



RUBY  
DIXON

CORSAIRS  
BETHIAH

SCIENCE FICTION ROMANCE

# CORSAIRS: BETHIAH

CORSAIR BROTHERS

RUBY DIXON



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## CORSAIRS: BETHIAH

I have a reputation for being the most chaotic bounty hunter in the universe.

What they don't know? My private life is just as messy. I've got a sweet, innocent cloned human woman who wants to be my lover...and a grumpy cyborg paramour who might be jealous that he's not the center of attention.

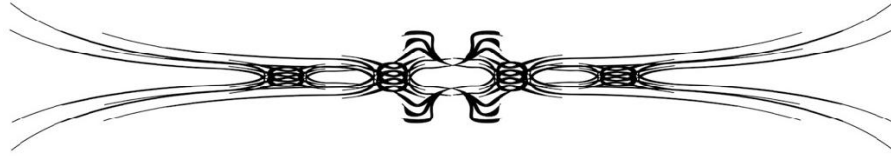
The solution?

A triad. Can three very different people love and work together all on the same small spaceship?

We're about to find out.

(Please note - this book is F/F/M and everybody touches everybody. If you're not into that, this isn't the book for you!)

# CONTENT WARNINGS

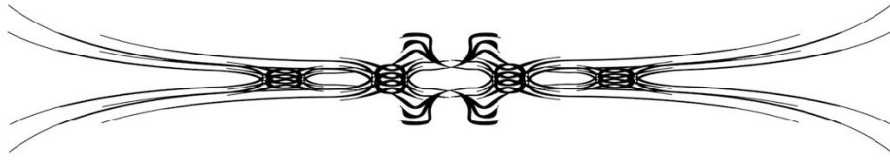


Hello there!

Please be warned that this book contains the following!  
Spoilers ahead!

- Cloning
- Kidnapping
- References to sexual assault
- References to human enslavement by aliens
- References to euthanizing/termination of humans
- Breaking and entering and law-breaking in general
- Pregnancy (okay, maybe not? But it's a Ruby Dixon book and I feel like someone's gonna be fertile at some point or mention it at least.)

ONE



## DORA

“Home sweet home,” Bethiah announces as we step foot onto the abandoned ship. Her smile is broad, and it’s that pleased look on her face that tells me that this ship is something she is proud of and I absolutely, positively should not cry.

It’s just that...it looks like a ship made entirely of garbage.

Mathiras and Helen had warned me that if I went with Bethiah, her ship wouldn’t be as nice as the *Little Sister* or the real swanky-looking ship, the *Scarlet Gaze*. I didn’t get to go on board that one. I just saw it through screens.

This ship is nothing like those. It’s a lot smaller, maybe the size of two RVs put together. The halls are tight, the ceiling much lower to the point that it practically scrapes Bethiah’s capped horns. She doesn’t seem to be bothered by it, but it feels cramped to me. The walls look like a bunch of different types of metals were all hammered and soldered together—this panel is a rusty shade, that one a gray, this other one a pale white with a bunch of alien writing on it. Pipes run along the ceiling overhead, and one drips on my hair. I wipe at my head, and I know from asking that the pipes are water recyclers and air recyclers and a few other things that make the ship functional. Everything looks worn and used, like this ship was constructed from the rejected scraps of an alien junkyard. As I walk down the narrow hall, clutching my small bundle of clothing, I see what looks like a patched hole to the right of me, and that’s alarming. What if the vacuum of deep space sucks us out of a puncture and kills us? It takes nothing.

And there is a weird funky *smell*. Like machine oil and something burning.

It’s all very overwhelming. I wish Ruthann was here, because then I’d be in this new environment with another

clone, another person that's completely out of their depth, and I wouldn't feel so alone. As it is, Bethiah strides past me, running her hand along one of the junkyard-looking walls and peers down the hall. "Everything seems to be in working order if the backups are keeping everything nice and climate-controlled."

"O-oh?" I manage, looking around. "How can you tell?"

"You can't see your breath, right? There's no frost over everything. And you're breathing." Bethiah grins at me. "That's how I know."

"But...you didn't know if it was working before we came on? Shouldn't we have helmets?"

"Nah. Spoils the surprise." She puts a hand on a hip and, ignoring my stunned expression, glances around. "So I'm not big on coddling. Just put your stuff down anywhere."

What does that have to do with coddling? "Put my stuff down?" I echo, trying not to sound like a complete idiot and probably failing. "Why?"

"Wherever you want to be your room. We'll figure it all out somehow." She eyes me for a moment and then gestures behind her. "I need to get things started on the bridge. The moment we fire this bird up, we're probably going to set off trackers, so we want to stay ahead of the game."

"Trackers? Game?"

"Game," she agrees, and a gleeful sort of light enters her eyes. "I'm gonna let you in on a secret, Dora. Everything's a game. We choose who we want to play with, we establish the rules, and then we start the game."

Does that mean she wants to play with me? Is that why she invited me? I'm flattered and puzzled at the same time. And... wait. Who else are we playing with?

But Bethiah leaves and I remain in the hall, clutching my few belongings.

I stare around the derelict-seeming ship, trying to put the puzzle pieces together mentally so things make sense. Ever

since I woke up from what I thought was a nap, things have been off kilter. I've been told that it wasn't a nap at all, but that I'm a clone, and the horrible people that were keeping me caged were going to sell me. The scattered memories I have are the memories of the original "host" donor, and that I was grown from a piece of the original Dora's brain, like a starfish growing another starfish from a piece of itself. I want to tell them that they're wrong, that I'm the real Dora.

But I can't remember my last name. Or where I come from.

And my companion, Ruthann, had the same "clone markers" in her blood as I do. And she left with two women who looked identical to her in every way.

So it has to be true. I'm a clone, and I'm in outer space (which I sure don't have memories of).

Bethiah's been kind to me in her weird way, and so when she offered for me to come with her, I jumped on the chance. I don't have a lot of things I can rely on, but she's shown me that I can rely on her. She's done her best to help me figure myself out, and she hasn't snapped at my endless questions or my tears.

Like she said, though, she's not going to coddle me. I guess I'll have to figure my own way out around this ship and decide where I'm going to sleep. With a wary look down the hall, I head in the opposite direction of Bethiah, since she said that part was the bridge. If this is laid out like the other ship, the *Little Sister*, that means there should be a mess hall and some cabins on the other end.

I peek through the next doorway and see what looks like the mess hall of the *Little Sister*, except smaller and far more cramped. There's a machine that spits out noodles like they had, but this one's blinking with all kinds of red lights, and a lone noodle hangs out of the dispenser, left behind after the last time someone prepared food. There's a ton of discarded wrappers on the floor here and a very tiny table with just one chair. Bethiah is a slob, but I suppose that tracks with her

personality, and that single chair tells me she's used to being alone.

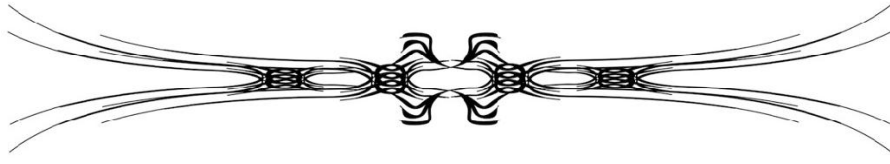
I find a few more chambers that look as cluttered as the mess hall, and one that has a woman's clothing tossed all over it, with a bunch of space-looking guns scattered on the bed. That must be Bethiah's room. It's the only one with a bed except for one other small chamber that looks austere and slightly forbidding. It smells musty and instead of using the main lavatory down the hall, it has one of its own, with a sink attached to the wall.

I suppose this will be the most convenient for both of us, if I settle into this room. I can stay out of her way and then she won't be sorry she was stuck with me. With a little sigh, I set my change of clothes down on the edge of the cot and look around at my bleak new surroundings.

Home sweet...home?



Two



## BETHIAH

I pinch the bridge of my nose, watching Dora through the vid-screen on the ship. The silly human decided to take my holding cell for her bedroom. She wants to sleep like a prisoner. What the *kef*. I watch her for a moment longer, just to make sure I'm not seeing things, but yup. She's getting comfortable in the holding cell and settles in on the cot.

Welp. I guess she's safe enough there, even if it's not the most comfortable spot. Then again, this ship wasn't made for comfort.

I should never have taken her with me. I'm too keffing soft-hearted. It's just that she has big eyes and soft yellow hair and her utter helplessness reminds me of...the one I will never speak of again. The one that broke all the pieces inside me.

She reminds me of a...fluffit. Those ridiculous, soft little puffball creatures on Homeworld that used to hop around on the ground and pollinate the low-lying flowers with their long noses. The same creatures that would panic and die, their hearts exploding out of fear, if you startled them. Fluffits aren't in the wild anymore, because there's no wild left on Homeworld. They exist only in contained, ultra-safe environments where they're kept safe from the world outside. Only then do they thrive.

