was in his throat as three sets of human eyes widened.

Then the squeals started again and Mirra turned to beam at him and drag him into the hug.

"Lennox! It's so good to finally meet you." He stood awkwardly with his arms by his sides as too many arms to count wrapped as far as they could reach around his body. "We've heard so much about you," That feminine voice must be Mirra's mother.

"This is my family." Mirra's voice was muffled since they were all still squashed together. "Ma, uh, Nayel. My da, Ereck, and Dinah. Guys, this is Lennox."

A voice at his side interrupted what he had been about to say. "Oh my goddess, you're huge. Are you really covered in fur all over? Oh sorry. Is that rude?"

Mirra snorted. "Dinah, you're such space-junk. Imagine that being the first thing you say to my boyfriend." Mirra's voice was playful. He was pleased to hear the warmth back.

“It’s fine.” He told Dinah.

“Listen to you, Mir. You sound so posh. Like a regular Martian millionaire.”

“Get spaced, Dinah.”

“Girls!” Mirra’s mother scolded. “I promise you, they have better manners than this.”

Lennox bit down on his grin to keep himself from retorting that Mirra certainly didn’t from what he had seen. Mirra beat him to it. “Ma, Lennox already knows I’m a basic bitch, okay? Don’t stress. Let’s get out of the tunnels. I have something for youse.”

She ushered her family in front of her, looking back with a wince and mouthing, “Sorry.”

Lennox grinned. “Nothing to be sorry for. They’re lovely.”

Somehow they squeezed through another three twists and turns, between what looked like a bathroom and somebody’s kitchen and then into a pod that might match the size of a small bedroom back home. If he had stretched, Lennox suspected he might be able to touch both walls at once. He and Mirra tugged off their suits and took turns to hang them on hooks by the door.

He got his first good look at Mirra’s family as they all flooded inside. Dinah had the same olive skin and dark wavy hair as her sister. She wore her hair short, in a cropped, messy bob that emphasized her slim neck and warm hazel eyes. Mirra’s mother was shorter than Mirra. She had pale skin and light hair, but a bright, welcoming smile and blue eyes that danced with humor. She and Dinah tucked themselves up onto a fold-down platform that contained a thin mattress and a neatly folded duvet, crossing their legs under them.

Mirra had clearly gotten her looks from her father. He was a handsome man with olive skin and a wiry athletic build. Mirra pressed a button on the wall and the bed on one side of the room folded up into a hard-looking couch. She took Lennox’s arm. “Come sit. I know it’s a bit squashy, but this is

it.” She spread her hands out and gestured around. “Welcome to my childhood home.”

Knees pressed beneath his chin, he tried to make himself comfortable on the tiny couch.

“So what have you brought us, kiddo?” Mirra’s dad had opened the cool store container, standing beside a tiny bench where a synth machine took up most of the countertop.

“Apples, and the yellow ones are mangoes—I don’t know if they’ve done so well in cool store. Oh, and the tiny little ones are blueberries.”

Dinah jumped down from the bed platform and pushed in next to Ereck. “Oh wow. Look how shiny the apple is. Can you eat the skin?”

Mirra nodded solemnly. “You can, but some people like to peel it first. I guess we haven’t got anything to peel it with, so probably don’t worry.”

“Will I cut one open? Would everyone like some?” Mirra’s father got out five bowls from a drawer beneath the counter.

“None for me, thanks. I’ll let you all enjoy.” Lennox shook his head.

“Same. I brought them for youse.” Mirra waved away her father’s offer of a bowl. It wasn’t the first time he had noticed her language had changed since they’d arrived at Fortuna. He wondered how much he had changed from the person he had been growing up. Before he’d been to Hagslaw Preparatory.

Dinah grinned. “Yum!” She turned to Mirra. “So tell us all the news. What’s the best thing about living at Nova?”

As Mirra talked, Lennox watched Ereck. He pressed a button on the wall. When nothing happened, he thumped the wall with his fist until a long narrow drawer popped out with a clang. He retrieved a blunt-looking knife that Lennox knew straight away would never work on the apple. Then Ereck held the fruit in his hand with the knife poised above the red skin, seemingly to debate about what to do next. “Hmph. I’m going to get the laser-cutter.”

He went back to the door, rustled around in a hatch and came back with a pair of thick gloves and a laser knife. “Hey, Lennox. Help us out for a mo’.”

Lennox unfolded himself from the couch, and Ereck shoved the gloves at his chest. “Throw these on and hold it for me, would ya?”

“Uh, I don’t think—”

Ereck scoffed. “Not too soft are you, son? Don’t worry. I won’t cut your finger off. I’ve been using one of these since I was six.”

With a nervous glance back at Mirra who grinned at him, he put the gloves on and bent so he could hold the apple gingerly on the counter. He was reasonably certain Ereck could have cut the apple without him holding it. The thing was hardly going to roll away. But since this was clearly some kind of test, he held as still as he could and tried not to show the fact that he was sweating blaster fire as the red beam of the laser passed millimeters from his finger. The gloves would not do anything against a laser.

Ereck passed around the pieces of apple and Mirra told a few stories about the Pinnacle Hotel and the show they’d been to see last week.

“Right!” Mirra’s mother hopped down from the bed and clapped her hands. “We’ve got wires to strip and sitting around here won’t bring in the new stuff either.” She jerked her head at her husband.

He straightened, giving her a mock salute. “You heard the boss. Lennox, you coming?”

“I uh...” He looked helplessly at Mirra who made a little shooing gesture.

“Go. We’re here to experience Fortuna.”

“Right.”

“Come on, then.” Mirra’s father slapped his shoulder, a slightly comical move because of how far he had to stretch up

to do it. “No better way to experience the real Fortuna than to salvage some scrap.”

••••

This was a mistake. This was the biggest fucking mistake of his life.

Lennox fought to keep his breathing natural as he pushed off the edge of Pod 53nvc and used his jetpack to propel toward the dead cruiser.

“Fucking jackpot!” Ereck’s voice in the speaker of his helmet sounded small and tinny and a hundred miles away, though he knew logically that he was only a few meters away.

“Yeah? Great.” He had no idea what he was agreeing with. All he knew was he had maybe eighteen minutes of fuel in the jetpack and next to no room for error. There was a long few minutes of nothing as he drifted, the quiet hiss of the jetpack audible only in his imagination in the vacuum of space. Then he felt the impact when his boots jolted against the door of the cruiser and the magnets in the suit kicked in automatically. Ten hells! Why would any sane person choose to do this?

The answer, of course, was that there wasn’t a choice. Not for the people living at Fortuna. Intellectually he knew that. Emotionally his senses screamed against the idea of going back.