Yeah, Dora reminds me of those.

I've no idea how I'm going to keep my sweet little fluffit alive out here in the universe, but I know I have to try. She needs someone that won't abandon her. Someone that will be her friend even when things are inconvenient. I might not be the most orthodox of buddies, but I'm loyal.

Well...loyal-ish.

Well...I'm loyal to those who are loyal to me.

Mostly.

It doesn't matter. Dora needs a friend and I aim to be that friend. Plus, I knew when I looked at Ruthann, Ruth, and Ruthie, that they'd all stick together. They consider themselves sisters. Dora doesn't have anyone, and I know how that goes. I'm the only person on this end of the universe that doesn't want anything from her. I just recognize a fluffit when I see one, and since this galaxy chews up fluffits and spits them out, I'm going to be her friend.

I'm going to teach her how to be hard and ornery so she can take care of herself. Then I'll boot her and send her off into the stars, because I work best alone.

I check in on Dora again, and sure enough, she's settled into the prisoner cot, still hugging her bundle of clothing. Her eyes are big and dark, and as I watch her, she sniffs and then swipes at her face. Crying. Tears. I hate tears.

I turn off the feed, because that's enough for me. She'll harden up eventually. Instead, I drum my fingers on the control panel, looking around at the ship. She's an ugly, battered thing, but I like strangely ugly things, and her engine hums like a song. I pet her, considering the new name I'll take up for her. Rhonda liked circuses, human shows with extreme, strange things. And while I still hate Rhonda with every fiber in my being, I appreciate the sentiment of the strange. I'll call the ship *The Bearded Lady* this time, I think.

Because it'll make her that much harder for Jamef to find again.

I've been thinking about my ship for a while now, ever since that fool Zebah stole her from me. I know bounty hunters love to mess with each other and stealing a ship is almost a sign of affection, but this one is *mine*. Mine, because it represents the game I play with her first owner, Jamef sa Raan.

Are you out there watching?" I purr, sliding my hands over the controls, imagining that the battered-looking cyborg bounty hunter can hear me. "Do you have a secret feed here on the bridge? Do you see what I'm doing to your ship?" I lean in

and lick the control panel, swirling my tongue over one of the buttons. Tastes like success to me.

Success and dust.

I know Jamef must hate me. He thinks I'm doing all of this to get back at him somehow. That I keep kidnapping him and "oops" letting him escape because I'm a feline playing with my prey. And while I do love a chase, it's more than that. It's me seeing how he responds to my overtures. It's me pushing to see how far I can go before he breaks and loses interest.

I glide my tongue over the keys again. Somewhere in the ship, a door opens and closes again, but I ignore it. I grin and straighten again, winking at nothing in particular. Jamef is someone I understand. He's a busted, ugly thing—the ones that always fascinate me—and I want to play with him. I'm not sure if I want to treat him like an insect—pin him down and pull off his wings—or if I want to kiss him.

I suppose half the fun is figuring out which one it's going to be.

"Come and get me, Jamef," I call out coyly. "I'll make it fun. I always do."

We've played this game for a while now. I stole his ship because it appealed to me. I like how it's so keffing ugly and yet the engine is so well-tuned. It's obviously loved and cared for, and yet the owner gave no thought to its appearance. It's more than camouflage, this piss-ugliness of *The Pleasure Spot*. There's something deeper and it calls to me with its weirdness, just like Jamef himself. I mentally picture the male. His is the same story that a lot of mesakkah my age have—he lost several limbs in the war and they were replaced on the cheap. His prosthetics are clunky, and the only credits he seems to have spent are on the cybernetic eye...and there he goes for function over form once more. It very clearly does not match his other eye. It's bright red and mechanical and it's like he's daring people to notice how much of him is no longer mesakkah.

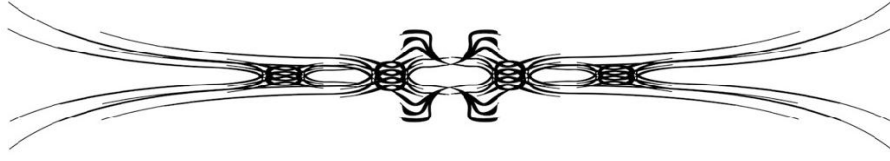
I notice, all right. I notice, and I find it arousing.

Just being back on the *Pleasure Spot* makes me a little turned on, because I know Jamef is going to hunt me down. I know he's going to come after his beloved ship and try to steal it back from me. I figured once I stole it he'd either report me to the authorities, or come after her himself. I've stolen it three times now and he's never once reported me, which tells me that she was stolen in the first place.

That, and Jamef likes this dance as much as I do.

Just as long as he leaves the little fluffit alone, we can dance as much as we like.

# THREE



# DORA

## *A FEW DAYS LATER*

As a freeloading human on a mesakkah vessel, I'm determined to earn my keep on Bethiah's ship.

There's just one small problem—there's nothing for me to do.

When we first arrived on Bethiah's ship—she's calling it *The Bearded Lady* because for some reason the name cracks her up, and apparently this is just the latest iteration in a string of weird names—I saw an opportunity. There was dust all over the ship from being abandoned, the filters leaving a fine mess of gray particles on all flat surfaces. The screens had smudges (Bethiah is a screen toucher, which drives me crazy) and the tiny mess hall in the clunky ship was a disaster.

Cleaning, I can help with, I figure. I can't read the Homeworld language or speak it. I can't fight worth a gosh-darn. I can't shoot a gun or fist-fight or anything good like that. I sure don't know how to operate the ship. The other day I closed myself in the supply closet and accidentally got stuck there for four hours because I couldn't figure out how to operate the door. Bethiah had to come rescue me and she laughed in my face.

It wasn't my favorite moment.

But Bethiah is giving me a place to live, so I want to do my best to please her. So...I can do housekeeping.

Except the day after we arrive, I realize that there are bots in the walls that do the dusting. There's a bot with a long, skinny squeegee that goes around and wipes down all the screens once a day. The mess hall bots activate and tidy everything within the space of an hour once the ship takes off.

And while Bethiah is a disaster, short of following her around like a puppy and picking up the things she discards, there's nothing for me to do to prove my worth.

It's a pickle.

I'm doing my best to stay out of her way, because I know she wants to be left alone. She's made it clear that she wants to keep our relationship an arm's length sort of thing. And that's fine, truly. I don't want to be a bother. I just...don't know what to do to prove my worth. How do I show Bethiah I'm valuable as a crewmember if I'm not really all that valuable after all? What can I do to be useful? Somewhere in my memories, I seem to recall that I've got a decent voice and I can play the flute and the piano.

Great. I'm musical. Not only do I think that's a pretty useless talent on a spaceship, I'm pretty sure Bethiah isn't the type to appreciate music. She seems more of a heckler than a musician. So...no singing. I don't think I'm a dancer (nor would that be appreciated, I suspect) so I turn to other art forms.

Maybe Bethiah could use someone to paint this ship. Not with a mural or anything fancy, but I'm sure I can manage a space-paintbrush of some kind, and these rusty-looking mismatched walls could use a coat of paint to liven the place up. There's a panel on the ceiling above my bed that looks like it was salvaged from somewhere, and while I can't read the alien writing that goes with it, the stick figures make me think the panel once belonged in a bathroom of some kind...or a brothel.

Because those are some really strange, vaguely alarming stick figures.

I stare at them for a bit and then decide that although Bethiah wants to be left alone, perhaps it'd be best to discuss with her how I can earn my keep. Maybe there are things a human can do that I'm not thinking of. I get to my feet and head out of my room, twisting my hands as I do. For some reason I'm anxious. I guess I thought that given how friendly and warm Bethiah was back on the *Little Sister*, that she'd continue to be so. That hasn't been the case, though. She's ignored me to the point that it feels as if she's trying to forget I'm here.



Chewing on my lip, I pace down the hall. Most of the time, she's on the bridge, so I head in that direction, and give a squeak of distress when one of the bots putters past me with a loud clank. Even the bots look piecemeal. It's so bizarre.

Sure enough, Bethiah is on the bridge. I can see her form as I head down the hall toward the slightly larger room that controls the ship itself. For a moment, I think she's reaching for something, but as I approach I realize her hands aren't in the air. They're behind her, holding onto a monitor...as she rubs her butt over the screen.

I pause, not wanting to intrude. Maybe...maybe this is an alien custom. I clear my throat. "Um? Is this a bad time?"

"Nope. I'm almost done." She gives her backside one last swipe across the screen and then her tail flicks back and forth as she hauls her pants back up her hips. "All good. What's the problem?"