Ereck latched onto the cruiser moments later and rapped the side with his magnetic screwdriver. “Start on this panel.” He undid the panel and let the piece of metal float away over their shoulders while Lennox leaned in with clumsy fingers inside the too-thick gloves of his suit and attempted to retrieve the cabling inside. It was difficult. Just when he had purchase on a piece of wire, his fingers slipped and he cursed. After fifty minutes, he had only ten cables tucked into the external pocket of his suit. Ereck leaned across to inspect his work. “Not bad. For a beginner.” He reached a quick hand in and retrieved five more wires in the space of two minutes while Lennox fumed. It was too similar to being an ignorant schoolboy again. Back in the days when his schoolmates easily had outpaced him at every task. Their knowledge of the

galaxy and global politics was ingrained after a youth spent traveling and hearing their parents speak about the nine oligarchs and the political machinations that kept Ximia running. His was hard won after nights spent studying after the others had gone to bed.

He had caught up though, and it hadn't been long until he'd been the top of most of his classes.

What was the point of mastering this though? He was only here to humor Mirra. A means to an end of getting what he wanted. Lords, he could have made enough money to buy five cruisers in the time it had taken them to strip these wires.

His jaw was tense and his shoulders ached when he stooped to pass through the door of the tiny pod Mirra's family called home some hours later. Mirra came over and slipped her arms around his waist, tipping her head back for a kiss. He placed a gentle kiss on her forehead and she frowned up at him. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

The lines between her dark brows remained, though she didn't push him. No doubt he'd hear about it later.

He forced down a truly awful bowl of synthed soup when it was offered and made sure to eat every drop. Every drop was precious when you lived like this.

They talked for a while, but he couldn't help noticing that even when they were sitting still, Ereck, Dinah, Nayel and even Mirra had something to do with their hands. The humans moved without seeming to think about it, stripping back the wires they'd salvaged, polishing old metal parts, snapping apart tiny pieces of polymer he would have assumed would be too small to bother. They hardly even looked at what they were doing.

At the end of the night, much to his dismay, Mirra's parents dragged a thin lumpy mattress out of lords knew what storage area and placed it in the center of the floor. The only available space. Then beds were folded out and the whole family settled down in the same room they ate in. The same

room they worked in. The same room they spent almost every spare moment in.

Two hours later, he rolled over, cursing the crick in his neck and the way his feet hung over onto the floor since the mattress was only built to accommodate humans. Short humans.

Beside him, Mirra stirred. “You okay?” She slipped a hand over his chest and a leg over his thigh, tucking herself close. He stiffened. They were in the same room as her damn parents and her little sister. All breathing the same metallic recycled air.

“Relax.” Mirra’s hand strayed to his balls, and he hastily grabbed her wrist.

“Mirra!”

“What? They’re asleep. But they won’t be for long if you keep making so much noise.”

“Don’t.” He kept hold of her hand when she tried to free it. “Not here. You know I can’t finish unless I knot you, and there’s no way I’m doing that here.”

Mirra rolled over. “Suit yourself. It’s not forever, okay? We’re only here a couple days.” She let out a long sigh, shoulders bunched around her ears.

Lennox rolled to his side, pulling her back against him. “I’m sorry, baby. I know. It’s just a lot to take in. That’s all.”

She lay rigidly for only a moment before she relaxed against him and patted the hand he had against her flat belly. “Yeah. I get it. I know it sucks. Thank you for humoring me.”

He pressed his nose into her hair and inhaled. He wanted to tell her it was more than just humoring her, but wasn’t that the way he had been thinking about all this? Just a way to prove he would listen, show her he was right, and then he could get on with pursuing his goal of taking down Nasqu Media and that bastard, Ilex.

It took him so long to work out what to say that Mirra’s breathing returned to the long deep breaths of sleep before he

had collected the words. He sighed.

“Your family doesn’t suck, Mirra. They’re amazing. It’s just this place.” He whispered the words into her neck and promised himself he would tell her tomorrow.

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TWENTY TWO

Mirra woke to familiar noises but had a moment's disconnect when she felt a strong furry arm draped over her. The rattle of the air filtration system and the light snore of her sister were homely noises. Noises she hadn't woken to in months. Lennox's warm body behind her was a piece that didn't match.

A flicker of the base lighting and a clunk from the generator triggered an automatic response and jolted her out of her half dreaming state. "Power out," she mumbled, clutching the leg of the sofa.

Moments later, the familiar sequence of events was like a welcome home smack in the face. The lights cut out. The pod went black. A second later the air filters cut too and the fans whirred to a stop. The gravity was next, the lurching hollow feeling in her stomach as her body tried to float upwards. She held her position with little thought after a lifetime of practice.

Poor Lennox wasn't so lucky. A snore ripped from him as his body drifted upward off the mattress. She fumbled for his arm as he moved next to her.

"What the—?"

The power cut back in. The lights flicked back on. For a moment she watched him flail in the air before the gravity returned and he slammed to the ground. The thin mattress did nothing to cushion the fall of his heavy body.

She winced.

"Sorry. I forgot to warn you about those. Are you okay?"

"Great. Just great." He sat, rubbing at his back. "What time is it?"

She glanced down at her wrist-com. "Early still. Go back to sleep." She tried to cuddle up to him again, but he got to his feet. She heard his back and neck crack as he stretched them. "I'm up now. I'm going back to my ship for a shower."

She sat, her own sleep impossible as frustration bored away at her cool. "I thought we agreed you were going to

commit to this. To really seeing things the way they are.”

“I can see perfectly well. It doesn’t mean I have to slum it like space-junk.”

They both glared at each other around the harsh words.

Lennox drew a long breath in through his nose and let it out again, closing his eyes for a moment. “I’m being an ass. I know. My only excuse is I’m tired. Winter is setting in and I’m not sure how much longer I can keep operating on summer hours.”

From the corner of her eye, Mirra saw her mother roll over, feigning sleep to give them a little longer to resolve their dispute. She sighed. Now was not the time to let loose and start an argument. That could wait for later.

If there was a later. A sick feeling crept in and snuggled up with the hot anger. What if he was already looking to put space between them? All those nice things he’d said about not being bothered about where she came from only meant as much as his actions made them mean now he had seen it. Now he was in it.

Lennox’s brow drew into a frown and he sat down again, reaching to cup her cheek with a gentle hand. “I’m sorry, Mirra. I’m no good at this.” He leaned forward to press his forehead against hers for a breath and the anger fell away.

“It’s not your fault. I know it’s crap. Believe me. I just need to know that you get it.”

He pulled back to look into her eyes, fingers playing in the strands of hair at the back of her neck. “I know. I’ll try harder.”

Goddess, this male was everything. Mirra clung to his arms, holding him there. “Lennox, I…” It was too soon, wasn’t it. The feelings welling inside her were big—huge. But now was the wrong time. With a guy like this, she’d just scare him off if she went in too hard.