Clearing my throat delicately, I try not to think about how she really just rubbed her butt on a vid screen. No wonder the bot with the squeegee looks so worn down. It's getting a real workout. "I wanted to talk to you about me being here."

The expression on her face changes. She gives me a narrow-eyed look. "Oh? Ready to leave already?"

"Not in the slightest." In fact, just the thought makes me a little panicky. I want the absolute opposite of that. If she sends me away I don't know what I'll do. Cry, probably. I want to cry right now, actually. There's a huge lump in my throat that makes it hard to talk. "Actually," I whisper, trying to speak around the knot lodged in my vocal cords. "I wanted to talk to you. I want to stay here. I want to stay here with you."

Bethiah relaxes a little. "And this isn't coming up because you caught me rubbing my ass on the security cams?"

"I, er, wasn't going to ask."

"Probably best."

I twist my hands. "It's just that...you've made it very clear you don't enjoy company."

“It’s not that I don’t enjoy company. It’s that company doesn’t really enjoy me. Most people can’t wait to get away from me.” She leans back against the control panel, a challenging look on her face. “Sure you don’t want to run?”

“I’m sure. You’ve been so kind to me —”

Bethiah immediately hops to her feet. She strides over to me and covers my mouth with her hand, glancing around. “Hsst! The walls have ears.”

I stare up at her in confusion as she scans the room with her gaze. She...thinks we’re being spied on? And she doesn’t want them to know she’s kind? “Should I pretend you’re mean?” I ask, my words muffled under her larger hand. “That I’m afraid?”

That won’t be hard. I spend most of my time absolutely terrified.

She brightens. “That might be a good idea.” Leaning in, she whispers, “It can be our little secret.” With that, she pulls her hand from my mouth and wipes it on my sleeve. “Now what did you want to ask me about?”

I’m not even sure I want to ask now. She’s so very confusing. But she’s also an alien, I remind myself. Maybe it’s a cultural thing and I only find her confusing because I’m unaware of how her people operate. Or maybe my cloned brains are more scrambled than I’d like. Either way, I’m pretty sure I’m the problem, not her. “I came in because I wanted to talk with you about my place here on the ship.”

“As my pet human, yes.”

I inwardly wince. While a “pet” means that she’s keeping me, it also means she doesn’t view me as an equal. I’m something to be coddled and cared for as long as I don’t piss on her shoes. It’s...not great. But I don’t have a lot of options so I can’t truly complain. “I’m doing my very best to stay out of your way,” I point out, just so she knows that I’m trying. “But I’m also well aware that this situation would be better if I pulled my weight. I thought I’d clean for you, but you have

bots that take care of that sort of thing. So I thought I'd volunteer to paint instead."

"Paint?" She frowns at me as if I've said a dirty word. "Paint what?"

"The ship?" I gesture at one of the hideous, beaten-up looking walls. "I thought some paint on the interior would give it a fresh look. Maybe brighten things up a bit. Make it look... clean...er..." I slow down, the words dying at the sight of Bethiah's horrified face. "I take it that's a no."

"This ship has character," she says, indignant. "I can't believe you'd want to strip it away from her. What, I suppose you liked the look of that other ship better? The *Little Sister*?"

I did, actually. And the *Scarlet Gaze*. And pretty much any ship that doesn't look like it's going to fall to pieces with a strong breeze. But I'm the interloper here. "It was just a suggestion," I say meekly. "I didn't mean to offend."

"Well, you succeeded," Bethiah huffs, moving to the wall and stroking one rusty-looking piece of metal as if to placate the ship. "You learn to appreciate things that are different. Things that have been pieced together with heart and soul. Things that have history behind them, that show that they've come a long way." She gives the wall another loving touch. "They're just as worthwhile when they're ugly."

"Of course they are." My stomach tightens, and I feel a little sick that I've hurt her feelings. This is her home and I'm here only through her kindness. "I didn't realize. I'm so sorry."

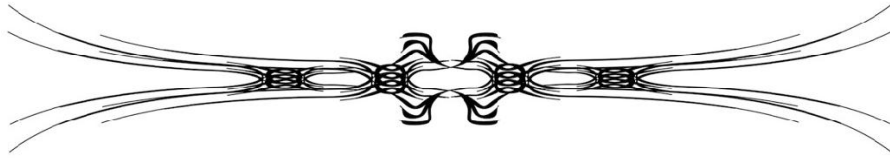
"We don't abandon things that aren't perfect," Bethiah says. "And we certainly don't try to change them into something they're not."

Why do I feel like we're not talking about the ship anymore? "Then tell me what I can do."

"Do?" She turns away from the wall and gazes at me. "For what?"

"For you," I say. "To earn my way on this ship."

# FOUR



## BETHIAH

**D**ora blinks at me with big eyes and it occurs to me that she has no idea what she's offering.

"I'm sorry, I think I heard wrong," I say to her. "Repeat that?"

She bats her eyes at me, all innocence and human frailty. "I want to stay on this ship and I want to please you. Tell me what I can do to earn my passage."

"Earn your passage," I echo.

Dora nods. "This is your ship. I'll do anything you want. Just name it."

A hot prickle starts at the base of my horns and tickles my ears. I'm reminded of another situation like this, with another human, and how I'd ended up falling in love with Rhonda, who'd taken my heart out of my chest and stomped on it with her dainty human foot. I'm not falling for this nonsense again. "What you're offering, the answer is no."

She flinches, and I definitely feel like I've kicked a fluffit. "Oh." Dora swallows hard. "So you're getting rid of me? At the next station? How long do I have?"

The frantic, hunted look on her face is back, and she looks as if she wants to flee. It annoys me, her fear. I understand it, but it still annoys me. "I didn't say that."

"But you just said there was nothing I could do to earn my passage on the ship —"

"No," I clarify, and the bases of my horns still feel hot. "I said you can't earn it in my bed."

Dora tilts her head. Her mouth falls open and then she sputters. "I—what? When was *that* on the table?"

"What did you think you were offering when you said '*Oh Bethiah, I'll do anything if you'll keep me*'?" I mimic her

voice with a simpering tone, tossing my braids.

Her hands fist at her sides. “I was thinking cooking! Or painting! Or singing!”

I stare at her. And then I laugh, hard. “Singing? Singing to pay your way on this ship? Are you keffing with me?”

The human’s face flushes and she gives me a withering look. Then, she ducks past me and stomps down the hall.

Oh, my little fluffit is mad now. I keep laughing, because I know it’ll rile her up, and follow after her. She ducks back into the holding cell that she’s claimed and tries to activate the door, but she’s not very good at that sort of thing. It takes her several angry taps before she presses down on the right spot, and I stand in the doorway before it can close, stopping the automated system entirely. I lean against the doorjamb, watching as she sits on the edge of the bed, all proper and flustered, her hands balled in her lap.

“You’re not going to ‘earn’ your keep on this ship, fluffit,” I tell her, still chuckling. “I brought you here so I could teach you how to take care of yourself. And rule number one? Never offer to do ‘anything’ to anyone, or else you’re going to find yourself dressed as a naughty praxiian, with your arm elbow-deep in some moden’s asshole looking to massage his sensitive spots.”

“Ew. I don’t even know what a moden is, but just...ew.” She gives me a disgusted look. “Why are you so awful?”

“Because you need to learn that this universe is awful, fluffit. And I’m not going to coddle you. You want to earn your keep? You learn everything you can about being a good corsair and how to handle yourself. You can take off on your own once you’re capable, and that’ll be all the payment I need.”

Dora gives me a betrayed look, her pink mouth pulled down into an unhappy line. “Is that why you were nice to me back on the other ship and you’re being awful to me now? Is this part of my ‘training’?”

Am I being awful? For some reason, that stings. Fluffit, I remind myself. She's nothing but a helpless little fluffit that will get herself killed. Someone with her best interests needs to be mean to her. "Here's another word of advice. Don't pick the worst room on the ship. If someone offers you free rein, you take the best room possible. Understand?"

It's clear she doesn't. She looks around at her quarters, and then at me, her brows furrowing together. "This is the worst room on the ship? It's the only other one with a bed."

"It's a holding cell," I point out. "What stopped you from taking my bedroom?"

Her mouth drops open. "I...what? It's yours."

"Exactly. I said you could sleep anywhere. Why didn't you take the best offered to you?"

She blinks, clearly startled by my question. "I...because... because it's yours and I'm your guest."

"You need to learn Bethiah's rules for piracy, fluffit. Number one—you always take what you want. Understand? Don't let anyone else come before you. You're in charge of your life."

The look Dora gives me is dubious, as if she doesn't quite believe the words I'm saying. "Everyone else in this universe acts like I'm an object to be owned. It doesn't matter what I think of myself if they're bigger and have guns."