“It’s not for much longer,” she said, holding back on the rest. That would wait.

He nodded. "Thank you."

When she stretched to kiss him, he turned away, letting her kiss fall on his cheek instead. She tried to tell herself it was just the culture difference. The fact that her parents were in the room, like he'd said last night. But what if it wasn't?

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Later, while Lennox sat cross-legged on the floor, answering work messages, Mirra lay next to Dinah and brought up her own wrist-com.

Mirra: Hey Cass. How's things? Can I ask a question?

Cassie: Hey! All good here. How is everyone? Did you say hi to your family from me? Ask me anything xx

Mirra: Is Errytt different now that it's winter back on Ximia? Like more moody?

Cassie: LOL I did not think it was possible for anyone to sleep in more than he already does, but apparently it is. And he's so clingy. Always wants cuddles. Can't keep his hands off me. Why? Is Lennox acting weird? It's probs just winter. Like you said.

Mirra: Yeah. I'm sure you're right.

Mirra flicked off her holoscreen with a sigh. That didn't sound like Lennox at all. If anything, he was more stand-offish than before. So grouchy. He wasn't sleeping much. On the trip here he'd even insisted on dragging himself out of bed early to exercise.

Dinah put down the wires she'd been stripping and leaned her head on Mirra's shoulder. "You okay?"

"Yeah." She ruffled Dinah's hair. "Just thinking about Cassie's parents. I should visit them."

Dinah's expression turned sorrowful. "I visit them every other day, but Mir... I'm not sure you should. It's pretty awful."

She set her jaw. "No. I want to. I owe it to Cass. And Lennox has to see. That's the whole point of us coming."

Dinah nodded. "Let's go."

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The smell inside Cassie's parents' pod was even worse than normal for Fortuna. It was stale with a hint of something suspiciously like urine. The pod was dark, only the low base lights on. Even those were flickering. Through the dimness, Mirra made out Darina and Jax lying on the bed, which was still folded out. They wore the VR visors, so she couldn't see their eyes. They didn't react at all when Dinah, Lennox and Mirra entered their pod.

Dinah went to their synth machine and switched it on, setting a cup underneath to collect soup.

"How long have they been like this?" Mirra asked her.

"A couple weeks." Dinah held out one cup of soup for Mirra to take. "I try to get them to eat something when I come."

Mirra took the cup of soup and sat on the bed beside Cassie's mother and put her hand gently on the older woman's arm. "Darina? It's Mirra. Can you hear me?"

She received no response.

Lennox cleared his throat from the doorway. "The VR headsets don't block out noise from the room. It's one of the safety features. She can hear you."

Mirra frowned. "Darina? Can you sit up and try to eat something?"

A dry, raspy voice came from Darina's lips. "In a minute, dear. Just leave it over there." She waved in the direction of the floor by the bed. Hot tears stung Mirra's eyes and she blinked them away.

On the other side of the bed, Dinah was sitting beside Cassie's father. "Help me sit him up," she said to Mirra. Before Mirra could move, Lennox moved to the side of the bed and helped Dinah with the older man. Dinah spooned soup up to his lips and after a few attempts he opened his mouth to receive each spoonful.

Mirra tugged Darina to a sitting position and copied her sister, feeding the soup to the woman gradually. She fought down the sick feeling in her stomach and tried not to look at the food stains on the front of their shirts or on the bed.

Dinah fetched a cloth and wiped them, then checked their supply of synth tablets. “I’m going back to help Mom with the rest of that haul. If you stay long enough one of them might speak to you, but I doubt it. It’s been weeks.” She slipped back through the door, retreating into the adjoining pod.

Lennox ran a hand through his hair. Mirra rounded on him. “Now do you see?”

“It’s not great, I’ll give you that.”

“Not great? It’s a fucking nightmare! And this is caused by Phantom Media. You know they came in here and handed out the VR sets for free? Stars know, nobody in Fortuna would have been able to afford one otherwise.”

He stepped close, drew her into his arms and stroked her hair. “It must be hard to see people you’ve known all your life like that.”

She nodded and brushed away a tear, pressing her nose to the patch of fur where his shirt was open at the collar. “So you’ll do it? You’ll switch the safety settings back on? You’ll make screen time limits?”

He sighed. “I have a lot to think about.”

She stepped back, staring up into his face. His jaw was set, his expression hard. “Think about? What’s there to think about? What about feel? Can’t you feel anything?” She pushed away and stormed toward the door.

“I’m going back to my ship for a while. There are a couple of vid-calls I need to make.”

She rounded on him. “Yeah. I bet. Fucking turn up the screws on Fortuna. Is there another way to make money off this place? Why not do that too? Get spaced, Lennox.”

He caught her arm before she could make her retreat. “I said I would think about this and I will. I mean it, Mirra. Your

happiness is important to me. Very important. I have an idea, but I need to make some calls to see if it can be done.”

She stopped fighting his grip. “Really?”

“Really. Leave it with me, okay?”

Turning back into his arms, she let him hold her. She couldn't stop thinking that it felt uncomfortable the way he'd framed that. He'd made it about her happiness. Well, what about all the people Phantom Media was taking advantage of?

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TWENTY THREE

Lennox breathed deeply, enjoying the clean, fresh scent of the filtered air inside his space yacht. He hadn't realized just how bad the air inside Fortuna was until he'd stepped back on board his own ship. Stretching his arms wide, he rolled his shoulders after a day and a half of hunching to fit inside the small human-sized spaces. Lords, it was past time to get out of here. All he wanted to do was take a shower, march back in there, collect Mirra, and go home.

Home!

He couldn't remember a time when he'd had such a strong sense of longing for it. For curling up and spending days hardly getting out of bed. When he pictured it, Mirra was beside him. He could reach out, draw her against him, and breathe in the scent of her soft hair.

He brought up his holoscreen, stalked to the living area, and threw himself on the sofa. Finally, furniture that fit him! He was about to enter the ID of his leading technician at Phantom Media, and get the ball rolling on his plan to address Mirra's concerns, when a headline on his newsfeed caught his eye:

Media mogul, Ilex Nasqu, with a message for new rival Lennox Bekkin.

The twat. Unable to stop himself, he clicked the headline, eyes scrolling for the quote.

"It's really rather adorable," Mr. Nasqu said when we interviewed him yesterday. "If Lennox wanted to join the family business, he only needed to ask. I'm flattered that he's trying to emulate me. Lords know his mother and I have been trying to reach out to him for years. I take this as a positive sign that he's interested in opening up a dialogue."

"Fuck you." Lennox dismissed his holoscreen with an angry swipe. No fucking way he was letting this opportunity slip through his fingers. He was going to make that asshole

beg for mercy before Lennox crushed his business under his heel.