"Not if you fight."

She gets to her feet, her hands smoothing down the legs of the bland-colored bodysuit that she wears. It was given to her by someone on the *Little Sister*, and it doesn't fit her quite right. The chest strains over the fasteners and it's tight across her backside, and the color is all wrong. I suspect her shoes fit her poorly too, with the way she walks, but Dora hasn't complained. That's the problem. She never complains about anything. Never asks for anything. She just hides in the shadows meekly and waits for someone to rescue her.

But rule number one? You rescue your keffing self.

Dora composes herself, takes a few steps forward, and then lifts her chin.

Yes, I say silently. Yell at me. Smack me across the mouth for being cruel. Push your way into my quarters and take them over.

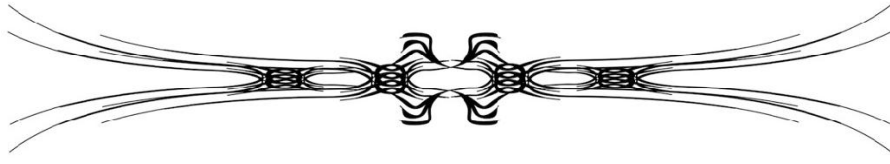
She glares at me, her chin lifting a little higher. Then, it wobbles. Hot tears streak down her cheeks.

I've made her cry.

Kef me, I'm the worst.



# FIVE



## DORA

**B**ethiah looks absolutely chagrined when I start to cry.

“Stop that,” she fusses, but it only makes me cry harder. I don’t know what she wants. I’m just scared and alone and I really wish I had a friend. The look she gives me is mortified. “Bounty hunters don’t cry.”

I wipe at my face, distressed that I’m making her mad. “I’m not a bounty hunter —”

“Not with *that* attitude.”

I break into a full-on sob, covering my face with my hands. “I’m sorry! I’m trying to do better!”

She makes another displeased groan, but in the next moment, I’m tucked against a taller, lean body, and she hugs me against her. It’s the first contact I’ve had in days and it feels so wonderful that I immediately burrow against her, the instinctive need to find shelter from the uncertainty in my life winning out over the fear of making her even angrier. Bethiah only rubs my back, though. She sighs. “Why couldn’t you be tough and ready to rumble like Ruthann? She’d have chewed my ears off if I hurt her feelings.”

I sniffle, burrowing into the warm safety of her arms. “Yeah, but she wouldn’t have gone with you. I’m the only dummy that did.”

That makes her chuckle. She rubs my back again and doesn’t seem in any particular hurry to let me go, so I stay right where I am. Being curled up next to someone is incredibly soothing. I’ve felt so alone for the past few days and bewildered. I’ve been trying to give Bethiah space, and it’s clearly not working for me. Maybe she might need space, but I don’t.

Well, she did tell me to be pushier. So I guess I should start.

“You’re not a dummy. Just soft.” She sighs again, as if that’s the worst thing in the world to be. “But don’t worry. We’re going to work on that. I have a plan.”

That makes me pause. “You...do?”

“I do, actually. I’ve never had a protégé before. It could be fun. I’m going to teach you everything I know about bounty hunting. It’ll be fun. You can be my decoy and lure in the bad guys. It’ll be great experience for you.”

“Um.” I’m not sure I like the whole “lure” idea. “I’m sure we have a lot of learning before we get to the whole ‘luring’ part, don’t we?”

“Oh, absolutely.” Bethiah chuckles. Her hand strays to my hair and she hums with surprise. “Your hair is softer than it looks.”

I’m not sure if that’s a good thing or bad thing. All I know is that it feels good to have her “pet” me like I belong to her. God, I really am touch-starved. I’m going to make her stop in just a minute. Any minute now. But she keeps petting my hair and doesn’t push me away, and I just keep on staying. “So what do we start with?” I ask. “Me learning the language, maybe? Or how to drive the ship?”

“Those are both good things, but we’re going to head to Three Nebulas Station first,” she tells me, stroking my hair as I hold onto her waist. “I need to pick up a few bounties and check in with the guild. We need a few new fuel cells, and I need to pay a visit to an old friend there.”

“Isn’t that the station that I was at?” I’m pretty sure Helen said stations are dangerous for humans, and the ones that held me captive there were cruel. I’ve blocked out a lot of those memories, but I remember chains and smelly bodies and crying people. So much crying. I remember cold, damp floors and staring eyes and... I shudder, clinging to her waist. “You’re not ditching me there, are you?”

“Didn’t I just say you’re going to be my protégé? It’s a promise, and if I make a promise, I keep it.”

I lean back a little to gaze up at her. “Do you make a lot of promises?”

She smirks at me. “Not if I can help it.”

Fair enough. “You swear on everything you hold sacred?”

“Fluffit, you should know by now that I hold nothing sacred.” Bethiah’s smile broadens. She gives my hair one last pat and then lets me go. “Which reminds me. I should go and set a course for Three Nebulas. I need to chart it to make sure it’s as obvious as possible.”

Of all the things I expected Bethiah to say, “make it as obvious as possible” seems...odd. “Why obvious?”

“I’m hoping to rendezvous with a friend of mine.” Her eyes gleam wickedly and she gives a toss of her horns. “We need to make it obvious so he can track us.”

“This is the friend you want to meet at Three Nebulas?”

“Mmm, different friend, actually.” Bethiah strokes one of her braids, a thoughtful expression moving over her face. “I have lots of friends.” She pauses. “Actually, I have a lot of acquaintances. Very few friends.” She puts a hand to her mouth in a mock-whisper. “Most people think I’m a bit much.”

That makes me sad. Is she a little quirky and prickly? Yes. But she’s also been kind to me in her way, and she’s letting me stay with her. She didn’t even get mad when I clung to her just a moment ago and cried all over the front of her jumpsuit.

“I’ll be your friend,” I tell her softly. If I’m her friend, she can be mine, too. It’s hard enough to be out here without a familiar face. I can’t imagine how lonely it must be to have no one to rely on.

Bethiah studies me for a moment. She reaches out and grabs my chin in her hand, squishing my face between her fingers. “Oh, fluffit. Remember what I said about being too soft?”

“I said I’ll be your friend,” I blurt, my lips contorted around her grip. “I didn’t ask. I told you how it was going to

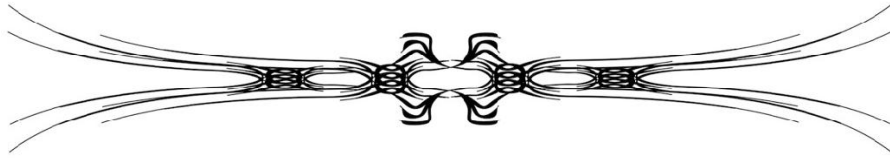
be.”

She brightens. “Why, you’re right. You’re learning already.” She gives my face another jiggle. “I like it, fluffit. Good job.”

For some stupid reason, her praise makes me want to squirm like a puppy with happiness. I beam at her back as she heads toward the bridge.

Now I just need to figure out what the heck a “fluffit” is.

SIX



## BETHIAH

I have to admit, I'm a little disappointed. It's been three days since I got my ship back and there hasn't been a single sniff of Jamef. No one hacking into my feeds, no one tagging my flight path, no nothing.

It's almost like he doesn't care that I've stolen his ship. And that hurts my feelings, just a little. A ship theft is practically a love note to another bounty hunter, at least I think so. It's me telling someone I respect them enough to steal their gear. It's me saying I've noticed you. Notice me back. It's like pulling on the braids of someone you like on the playground. I'm giving him all the signals, so I'm not sure why he's not chasing.

Then again, maybe he is and I'm just not being patient enough. Patience is not a strong suit of mine.

But Jamef and I have been playing this game for a while. I stole his ship. He hunted me down and captured me. We flirted. I got away. I stole the ship again and imprisoned him. He broke out, hunted me down and stole his ship back. Now I have it again and I'm waiting for his next move. If he's not giving me any signs of wanting to play, I guess I need to focus on my little fluffit until he emerges from the shadows. So I toy with the course for Three Nebulas. I'll circle wide around the abandoned grain station, just in case he hasn't caught wind of our trail, and make it obvious where we're heading.

Then if he wants to come play, he can.

I tinker around with the flight settings for a while, watching Dora on one of the vid cams as she moves around the ship. She cleans up the mess hall, despite the fact that there are bots to do that sort of thing. In fact, she almost seems offended by the bots. She swats one when it gets close and tries to wipe down the lone table in the dining area, and steals the towel out of its pincer. With a disgruntled look, she pushes

it aside and does its work instead, scrubbing the table with the towel and then wiping down all the machines.

Strange fluffit.