Too frustrated to make the call, he got up and walked to the shower, stripping off and getting under the spray, which he left icy cool. Standing under it for twenty minutes still didn't cool the fire that heated his skin beneath his fur, though. Slamming his fist over the controls to shut off the water, he got out and wrapped a towel around his waist. He wanted to break something. To rip the door out of its socket. To smash up every surface inside the ship.

He huffed. No. He wanted to find Mirra, strip off all her clothes and gather her against him in bed so he could hold her. So she could calm the tempest of emotions swirling inside him. As he thought this, a noise in the hall made him turn.

As if she'd read his mind, there she was, pulling off the space suit she'd used to come through the docking tunnel and already reaching for him. She slipped her arms around his waist and pressed her face to his chest. "What is it? What's happened?"

How did she read him so well? Like she just got him. It had only been two months and already he had a hard time imagining life without her.

No, not a hard time. It was impossible. He didn't want to think about it.

He hugged her to him, probably squeezing too hard. She didn't complain. "Mir. Gorgeous girl. How did you know I needed to see you?"

She leaned back a little to look up at him and he cupped her small face between his large hands. Suddenly he didn't know why he was holding back any longer. He should be telling her how he felt.

He grinned down at her. "You're so perfect, Mirra. You know that, right?"

She smiled up at him. "Yeah. I am, aren't I?"

He nodded. "And I've thought of a way to fix this problem with Real Life. I just have to be careful, that's all. That asshole

was in the media today talking about how I'm trying to emulate him. How he thinks it's great. I'm going to wipe the smile off his face. You wait and see."

"What asshole, Lennox? Who are you talking about?"

"Ilex. The twat my mother ran off with. He owns Nasqu Media. He gave some interview saying he'd give me a job if I wanted to come work for him. As if!"

She stiffened. "Then that's what this is all about?"

He nodded.

"This is all just about getting back at him? At her?"

"Yes. About wiping the slate clean. About a fresh start."

She frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"Once I deal with him, then I'll have that off my chest. It won't weigh me down anymore. Then I want you to come back to Ximia with me. To be my mate. I just have to do this first."

"Lennox, that's not the way."

"It is!" He forced himself to keep his claws gentle on her soft skin. "It is. I need this, Mirra. I need to put this to rest."

"And what about all the people addicted to Real Life?"

"I'm going to fix that. I'll get my technicians to come up with a system to deliver nutrients to them through the game. When they eat in the game, the bots will deliver them what they need. Then they don't have to switch off and they'll still be taken care of."

"You're joking aren't you? This is some kind of sick fucking joke."

He released her, staring down at her.

She glared right back.

"No. I'm not joking. Why would you say that?"

"Because it's not a solution at all. These people are unwell. They need help. Not to have their addiction enabled."

He shook his head. “No, Mirra. They’ve got the right idea. Don’t you see? This place, it’s like a hell. Can you really blame them for wanting to escape? Isn’t that what you did? Why not let them escape too?”

“Bullshit.” She shook her head, stepping back further.

“They’re the lucky ones.”

“Bullshit. They’re dead already. We might as well space them now. They’re not really living. They’re just existing. They’re switched off from everyone who cares about them. They’re just a shell.” She stumbled toward the door.

“Mirra, wait!”

“No. I’m going. I can’t talk to you right now. You know I thought you’d changed.” She came forward again and thrust a finger into his face. “I thought you got it. I thought you’d opened up and let me in. But you’re just the same closed off walking corpse you always were. That’s not living either, you know. It’s not living when you cut yourself off from feeling anything because you’re too scared. They’re people, Lennox. They’re all people. Not just numbers in some game of revenge. I really thought you had a heart. I guess I was wrong.”

“Wait.”

She ignored him, storming toward the door. “No, Lennox. Go back to Nova.”

“Don’t you walk out that door, Mirra.”

“Shut up, Lennox.”

“Mirra!”

“Fuck you.” She reached for the panel. She didn’t even have on her suit.

“Stop!” The word ended on a growl that tore from his chest, freezing Mirra in her tracks. “Get back here.” He growled again, long and low and desperate.

Mirra shuddered. Her knees wobbled, and her scent went from bitter anger to hot arousal and sweet release in seconds.

He hurried forward and caught her before she collapsed. She was pliant and floppy in his arms. He could see a dark patch at the crotch of her pants where her slick had flooded her panties. Possibly he had put more into that growl than he had intended. “You can’t go.”

“Okay.” The word was mumbled. She wouldn’t meet his eye.

“Stay with me.”

“Okay.”

What had he done? “Stay with me.” He pulled her limp body tight against his chest.

“Yes.”

She was gone already. His growl had made sure of that.

He’d fucked it up. He’d done the thing he promised he would never do. When she woke from her trance, she’d hate him.

Was she right? Was he really so heartless he’d lost sight of what life meant? If he knew anything it was that it was right here in his arms, already slipping away from him.

“I love you, Mirra.”

“I love you too.” The words were robotic. She stared straight into the fur of his chest. Bile rose in his throat and he forced it down.

He had to let her go.

Lennox bent his head and pressed a kiss to Mirra’s hair. Her clover and sunshine scent brought tears to his eyes instead of calm.

Mustering what strength he had left, he set her carefully on her feet and stepped back. His voice was tight and rough. Clearing his throat, he choked out the words. “Mirra. Go back to your family.”

“Yes.” She turned, shuffling toward the door.

Lords, he couldn't watch. But he had to. She opened the door to the tunnel before he remembered. "Mirra, stop."

She stopped.

"Put on your suit."

She fumbled awkwardly with the suit, but he couldn't step forward to help. If he had her back in his arms, he'd never find the strength to let her go a second time. He had to let her go.

Eventually she pulled up the suit and he prayed she'd have enough awareness to activate the helmet if something happened. "Go back to your family, Mirra."

She stepped out of the door and he stood there watching until she turned a corner and the door slid closed behind her.

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TWENTY FOUR

Mirra rolled over, moving carefully to avoid waking Dinah, still sleeping beside her. She lifted her wrist-com with a sense of dread weighing heavily in her empty stomach.

Lennox: Hi, gorgeous, if you read this—

She swiped the notification away before she was tempted to open the message. What would he say anyway? He'd made his decision. The fact that he hadn't stuck around to talk to her face to face after their argument told her all she needed to know.

It had been a week and the wound still stung like new.

She had really thought—

With a sigh, she cut herself off. No looking back. The kangaroo only hops forward. Which was the shittiest motto, but whatever. No one here to laugh at her for it. If only she'd saved the marks she'd spent to have the tattoo done, she'd be at least a little further toward affording the ticket back to Nova. But she hadn't been careful. Most of the marks Lennox had given her back when they were still fake dating had been used to keep her family and Cassie's afloat.