Later that evening, she heads back to her room—the holding cell—and curls up in her bed. I just shake my head at that. I can't make her into a fighter overnight, I suppose.



I wake up in the middle of the night to a touch on my leg.

Automatically, I reach for the blaster I keep at hand and press it to the face of my attacker without even rolling over. My mind is already going through the defenses on the ship, trying to mentally pinpoint vulnerabilities. “Don’t try it,” I say aloud. “Or your brains are going to end up on the wall.”

How did someone get in past the perimeter alarms? How—

There’s a choked sound. “Um...Bethiah?”

Kef. It’s my fluffit.

I let out a heavy sigh and roll over. Sure enough, Dora is there, her eyes wide. There’s a reddish mark on her pale forehead where I had my blaster muzzle pressed. “What do you want?” I ask. “It’s the middle of the night.”

“I had a nightmare,” she says, her eyes focusing on me. “I dreamed I was back in the slave pens and no one was coming for me.”

Scrubbing a hand over my face, I set my blaster back in its spot tucked between the mattress and the wall. “You’re not there. You’re here, with me. Go back to sleep.”

She doesn’t move. And when I turn to look at her again, her lower lip is trembling, her eyes shiny. “It felt real.”

“It wasn’t real.” I turn on my side, my back to her. “Go to sleep.”

It’s quiet in my room for a moment, and my senses prickle. Then I feel the bed dip slightly, and the silly, foolish fluffit



crawls into my bed and presses herself against me. “You said I should start demanding things more, right? Well, I’ve decided this is my bed now.” Her voice is trembling, as if she doesn’t even believe herself. “This is my bed and I’m going to sleep here.”

“Is that so?” I’m amused at her. This is where she draws a hard line? This is where she fights back?

“Yes,” Dora says, her voice firmer. She presses herself up against me, her breasts brushing against my back. She tucks her smaller body against mine and slides an arm around my waist. “And you don’t have to leave, of course. You can stay. I’m willing to share my bed.”

This is quite amusing. I love when someone surprises me, and my little fluffit has surprised me after all. “I appreciate the largesse.”

“You’re welcome,” she says, voice sleepy. “Now go back to sleep.”

I’m afraid to move a muscle, but I can’t stop grinning. Tiny, terrified little Dora has decided to fight back after all. Maybe she’s not a hopeless case. “Just mind the horns if you’re going to sleep on that side.”

“Kay,” she tells me sleepily. “Night, Bethiah.”

“Goodnight, Fluffit.”

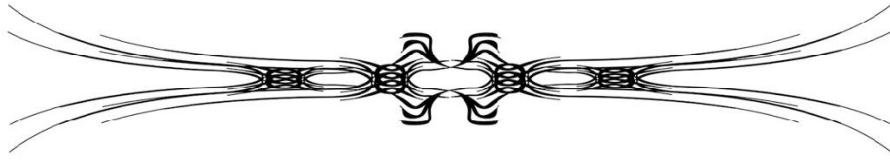
“I’m going to find out what that is someday.”

I smirk to myself. “Go ahead.”

I remain still and quiet, waiting to see if Dora peels herself off of my back now that I’m not kicking her out of bed. My tail is trapped between our bodies, and her arm remains locked around my waist. Every once in a while, she shifts, and I can feel her small nose bump against my back. I really should kick her out of bed. If she shares mine, people are going to assume she’s my pleasure slave.

And yet...I don’t kick her out. I tuck my arm over hers and close my eyes, drifting off to sleep.

# SEVEN



## DORA

A tiny part of me is surprised when I wake up the next morning and find that I'm still in Bethiah's bed, the big spoon to her little one. I really thought she'd kick me out, but she doesn't.

She doesn't kick me out the next night, either, or the next. It's like it's been established that yes, now we sleep together. We squeeze into her bed and I cling to her all night long and she allows it. Is it all because I demanded to stay, I wonder? Or is it because she feels sorry for me? Is it because my nightmares don't happen when I'm tucked against her? Whatever it is, I'll take it. But I'm emboldened by her permissiveness when it comes to bedtime, and I decide to push it a bit further.

"Show me how to fly the ship," I demand the next day, since demanding is apparently Bethiah's love language.

And she does. She lets me sit in her chair and stands over my shoulder, pointing out buttons and controls. There are so many that they all blur together in my mind, especially since I can't tell the squiggles of writing apart. But the next day I try again. And the next. I start to learn that this squiggle that looks like an exploding carrot means "vid cam" and this button that has a melted star on it toggles the rest of the control panel to light up. I'm getting somewhere at least.

Now that I'm forcing Bethiah to include me, it feels less lonely. In fact, it feels like we've returned to that easy friendship we had back when we were on the *Little Sister* and she decided to be my friend. I'm learning a lot about Bethiah, most of all that when she decides someone's getting too close, she pushes them away again, and that I need to push back. It makes me wonder if she's all steel inside, or if it's just swagger and putting on a brave face. I know what that's like.

Well, I don't really, since my "brave face" involves tears and cowering. But if I could put on a brave face, I imagine it'd be a lot like Bethiah's careless adventure-seeking. She acts like she doesn't give a toot, but I think she does.

Maybe she could be a little less careless from time to time, though. This particular day, she's showing me the controls. "Can you toggle the vid screen?" she asks.

Frantically, I search the control panel, looking for the carrot squiggle. I swear she's moving the buttons around when she thinks I'm not looking, because I can't find the damned thing. "If I say no, are you going to get mad?"

"It's right here," she tells me and taps the display. Sure enough, the moment she taps it, the correct symbol displays. Ah. So it's a different symbol until it's depressed. I stare at it, making a mental note. Stick-man with four legs and no arms turns into exploding carrot, I repeat to myself. Stick-man with four legs and no arms to exploding carrot—

"That's always a delightful sight, isn't it?" She sighs, leaning forward on the controls display and gazing up at the screen. "So much opportunity."

I look up from the control panel. For a moment I watch her face, and her eyes are shining with excitement, her lips curved. She's so pretty, I realize. Pretty and strong and confident. I want to be just like her. Then I look over at the screen.

And bite back a yelp, because we're awfully close to what looks like an enormous space station. It looks like a child's ring-toy but inverted—neatly stacked rings with what look like thousands of tiny windows curved around a large central tube. As our ship flies overhead, I see lots of other ships zipping past, and the ring on the top looks as if it's full of holes, which more ships come in and out of. Docks, I think. It all looks incredibly busy and far too close. "You should take the controls," I say to her, jumping to my feet. "You need the chair."

"You wanted to learn, right? Now's a good time to learn. Go ahead and fly us in there." Her eyes gleam with a zealous

light and she grins at me, all teeth. “We talked about how to establish landing protocol. You should have this.”

Is she *kidding* me? She tells me how to land the ship once and she assumes I’ve got it? Does she forget that she’s also told me about the environmental systems, the defense systems, and how she used to mend the bots on some farm she hid out on for six months? All of that jumbles around in my frightened head and I make a terrified squeak. “I can’t.”

She waves an airy hand. “Of course you can —”

“Bethiah,” I snap, pointing at the vacant chair. “You take these controls right freaking now and you fly us in!”

Her tail swings back and forth, almost like a happy puppy. “Is that a command, fluffit?”

“Yes!” I bark out frantically, wringing my hands as our ship continues to creep closer and closer to that massive station. “Please! I can’t fly us yet! I’ll mess it up! I...I...” I try to think of something that will make her take the controls. Something. Anything. “Just do it! Or I’ll...”

“You’ll what?” she teases. “Spank me?”

“Yes! If that’s what it takes!”

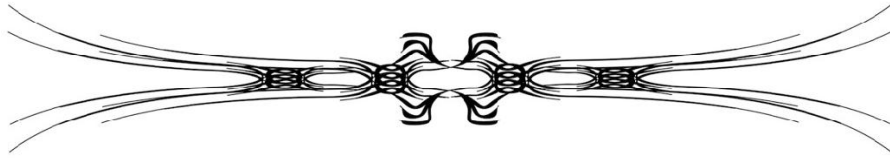
Bethiah leans over and hits a single solitary button on the control panel. “Initiate docking sequence, computer.”

“Initiating docking sequence,” the computer chirps back. “Please remain seated.”

I’m positive she didn’t show me that button before. I’m also positive I’ve never interacted with the computer. Is this another game of hers? To push me until I break? I huff, glaring at her, and then storm off of the bridge.

“Does this mean I don’t get my spanking?” she calls after me.

# EIGHT



## BETHIAH

**H**umans. So adorably fussy.

I let Dora have her little fit as I watch the ship dock itself at the main port of Three Nebulas. I'll have to pay quite a few fees for my impromptu visit, but I can make the credits back. It's more important that my little human companion get the gear she needs in order to succeed. She's been improving over the last few days, but she's still a panicky thing, prone to anxiety. Sleeping in my bed has helped, but she's still got a long ways to go before she's a take-charge sort of female.