After everything Cassie and Errytt had done for her, she couldn't bring herself to ask again for their help. So she pulled herself out of bed, washed her mouth out with a gulp of synthed juice and set to work stripping the last batch of panels she and her father had collected.

Hours later, she stood and stretched out her aching back. Her fingertips were sore from pulling at the casings and her eyes were crossing from staring at the tiny pieces for so long without a break. How quickly she'd forgotten what it was like.

A buzz from her wrist-com made her look.

Lennox: Please call me, gorgeous.

Fuck off!

She deleted it before she was tempted to do just that, just so she could give him a piece of her mind.

“Hey, I’m just going to go check on Jax and Darina. I could use a break.”

“Okay, love.” Her mother waved without looking up from her work.

Dinah asked, “You sure you don’t want me to do it?”

“Nah. You’re good.”

When Dinah looked like she was going to ask about the message, Mirra turned quickly and headed for the door.

Darina and Jax lay in their usual positions on the bed when Mirra entered. The room was dim as always, so she adjusted the lighting to brighten gradually and checked the air filters. They needed replacing. She would have to ask her father if he had any parts to spare. She should be able to make time to come back tomorrow and see to it.

A noise from behind her made her whip around.

Jax grunted, sitting up and tugging at his VR headset. A moment later, Darina did the same. Mirra rushed over. “Hey, it’s Mirra. Are you okay? Do you need something?”

“Damn thing stopped working.” Jax scowled.

“Don’t look at me. Mine’s the same.” Darina glared at him.

“What the hell? There’s a message. Did you get that message?” Jax slapped his palm against the headset.

“The one that said your allotted hours have been used today? Yeah. I got it too. I’ve never had that before. It’s probably some bug in the system. They’re probably fixing it now.”

“I doubt it. They’re probably about to start charging more. You mark my words, they’ll be charging a fucking subscription by the end of the week.”

“They can’t do that!”

Jax and Darina continue to stare at their headsets and argue as if Mirra wasn't there. Mirra couldn't look away. Allotted hours? Could it be?

She raised her hand, trembling fingers hovering over her wrist-com. Had she misjudged? If only she hadn't deleted all his messages!

Unable to bring herself to call, she took the coward's way out.

Mirra: Did you do this?

Lennox: That depends on what you mean by this...

She was typing a response, when his next message appeared.

Lennox: ...if you mean did I fail to see what you were trying to show me, then yeah. I did that...

Lennox: ...if you mean did I possibly fuck everything up between us by trying to hold on too tight, then yeah. I did that too...

Lennox: ...if you also mean actually trying for once in my life to take good advice when it's given to me and do something to fix my mistake. Yeah. I hope I did that too.

She stared at her holoscreen, her heart making a getaway attempt as her hands shook. Darina and Jax were still arguing in the background. She tuned them out.

Lennox: Mirra? Please say something. Anything. Even if it's just to tell me to get spaced. I'm about ready to go out that airlock if you don't answer me.

Mirra: Don't you dare!

Lennox: Got you! You have too kind a heart not to respond to that.

Mirra: Get spaced you prick. What are you talking about anyway? Aren't you back at Nova by now? She sniffed, then noticed the silence in the room. Darina and Jax were exchanging worried looks.

"Mirra, are you okay?" Darina asked.

“Yes,” she said, but her credibility was totally shot when the next message popped up on her screen and she let out a sob.

Lennox: How could I go back without you?

She raised her hand to cover her mouth as if that would somehow help her hold back the emotions. Taking a deep breath she let go and typed the next message.

Mirra: Then did you turn the screen time limits on?

Lennox: I did. I'm sorry it took me so long to roll it out. The technicians said they needed to test it first to make sure it worked the way they wanted.

Mirra: Why didn't you come tell me, you idiot? I can't believe you were here all along.

Lennox was typing something. She waited anxiously while the little dots indicated he was composing a message. There was a pause, then the dots started dancing again. Finally:

Lennox: I needed you to know you could say whatever you needed to and make your own decision without me taking that power away from you again. I needed you to be able to trust me.

Mirra's hand was a blur over her screen as she typed in her answer.

Mirra: I do trust you. How could you even think I wouldn't?

Gentle hands closed around her upper arms and guided her to the bed. She sat without really being conscious of doing so. Jax handed her a cup of water. “Drink this, Mirra. You look like you're about to collapse. What's happened?”

She looked up with another sniff. “Everything! Nothing. I'll explain later. I'm just—” She cut herself off as another message from Lennox came through.

Lennox: I fucked up, Mirra. I should never have growled at you like that.

Mirra: But you knew that. Even I could tell you knew that. I trust how you are after you've growled at me. Because when I'm like that you would never take advantage. We all make mistakes. We get angry. Fuck knows I shout at you enough. If I could growl I'd totally growl at you. So I get it. Just don't give up on me.

Lennox: I didn't. I haven't. Does that mean you haven't given up on me either?

She grinned.

Mirra: A kangaroo only hops forward. Or hasn't anyone ever told you that? That means you can make a fresh start with me whenever you need to.

Lennox: What about right now? Because a week without you in my arms was a hell I never want to go through again.

Mirra: Worse than stuffy human climate control and hot showers?

Lennox: Yes

Mirra: Worse than weeks of stale air and synthed food?

Lennox: Even worse than that

Mirra: Worse than spending an entire night watching me work at Club Fantasy but never being able to book me?

“Are you trying to make me growl at you again?”

She looked up with a gasp to see Lennox in the doorway of Darina and Jax's pod.

“Who are you?”

“What's going on here?” Jax had jumped to his feet, but Mirra was quicker. She dived across the room and straight into Lennox's arms. “How did you find me?”

“Dinah told me you were here.”

“That was awfully quick.”

“I was into the docking tunnel as soon as you sent the first message.”

She laughed. “Is that right? That’s making an awful big assumption, mister.”

“Just being ready to close the deal.”

She hugged him tighter, then turned to face Darina and Jax who stared at Lennox. “Darina, Jax, I’d like you to meet Lennox. Well, meet him properly. He was here before... well anyway. He’s Errytt’s friend.”

The two looked at each other, puzzled. “Errytt?” Darina frowned. “I’m sure I’ve heard that name before.”

“Cassie’s boyfriend!” Mirra shook her head. They would have a lot of catching up to do if Cassie let them. She tried to explain, but in the end they left two very confused humans scratching their heads and agreeing they’d better vid-call their daughter.

Lennox put a large hand on her shoulder as they squeezed between pods. “Does this mean we can talk now?”

She twisted to look back at him. “What else do we need to talk about?”

“About everything I have planned. About the trip back. About you and me, and our future.”

Her heart did a little dance and she tried not to grin so wide it split her face. “Yeah. I reckon we can talk about that. In a little while.”