As we dock, I activate a script on the ship that feeds nonsense information to the shipyard records. The crew at the docks will know it for a fake, but a few credits will have them look the other way. Time to get to work.

I head to my quarters, putting on my rattiest-looking jumper and a pair of worn boots. My blaster-belt is equally tattered-looking, but the weapons inside are top-notch. When it comes to visiting a station, it's best to look as if you don't have two credits to rub together. The only problem with this sort of disguise is that Dora has to come with me, and Dora's not a cheap sort of pet. Someone who's broke wouldn't have a plaything like her.

We need a solid plan, and most importantly, I need for Dora to go along with it.

Once I'm dressed, I hunt down Dora. Even though she's sleeping in my bed (which is probably a bad idea, but I don't mind it) she's keeping the holding cell established as "her" space. For some reason, that irks me even though it shouldn't. The less clingy she is, the better...even if I kinda like her clinginess.

Kef me, I must be really lonely. I scrub the thought away and swagger into the holding cell, a bright smile on my face. "How do we feel about visiting the station together, fluffit?"

She gives me a surly look, obviously still upset about the little joke I played on her on the bridge. “Do I have a choice?”

“Honestly? Not really. This trip is for you. We’re getting you kitted out so you need to come with me.” I gesture at the door. “Hop to it.”

“Kitted out?” Dora looks worried. “How so?”

“Well, for starters, you’re far too pretty and far too human. We’ll need to get you a holo-mask that will disguise your features so you’re able to travel without any rogues trying to snatch you.”

“You...think I’m pretty?”

My brow heats and I rub the base of one of my horns. I pick up her clean change of clothing, trying to decide if it’s going to call attention to her on the station or if I should be completely obvious and swaddle her in an oversized cloak like Mathiras did with Helen. “Focus, fluffit. Now, I can’t hide that you’re human—yet—so we need a good cover story. Are you going to be upset if you have to wear a collar?”

When she doesn’t answer, I glance over at her.

Dora’s biting her lip, giving me a soft, bashful look. She tucks a yellow strand of hair behind one tiny round ear. “Do you think all humans are pretty or just me?”

I am absolutely not answering that. Time to distract. “Just answer the question. Collar okay?”

She shrugs, touching her neck. “I don’t mind it as a disguise.”

“Okay, good. That makes things easier. Now if anyone asks, you’re a naughty, naughty runaway slave and I’m the one bringing you back.” At her startled look, I continue on, setting her other jumper back down on the bed. “It’s a private job, done under the table for an old friend, which is why it’s not an official bounty. They know I’ve got a soft spot for female humans and that’s why I was hired. Your master is going to pick you up on 3N and you’re absolutely pissing terrified of him and want to stay with me, so if you’re a little clingy it’s understandable. Got all that?”



Clearing her throat, Dora replies with, “You’ve got a soft spot for female humans and you like that I’m clingy. Is that true?”

Have I met the only keffing being in this universe more difficult than me? I frown at her. “Don’t get too excited. It’s called a cover story. Did you catch the rest of that or not?”

“I’m pretty, you’re distracted by my beauty, and you’re doing your best to hide your crush on me.” Dora’s eyes are positively sparkling with glee.

Cloak it is. Maybe I’ll get lucky and she’ll suffocate under it. “Let’s just go before I decide it’s reality and get rid of you after all.”

“You wouldn’t,” she declares, and she follows after me as I stride down the hall of the ship. “You wouldn’t have anyone to spoon you at night and you like it. I’ve heard the little noises you make in your sleep.”

I do *not* make noises in my sleep. Especially not happy ones. “Wrong again.”

She trots up behind me, choosing this annoying moment to be fearless and unafraid of me. “Can I hold your hand on the station?”

“Only if you want it chewed off,” I say cheerfully. Then I raise her hand to my lips and lick it, all while maintaining eye contact.

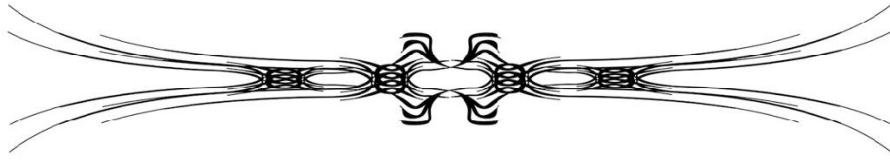
That makes the little fluffit pause. She blinks at me and then extracts her hand from mine. “Has anyone ever told you that you’re weird?”

“Never. Now, let’s get you a nice blinky collar so everyone can think you’re a runaway slave.” Holding hands, keff me. If I held hands with a human female in the midst of that den of thieves and scoundrels, they’d think I’d gone soft.

And Bethiah is many things, but she is definitely not soft. Weird, yes. Erratic, absolutely.

Soft? Never.

# NINE



## DORA

I touch the collar around my neck and try not to look too anxious as we head off the ship.

Did Bethiah want me to pretend to be scared? There's no pretending necessary. I'm absolutely terrified right now. Three Nebulas is the same busy station I remember from before, and the moment the smell of sour air filters and damp heat hits my skin, it brings back a flood of memories. I'm no longer cocky and teasing and having fun. In a heartbeat, I'm a terrified, powerless human once more.

And I want to go back to the ship. Immediately.

If Bethiah notices my fear, she doesn't say anything. She struts through the narrow halls with an arrogant swagger that tells everyone she's hot stuff, and the lead attached to my collar is loose in her hand. I trot behind her, avoiding the sassy swish of her tail as best I can and trying to bite back my whimpers of terror.

She said she wasn't going to sell me. I have to believe her. I have to have someone to rely on in this universe, and I've picked her.

I hope I haven't picked wrong.

Bethiah gave me a cloak to wear while we're on board the station and while I initially didn't want it—and it's too stuffy for it to be comfortable—I'm glad I can hide under its folds and slink behind her, trying desperately to remain unnoticed. I say nothing as Bethiah cheerfully greets the port workers and slips them some of the square, metallic alien money. They nod at her and eyeball me a little too long, and I move a little closer to her.

“Where to first?” I ask when we turn down a long hall. It's crowded, people loitering along the edges and watching us with far too much interest. I notice Bethiah's hand goes to her holster and her swagger gets a little more obvious as we duck

into the mixture of cat-aliens, blue aliens, and some that look like lizards and frogs. It's such a strange blend of beings, and it makes me nervous all the same. My memories from this place are scattered with intense fear and confusion, but I recall what it was like to huddle next to the cold, damp metal wall, chained to others. I remember what it felt like, dying a little inside, each time someone groped me and looked at my teeth like I was livestock.

I hated it, and I hate being back here. Shivering despite the mugginess, I tug my cloak closer. Out of the shadows, I catch a glimpse of a red eye, and I avert my gaze. The last thing I want is more attention.

"Mmm, I smell fried leaves," Bethiah says cheerfully as we turn down another winding hall. "You want a snack, human?"

"No."

"You're no fun. What if I feed it to you?"

I can't tell if that's flirting or just more of her chaos. "Still no."

Up ahead I see an atrium, where the halls open up into a busy central area, and my skin practically crawls with the need to head in that direction. There are green things there, plants, and more shops, but all I care about is that it's open and less oppressive than the cramped halls.

We pause by a stall, and sure enough, it's full of fried foods. Bethiah breathes deep, inhaling the scents, but they make me want to vomit. I can't eat anything. I'm too anxious. I edge closer to her, and to my surprise, she loops an arm around my shoulders and pulls me in against her breast. She flashes sharp white teeth at me. "I said you're going to eat, and you should eat, fluffit. It'll be delicious."

"I'm really not hungry, Bethiah."

"You can eat a nibble," she says, her arm squeezing around my shoulder. She's holding me so tightly I'm practically shoved against her tit, but at least I'm protected from passersby, who are just swerving around us like we're an

obstacle in the way and not a spectacle. “We want two of the fried leaves,” she says, holding up her fingers. “One sweet and one savory.”

The vendor—an alien with orangish skin and creepy eyes—nods and picks up two iridescent, shiny containers. He immediately begins to stuff both with the revolting-looking fried leaves, which are covered in what must be a crispy reddish dough. One is then covered with a sprinkle of something that looks like coffee grounds, and then they’re shoved across the cart towards us.

Bethiah hands him a couple of the metal “coins” and gives the coffee-sprinkled basket to me. She picks up the other and eyes him. “Any fruit today?”

Good lord, fruit too? I’m going to be sick. My nose wrinkles.

The vendor shakes his head. “No fruit. Not a single shipment.”