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TWENTY FIVE

As soon as they walked through the door of the space yacht, Mirra stripped off her space suit. She didn't stop there. She pulled off the old ripped shirt she had on and tossed it to the floor. Then she unfastened her trousers and kicked those off too while Lennox continued dragging his eyes up and down her body.

By the nine, she was a sight. His hands itched to play over the silky smooth texture of her skin. He clenched them by his sides after removing his own suit. "Don't you want to talk first?"

Mirra lifted one shoulder in a half-shrug. "First I want to have hot make-up sex. Then we can talk when you're completely at my mercy." She unfastened her bra and dropped it onto the pile with a wicked grin.

His mouth went dry. Her small brown nipples were already gathered into tight little buds ready for his tongue and her taut flat stomach begged to be decorated with his come. "Mirra, I need to tell you—"

"You really don't." She stepped closer while pushing her hands into the sides of her panties and sliding them slowly over her hips.

"Mirra, I love you." He blurted it, with no grace and no context. She froze in her tracks. Her eyes locked on his and her lips parted just the slightest amount.

"Say something." He fought to keep the growl out of his command.

She said nothing, but a grin shot across her face. Launching herself at him, she jumped so he was forced to catch her up. Then she threw her arms around his neck and her mouth crashed against his.

Her weight was nothing. He could have lifted five of her easily, but the kiss sent him staggering back against the wall. Had he forgotten what it felt like, or was it just this good every time? Her lips moved over his. Mirra's tongue darted into his

mouth to tease him and she ground her naked pussy against him over his clothing.

He clutched a handful of her gorgeous ass and held on, anchoring himself to the moment. They kissed for what was probably only a few moments, but felt like lifetimes. Then Mirra broke away.

“I love you too.” She kissed his nose. “And I trust you. And I know you have an excellent plan. But if you start laying out rules before you get inside me, I’m going to scream. You know I’m only going to break them anyway, right?”

He laughed. “That might be what I love most about you.”

“That I break your rules?”

“That you don’t take my shit. Or anyone’s shit. That you stand up for yourself and everyone around you. You even stood up for me before I realized I needed you to.”

He leaned in for another kiss, then had another thought. “And the way you challenge me and then in the next moment give me exactly what I want.”

She gave him another of those brilliant grins. “Lennox. I love you. I do. But shut up and fuck me, okay?”

He groaned and squeezed her ass. Then her mouth came down over his again, and he got lost in it for a while longer. Lords, he was hard, his cock pressing insistently against the seam of his trousers. Mirra slid down from his arms and cupped him in her palm, looking up at him with an expression that made him weak at the knees. Grabbing her hand, he turned her and pushed her against the wall. “Hands stay on the wall. Spread your legs, gorgeous. You need to come and come hard.”

“Mmm, yes.” She moaned as his touch slid down her sides, up and back, savoring the shape of her. Then he dropped to his knees, spread her ass and planted his mouth straight over her clit. She gasped. Yes! Her muscles tensed beneath his lips as he applied firm pressure and suction. She pushed back against him, her hands on the wall where he had placed them and her ass presented to him like a meal. So he lapped along her crease

and up over her puckered hole, reveling in the way she squirmed. “You like that, gorgeous?”

The whimpering cry she made was perfect spring sunshine. Her scent grew deeper. He drew a finger through her moisture and pressed at her ass while he kept flicking her clit with his tongue. Of course Mirra, being Mirra, didn't just let him in. She pushed back, taking his finger inside her tight little hole, flooding his mouth with extra honey.

Fuck! The way she gripped his finger had him making plans to claim that part of her with his cock as well. But not today. Today should be about lovemaking. He should be worshiping her body, not making filthy plans to leave her with cum dripping from every hole.

At that image, he had to breathe through a spike of pleasure so acute he nearly spilled in his pants. It was lucky he'd kept them on, or the moisture already leaking might have been enough to send her into heat. A bomb inside him felt ready to detonate. The built-up need to fuck and claim and bite and knot pushed him to his limit.

“Goddess, I'm close. I'm close already.”

Thank the stars!

Mirra was panting, rocking her hips back with every thrust of his finger. His eager woman, greedy for everything he could give. He just had to hold back so he could make her come about ten more times before he started rutting her for all he was worth.

He poured all his concentration into working her little bud until her movements grew frantic. She moaned his name, the sweetest sound in the galaxy. Then she pushed back and came with a series of little flutters against his tongue. He wasn't done lapping up her release when she pulled away.

“Why have you still got clothes on?” She began tearing at his shirt until he helped her remove it. “I need you inside me now.” She reached for his pants. He was helpless to stop her. Anything. Whatever she needed. They were both on their knees, pulling at his clothes like hungry animals.

“Bed,” he told her, lurching to his feet.

She looked up at him with a wicked grin. “Make me.”

“Oh no. Not this time.” Instead of growling, he lifted her and carried her to the bedroom. He couldn’t resist giving her ass a little spanking on the way. Mirra squirmed and her scent was pure torture. He tossed her onto the bed.

When he flipped her onto her knees and pushed inside that tight little pussy, they both sighed. He held her hips and pulled her onto his cock, sliding all the way home. “Lords, Mirra. You feel so good. But I’ve got you, baby. I won’t come until you’re done. You just tell me when.” He moved slowly, thrusting in and out, savoring each tight squeeze around his shaft and each wet noise their bodies made together.

Mirra moaned. Her head lolled forward when he thrust in hard. He pulled out slowly and did it again. Looking back over her shoulder she shot him a dangerous look. “What if I want your come now?”

He grunted. “Soon. You first.” Shifting his rhythm, he softened his movements, giving it to her nice and easy. “Let me see how much you want me. How much you need me. Not the heat. Or my knot. Me.”

She gasped and he angled his hips to hit the same spot again.

“It is you!”

He went faster.

“Lennox. It is you! The heat, the passion. That’s you. That’s us. It’s—” Her words transformed into a keening cry when he reached forward and pinched her clit.

“That’s it, baby. Come for me.” He pushed her down, her chest to the mattress and her gorgeous ass in the air. Then he pounded into her fast and hard, just the way she liked it. “Come for me.”

“I am. I am. Oh that feels so good.” Reaching between her legs, she brushed his hand aside. Instead of touching herself

though, she reached further, brushing fingertips over his balls as he speared into her.

“Fuck!” His movements grew erratic. She didn’t stop. Already she was clenching around him, milking him for the first load. “Fuck! I can’t hold on.”

“Come with me.”

As if he had any choice! He thrust inside once more, holding himself deep. She tugged his balls and he unloaded. Pleasure seared down his spine, sucking out his breath, wracking his body. She was a wild ride and damn him if he didn’t love every second.