“Hmm,” is all Bethiah says, and she looks thoughtful. “No other fruit vendors have moved in?”

“Not a one. Pass that on to your friends.”

“Oh, I will,” Bethiah says, practically purring. She sounds pleased, and I wonder what the heck they’re actually referring to. She looks around, then spots an unoccupied bench by a nearby leafy plant. “Let’s sit over there, fluffit. I want to eat my snack before we get down to business.”

She releases me and I follow her over to the bench. When I sit down, her tail curls around my waist and she tugs me a little closer. With a hearty bite, she crunches down on one of the leaves and makes a delighted sound of pleasure, one of the ones she swears she doesn’t make in her sleep. “Been forever since I had decent fried leaves.”

“You can have mine,” I offer, holding my basket up to her.

“Absolutely not. You eat one.”

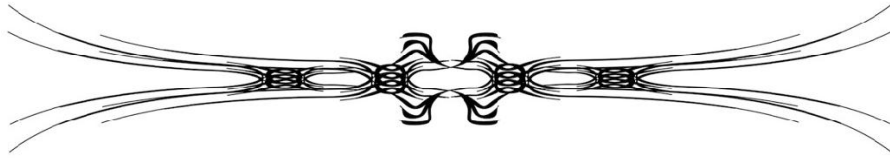
Reluctantly, I do, and I’m surprised at the taste. It’s a bit like a powdered donut from back home, with a hint of a

crunchy tang to it. “Oh. That’s pretty good.”

“Sweet?” she asks.

And before I can answer, she leans in and licks my mouth, then smacks her lips. “Yup. Sweet.”

TEN



## DORA

**B**ethiah just licked me. On the lips.

I want to gasp in shock. I want to ask her what it means. I want to lick her back. Instead, all I can do is stare at her in surprise. Is this part of the game we're playing? Where she's pretending to be soft for a human? Or is she truly flirting with me? It's so hard to tell with Bethiah. Every time I think she's opening up a little, she does something wild and irrational.

But...she did say I was pretty.

I flush with pleasure at the memory. Her tail is still wrapped around my waist, holding me close, and as she eats another one of her leaves, I notice that her gaze is darting around underneath her lashes. She's surreptitiously watching everyone else around us even as we snack. It's probably part of the game, then, I decide.

But my part is that I'm supposed to be clingy and trying to convince her to stay, right? So I decide to push a little. I eat another sweet fried leaf, and let the dark sugar crystals brush against my lips. When Bethiah glances my way again, I lean in (it's a lot of leaning) and plant my mouth against hers. I linger there for a moment, noting how soft her mouth is, and then pull away. "Giving you another taste," I say softly. "Since you liked the first one."

Her eyes narrow on me and the tail around my waist tightens a little. But she doesn't look mad. Her mouth twitches in a hint of a smile, and then she licks a sugar crystal from the corner of her mouth, and I'm fascinated by the sight of her tongue.

For the first time, I'm considering my sexuality. The memories I have from "before" are vague and random, more like trivia that pops up from time to time when I least expect it. My favorite TV show was *Friends*, the smell of cucumbers



reminds me of my granny's garden, and I can't remember more than that even if I concentrate. It's nothing I can rely on. When I "woke up" as a slave, my sexuality wasn't my own. It didn't count, because it didn't matter if I liked male hands or female hands on me. They were hands I didn't want, so I tried not to think about them at all. No one bought me in that time frame, so I spent my time huddled next to other slaves and fearing the day when it'd eventually happen.

But now that I'm free...I'm thinking about things. Things like how soft Bethiah's mouth was against mine, and how much I like curling up against her. Do I like women, then? Do I like women exclusively? I ponder this, and my mind flicks open a few old memories, of kisses shared on a beaten-up sofa in front of a TV, kisses from a man with a beard. Hmm. I consider this a bit longer and decide that I don't care what gender someone is, as long as I like their personality and feel safe with them.

To me, that's all that matters. That it's my decision whether or not things move forward and that I have a say in matters. That I'm excited to have those hands touch me, be they male or female.

I don't know what that's called and I don't care. I just know that with Bethiah's tail curled around me and her smiling down at me, I'm feeling lots of things.

Mostly I'm hoping she'll brush her lips against mine again. So I eat another sweet leaf, even though I'm not hungry, and then tilt my mouth up in her direction. "Do you want another taste?"

She touches a knuckle under my chin, considering. "No, I don't think I do. I think you're trying to seduce me into keeping you, and I'm not going to fall for that."

My stomach clenches with disappointment. I don't care if it's part of the game or not, it still hurts my feelings a little. I lick the sugar crystals off my fingers and set the rest of the food aside, no longer interested. "Did you want to see if we can find a fruit vendor, then?"

Bethiah chuckles. “Oh, sweet little fluffit, it’s never about fruit.”

It’s not? Good gravy, this woman is confusing. “Then can we get a drink of something? I’m thirsty.”

“We can, but we’ll need to be quick about it. I’m being watched.” Her eyes gleam, and I realize she’s excited about this. Her tail is shivering around me with excitement, and her movements are a little more exaggerated. She even tosses her hair.

I look around but I don’t see anyone in particular. People are watching us, yes, but they’re watching a bounty hunter with a human on a lead. I don’t know if they’re looking to steal me away from her, or if they’re just enjoying the spectacle of us kissing, but either way, I suddenly feel very on display. “Are we in danger?”

“Oh, I hope so,” Bethiah purrs. “I really, really hope so.”

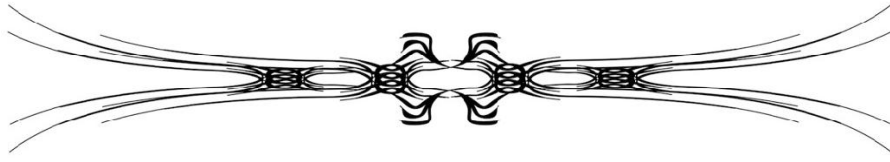
Her strange answer comes with a subtle movement, her smoothing one of her braids. It makes me realize that I thought we were coming here to meet a business partner, but I could be all wrong. We could be meeting a partner instead. Maybe that’s why Bethiah isn’t interested in kissing me.

She’s already got someone she’s interested in.

The stabbing little ache in my heart is quickly ignored as I straighten. It doesn’t matter if Bethiah is just playing with me. She’s been my friend, and she’s going to teach me how to be independent. I don’t need more than that from her...even if I like the thought of *more* way too much.

This flirting between us is just a game, a performance. I can’t read more into it than that.

# ELEVEN



## JAMEF

Eyes narrowed, I watch the annoying, beguiling, deceitful bounty hunter I've been pursuing kiss a pretty little human on the lips and smile at her.

It's like Bethiah is *trying* to get under my skin.

She's succeeding, too.

A female that steals my ship and redecorates it while flirting with me and daring me to capture her should at least be faithful, I should think. She's said she was interested in me in the past, and yet here I find her pressing mouth-parts to a human in public, flouting every hygiene law possible. There's an indignant part of me that still wants the law to step in and do something about the flagrant show. I want some station official to come and give her a digital ticket for public lewdness.

No one does, though, and once again, the law disappoints. I should know by now that no one ever enforces the rules that they make.

Drumming my cybernetic fingers against what's left of my real leg, I watch as Bethiah finishes off her leaves. She chats merrily to the human—who looks a bit less enthusiastic—and gets to her feet.

“Lock onto heat signature of Bethiah and companion,” I murmur.

Immediately, the computer in my eye locks onto them, outlining them in the sea of bodies on the station. They move through the crowds, ducking down a hall, and the sensors in my eye continue to show the red outlines, noting the distance between their current location and mine. I get up to follow them, wondering at Bethiah's game.

She wants me to chase after her. That much is obvious. She knows that I'm watching the bridge from a remote feed. I

know that because she constantly talks to me as if I'm standing on the bridge itself and I can see everything she does. She rubs her ass all over the control screens, deliberately trying to rouse me into showing myself. I know that if I do, I need a solid plan. Last time I approached her, it was equal to equal, male to female. I wanted to talk. I wanted to parlay.

I wanted to get my keffing cock wet. And Bethiah acted like she wanted it, too.

Instead, Bethiah knocked me over the head with a spanner and imprisoned me on my ship. She claimed it as her own, had it revamped into something much uglier, and renamed it from the *Doldrum* to the *Pleasure Spot*. I know she's doing it to get under my skin—everything she does is to get under my skin, it seems—and she acts like this is all a game.

Well, I can play games, too. The next time we meet, it won't be as equals. She wants to be chased until she's caught? I'll catch her, all right. But someone as clever and unpredictable as Bethiah needs bait.