When he could pull back, he took one look at Mirra’s broad grin and couldn’t regret it at all. She turned and pushed him to his back, slinging a leg over his hips. “Are you ready, babe? I intend to have you burning with me before I’m done.”

He laughed. “I think I already am. I think I have been from the minute we met.”

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Mirra slid down over Lennox’s cock slowly, savoring the way he filled and stretched her just right. Really she just wanted to impale herself on him, to take what she wanted. Already her clit throbbed, her nipples puckered, and heat bloomed over her sensitive skin.

Goddess, it felt good. It felt amazing. It was nothing compared to the way he looked at her with raw hunger in his eyes. His come trickled down her thighs, coated his belly and his cock, and made a sticky mess between them. It wasn’t the only thing sending her soaring to new heights though.

He loved her! Loved her so much he had just blurted it out, unable to hold it in and put limits on it. That was the best feeling in the five systems. Now she wanted him wild and unrestrained.

“Don’t hold back, Lennox. Give me everything.” She planted her hands on his solid chest, already moving over him, unable to keep still. “I’m not showering after this. I want you to fill me up so full I’m dripping for days.”

He groaned, strong hands at her hips pressing her down more firmly with each rise and fall. “Fuck, Mirra. I’m going to go off again if you keep that up.”

“Do you think I could stop now?” She ground over him, loving the way her clit felt against the base of his cock. “Give me more. I want to drink you down. Want it spilling out the sides of my mouth and down my neck.” She lifted and plumped her breasts as she rode. “Want you to spray my tits with it, paint my belly with it. I want to be so on fire for you, you only have to say my name and I shatter.”

“Fucking stars, woman, you’re going to be the death of me!” He lifted his hips to fuck up into her, hands holding her steady as he did.

She threw her head back and laughed, giving herself over to it as he finally unleashed on her. He flipped them, grinding down on top of her. He pumped into her, shaking the bed, making delicious friction coil in her belly.

It felt like too soon when he pulled from her. It might have been hours. The strange empty feeling clawed at her belly and had her pleading for him to fill her again.

“You want more of my come?”

“Yes!”

He pumped his fist over his shaft as he held it over her. “You want to wear my juices like jewelry?”

“Goddess, yes!”

With a harsh sound he jerked into his hand, spraying milky liquid across her breasts and chin. She opened her mouth for him as he continued to jerk creamy ropes across her. The salty come hit her tongue and the need burned brighter, drawing in her belly, curling her toes until she almost came from the feel of the cool air across her skin when he sighed. “Lords, you wreck me, Mirra. I’m a fucking mess over you.”

She laughed. “That’s good, babe. Look at the mess you’ve made of me.”

He leaned down and kissed her, even as the musky flavor of him lingered on her lips.

Then he drove back into her fiercely, immediately finding the rhythm she needed and never stopping.

It was still growing. She was spreading out, the need and pleasure building together until her moans reached out into the darkness beyond the ship's hull and her aching core pulled the stars a little closer. Nothing could feel this good. Nothing except more of him. Would he ever get close enough? She'd devour him. She'd consume him.

He must have come again, because he stilled, sweat dampening his furrowed brow.

"Keep going," she whimpered. "Keep going. Please don't stop."

He circled his hips, hardly moving as his large hand brushed the strands of damp hair from her forehead. "Are you ready for my knot?"

She nodded. She couldn't form the words.

He understood. Lennox kissed her softly, then licked down her neck to find the place where a trace of his bite still remained.

"Mine." He kissed the mark.

She sobbed. "Yes!"

He slipped a hand between them, finding just the right spot.

"Mine."

"Yours."

"Then come for me." It wasn't a growl. His voice was rough and gravelly, but it wasn't his growl. He pushed up against the side of her clit and gave her one last thrust and she obeyed. Shaking, clutching at his back and shoulders, she came until she didn't think her body could take any more. Though her walls clamped around him she still felt empty, gaping, dying for the pressure of his knot.

With a roar, Lennox bit down into her shoulder and pulsed inside her as he unleashed a final time. Then the swelling started and she could breathe again.

The burning of her skin and the tingling heightened in all her sensitive places. Her cunt ached and then it was gone. She was full. Stuffed with him. Under him. Completely at his mercy, knowing he was also at hers.

After a while she let out a long sigh. Lennox kissed her forehead tenderly. “You know what I was looking forward to more than any of it?”

She shook her head, smiling when soft fur tickled her nose.

“This. Just this. Holding you in my arms and knowing that you’re not going anywhere. Not for a good long while.”

“Lennox, you don’t need to knot me for that. I’m staying just as long as you want me.”

He grunted and his throat worked on a swallow. He didn’t look away. “Forever then?”

“Forever.”

“Definitely forever.”

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TWENTY SIX

“Hey, pass the mango salsa, Dinah. Stop hogging it all!” Mirra reached across Lennox to grab at the bowl of spicy salsa only to have her sister snatch it away.

“Get spaced, Mir. It’s too good to share!”

With Dinah distracted, Lennox reached over with his longer arm and grabbed the bowl with a laugh. “I’ll order more if you like it that much,” he said to her. Then he dipped a crispbread in the salsa and offered it to Mirra. She took it straight from his hand, licking his fingers with a subtle little smile to let him know exactly how she would reward him later. The low rumble in his chest sent little shivers through her whole body.

They were in the penthouse suite of the Aphelion, sitting at the enormous dining table with a feast laid out to celebrate *slekfast*, the festival to welcome the winter. Technically, they were a little late, but both Lennox and Errytt had agreed it didn’t matter.

Around the table sat Dinah, her mother and father, Aedard, Cassie, Errytt, Darina and Jax. They made an odd mix with their combined families and species. Yes, there was still tension between Cassie and her parents, who were still adjusting to life outside the game and to their daughter’s alien boyfriend.

It felt right to have everyone all together. As Mirra looked around the table, she couldn’t think of any better way to celebrate a festival that was all about acknowledging the love you had for those closest to you as well as how much they sometimes drove you crazy!

“Hey, Dinah, don’t you have that job interview today?” Nayel asked.

Dinah shifted in her seat, looking uncomfortable. “Yeah, but I’m not sure I’ll go. I’ll probably never win the job anyway. Who wants to hire space-junk like me?”

“You never know,” Cassie said, throwing a smile at Errytt who sat beside her. “I thought that too, but look how things turned out for me.”

Dinah flushed. “Actually, it’s funny you should say that. The guy I’m interviewing for is Ximian too.”

Lennox and Errytt shared a look across the table.

Before Mirra had a chance to question what it meant, Lennox looked down at his wrist-com, then flicked up his holoscreen.

“Hey, no business calls today,” Aedard called from down the table.

Lennox lifted a hand to fend off his father. “This one’s important, Dad.” He got up from the table and paced over to their bedroom, opening the vid-call. Mirra heard him answer quietly as he closed the door. “Kaeler, do you have that paperwork for me?”

Mirra frowned, getting up from the table to go after him. When she opened the double doors, he was just ending the call. He looked up with a big smile. “I have a surprise for you.”

“Mmm.” She sauntered up to him, slid her hands up his chest. Clinging to his shirt collar, she brought him down for a kiss. “Go ahead. I love surprises.”

“How about surprises that involve fifty-page legal documents?”

She frowned. “You’re not really selling it, but I’ll bite. What is it?”

“I’m opening a factory.”

“Okaaaay.”

“At Fortuna. It’s going to be the new location where we manufacture Phantom Media’s brand wrist-coms and VR headsets.”

Tipping her head to the side, she narrowed her eyes. “And why Fortuna? Why not oh... anywhere else in the five

systems?”

His grin grew wider. “Because that will allow me to employ exclusively from the talent pool at Fortuna. And what’s more, it will supply me with environmentally sustainable and cheap parts and a labor force who know exactly how to salvage and use them.”

She smiled. “And what will you pay this labor force?”

“That’s the best part. I pay them above Earthspace minimum, plus holidays and leave entitlements, and I still come out on top.”

She laughed. “Oh, so there is something in it for you.”

He grew serious for a moment, his grin falling. “Yeah, but Mirra, the business has to survive. I can’t run it into the ground.”

She patted his chest. “Relax. I know that. I’m only teasing. Does this mean you’ll turn a profit by the end of the year?”

He shook his head. “No. It will take me more like five to make anything decent. But this way, I’ll break even.”

“Then what about Ilex and Nasqu Media?”

He shrugged. “They’ll be waiting when I’m ready. But until then, I’ve found out what’s really important in life, and looking back at the past and seeking petty revenge is not it.”

“What about the paperwork? What does that have to do with me?”

He opened his holoscreen again and flicked to a page of the document with tiny writing and a blank space at the bottom. “Well, this part needs your signature, I’m afraid. And about twelve other parts.”

“Why? Not that I mind, but I should probably know what I’m signing.”

“Ownership documents. I’m putting it all in your name.”

She bit her lip over her huge grin. She couldn’t resist teasing just a little, though. “It’s not the romantic gift I would

have chosen.” She gave him a playful push. “But it might be one of the best you’ve ever given me.”

He laughed. “I’m afraid my reasons are completely unromantic.”

“How unlike you.”

He shot her a look that told her she would pay for that later. She certainly hoped so.

“It’s a little loophole in Earth law. You see, foreign investors aren’t allowed to own any major property that close to Earth, but a human...”

She leaned up on her toes to press a kiss to his nose. “I’m proud of you, babe. I think this will really make a difference.”

“It should give people some purpose. Something to work towards and hope for. Fortuna won’t be the dead end that it has been anymore.”

She was about to pull him down for a real kiss when she remembered the look.

“Hey, what was that before about Dinah’s interview?”

He frowned. “I only know of one other Ximian in Edgespace right now and I’m not sure he’d be the employer I’d choose for Di.”

She snorted. “What you guys have a listing of every single Ximian outside Ximispace or something?”

“No, but trust me, if it’s Lord Draigr, she’d be better off looking for something else.”

She reached up and pinched his cheek. “Aw, it’s cute that you’re fussing over my little sister, but calm your crazy. She’s an adult. She can make up her own mind.”

He huffed. “I’m still going to have a word with her about it before she goes.”

Mirra rolled her eyes. “Suit yourself. You’ll probably just make her more determined to go for it, you know.”

He chuckled. “She’s not you, Mir. Dinah actually listens to me some of the time.”

She laughed. “Where’s the fun in that?”

His voice dropped very low and his gaze grew extra heated. “I’ve half a mind to *make* you listen, wicked woman.”

She squirmed, her core already growing slick at just the prospect of his growl. All the better, he would be able to smell exactly what his words were doing to her. “Mmm, is that a promise?”

He sighed. “Yeah, at the end of winter when my father goes back to Ximia, and if your family ever find a place of their own.” He leaned in anyway and claimed a kiss that was neither chaste, nor quick. When he pulled back, there were cheers and catcalls from the other room. Mirra laughed. Of course the door was still wide open. She could care less.

“Come on you two. Time for cake,” Errytt called from the dining room. When they emerged, Mirra’s eyes lit up at the sight of the enormous white frosted cake in the center of the table.

Lennox ushered her back to her seat and another look passed between him and Errytt across the table. “Now there’s a special tradition associated with the cake at *slekfast*,” he said, as he took a knife and cut a generous piece. Aedard snorted, but when Mirra looked over at him, he averted his gaze. Errytt was smirking at Lennox as he stood and cut his own piece of the cake.

“Open your mouth.” He held out a piece of cake. From the corner of her eye, she saw Errytt do the same to Cassie. At the last minute though, Lennox diverted from her mouth to smear the cake right into her hair!

“You prick!” Mirra launched to her feet, snatching her own piece to throw at him. “I might have known you were up to something.” Cake flew backwards and forwards. Once the humans caught on, they quickly joined in.

Mirra shrieked and dashed from the table while Lennox wrestled a large piece out of her grasp. It didn’t take him long

to catch her and slip cake down the front of her dress and wipe it on her cheek. She laughed and stuck out her tongue to lick it from the side of her mouth. “Is that really a tradition?”

Around them the food fight continued. Laughter and squeals came from Dinah as someone landed a good shot.

He nodded. “Sure is. Sleakfast is about venting frustration with your loved ones before a long winter shut-in. The cake fight is an important part of that.”

“And have you got any frustrations you need to vent this year?”

He groaned, hauling her against him. “I can think of one very pressing frustration.”

Mirra laughed. “You know, I still haven’t terminated the rent on my apartment...”

“Oh really?”

She grinned. “But I thought that was against the rules for winter shut-in. You’re not supposed to travel or move addresses, right?”

“I’m pretty sure there’s a loophole covering extreme circumstances and hardship.”

“Exactly how hard are we talking?” She slid her hand up his thigh, reaching for the goods, until he caught her wrist.

“Not now, Mir, I’m begging you.”

“I guess we’ll have to sneak away later then.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

She grinned. “There. I’ll make a rule breaker of you yet.”

Lennox shook his head. “You made me a rule breaker the minute I laid eyes on you. It just took me a while to realize it.”

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Thanks for reading. I hope you enjoyed Mirra and Lennox’s story. Can’t get enough of my polar bear alien billionaires? Have you read Errytt and Cassie’s story, [Alien Billionaire’s Assistant?](#)

[Sign up for my newsletter](#) and get all my latest news, including notifications about upcoming releases and sneak peeks of what I'm working on. Book 3, Alien Billionaire's Nanny will be Dinah's book. I'm expecting to release it around March or April 2023.

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