I watch the human she tugs along after her. The female looks reluctant, but she clings to Bethiah, moving as close to her as possible. A bounty, most likely, and one she's gotten too close to...or this is another game designed to flush me out. To make me jealous so I'll confront her.

She'll be expecting me to try and steal her ship. *My* ship.

I have a better idea.

I'll steal her little bounty and force her to come to *me*.

Ducking down a side hall in the busy station, I smile to myself.



**D**ORA

“So where are we going now?”

Bethiah's movements are quick, her steps much longer than mine so I'm forced to jog after her through the halls of

Three Nebulas. She seems to be in a strange mood after kissing me, and I wonder if it's because I didn't react with horror. Was she trying to shock me? Because I'm not shocked. I suspect this is just another mood swing in which she decides we're too friendly and so she pushes me away again.

I'm starting to recognize the signs, and I'm annoyed by it. And when she moves faster down the hall, my annoyance grows. I grab her swishing tail so I don't lose track of her, but also to remind her that I'm following behind her and she doesn't choke me with the lead on the collar.

It's the wrong thing to do. Bethiah halts in her tracks so quickly that I crash into her back. She stops in place and slowly turns around, staring at me. "Did you just grab my tail, fluffit?"

This feels dangerous. "Um...yes?"

Someone titters nearby. Her eyes narrow. She stares at me, long and hard. You could hear a pin drop on the station.

"Is tail grabbing a bad thing?" I ask in a small voice.

"Very."

"Maybe you should spank me, then." I lift my chin, trying to be brave (or at least pretending to be).

She leans in, her eyes a little wild. Her ear jewelry glints in the station light and the gleam of her horns makes her seem all metal and suddenly very hard. When she tips a hard finger under my chin and forces me to look up, I shiver. "You want me to pull your pants down and spank you here in front of everyone, fluffit? You like being on display?"

Eek. No, I don't. Why did I dare Bethiah? She's crazy enough to do such a thing. "I'd settle for knowing where it is we're going and you walking slow enough so I can keep up," I joke. "Maybe save the spanking for later in private."

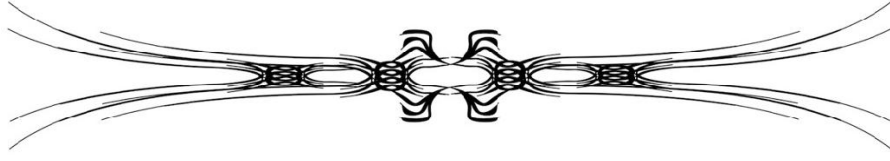
She tilts her head, considering me, and for a long moment, I really do think she's going to pull my pants down in front of all these aliens crowding the station. Instead, she slides a hand around my collar and gently tugs me toward her. "Oh, fluffit,"

she croons. “If you wanted more attention from me, all you had to do was say so. I’ll give you everything you want.”

Oh no. This feels like a trap.

She leans in closer. “As for us, we’re going to visit Zakoar’s body shop.”

# TWELVE





## DORA

**W**e're going to a body shop? For me? It sounds... strange. But I trust Bethiah, and if she wants to take me to a repair place, I assume there has to be a reason. Maybe the junky-looking old ship needs to be outfitted with something specific for a human? I don't know anything about space travel so this could be entirely routine.

And yet...this is Bethiah. I'm starting to learn that she does nothing routine.

I follow behind her closely, resisting the urge to ask a million questions. She knows I'm a clone and my memory is in pieces. If there's something important, I'm sure she'll tell me.

But as we turn down another hall and come into an area that's filled with music and I see a scantily clad woman dancing in a window, I'm starting to wonder if Bethiah didn't maybe get distracted from her to-do list. She pauses in front of the window, giving the feathered female gyrating behind the glass an interested look.

I nudge her. "Hey, um, Bethiah? Can I ask you something?"

"Not sure." She tilts her head, studying the dancer even closer.

"Um...not sure what?"

"If they have feathers everywhere." She bends over and peers at the female. In turn, the female turns and squats, wriggling suggestively and showing us *everything*. "Oh, well, that answers that," Bethiah says with a chuckle, and slides a credit through a slit in the glass. The female immediately scoops it up and turns around, shaking her feathered backside at us.

Scandalized, I flush hot. “That wasn’t what I was going to ask.”

“Then what were you going to ask?” She tilts her head in the other direction as the female grabs one of her ankles and lifts it high in the air. “Kef me, she’s limber.”

“Oh please,” I huff. “Anyone can do that. Can we focus?”

Now Bethiah turns towards me. “You can do that, fluffit?”

“Does it really matter right now?” I edge closer to her, touching the collar around my neck. “Wasn’t there an agenda today? Aren’t we supposed to be checking in with your guild?”

“Oh, that? I already did that.” She taps the glass when the bird-woman looks away, as if trying to get her attention again.

“Um...you did? When?” I glance around, because I don’t recall that happening. Is it possible that someone followed us? That she’s been communicating with them and I didn’t realize? “Did I miss something?”

“Obviously. You think she’s a squawker?”

I wrinkle my nose at my companion. “Don’t be crass.”

“Is that gross?” She turns and leans against the glass, eyeing me. “I thought it’d be more crass if I asked if you were a squawker.”

“I have no idea if I am or not,” I admit. “I don’t have any memories of that sort of thing.”

“Now that’s a shame.” Bethiah tsks, slides the dancer another credit chip, and then saunters away.

Is she being deliberately annoying? Knowing her as I do, I’m going to venture with “yes.” Fighting back a wave of irritation, I follow after her again, holding out my lead. She keeps forgetting to hold onto it and it’s going to ruin our cover story. I think. “Please don’t change the subject. You mentioned back on the ship that you needed to check in with the guild. Can you please just tell me what I missed without being coy or dancing around it so I can learn to spot these things?”

Bethiah slows down just enough to sling her arm over my shoulders, tugging the material of my cloak against my throat hard enough that I make a choked sound. Not that she notices. She just slides her other hand under my hood and strokes my hair like I'm a favorite pet. Leaning in, she whispers, "Did you not hear me ask earlier if there was fruit to be had? And fruit vendors?"

I furrow my brow. When we were ordering food? "I...yes? What does —"

She moves closer, her lips brushing against my ear. "I'm not going to ask outright if slavers are lurking, little fluffit. That seems foolish, don't you think? And I'm many, many things, but rarely ever foolish."

Oh. I turn my head, and our noses practically touch. I wait for her to pull back, to draw away, but she doesn't, and my breath speeds up. "How was I supposed to know?"

"You weren't. That's the point." Her grin is wicked. "But if you ask me nicely later I can spill all my secrets."

I may not have memories of sex or intimacy, but even I know she's flirting with me. I study her face, so close to mine, and wonder if she's trying to scare me off. Is this another Bethiah moment where she's pushing hard to see if I'll push back? Or is she being genuine? It's so hard to tell. "So you're telling me...you're a squawker?"

Bethiah blinks in surprise, and then throws her head back and laughs. She squeezes—okay, crushes—me against her chest again, but it feels affectionate. "Oh, I like you far too much, fluffit. It's going to be a shame to hand you over."

Hand me over? Oh, right. Because of our cover story. "You can always keep me," I reply, leaning into the story. "I can be really, really good for you."

Her eyes flare, and then her tail swats me on the ass. "Flirt."

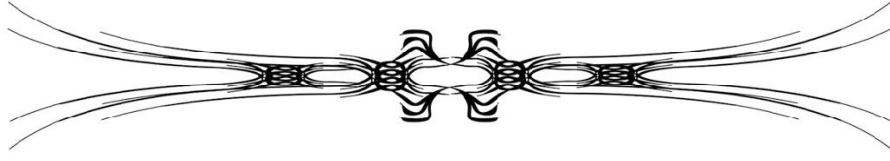
She's calling *me* a flirt? Pot, meet kettle. I snort. "So what is this body shop guy installing on the ship?"

“On the ship?” She chuckles, her arm still around my shoulders, and walks across the narrow hall. Tugging open the door of the junk shop across the way from the dancer, Bethiah continues. “Nothing at all, fluffit.”

“Then what’s the body shop for?”

Her grin when she looks down at me is positively feral. “Why, bodies.”

# THIRTEEN



## BETHIAH

**D**ora makes a little squeak of alarm and looks as if she's going to run away from me. "We're buying bodies?"

She would jump to that conclusion. "Do I look like I deal in corpses?"

Her jaw drops. "You mean they're alive?"

I snap my fingers in front of her face. "Focus, fluffit. I said we're going into the body shop, not that we're buying people. Calm down." I steer her inside of Zakoar's junk shop before she starts screeching about corpses any louder. The fluffit's cute, but she really doesn't know when to hush.

Of course, I know that a lot of the station is new to her. I suspect that whoever brought her here the first time—when she was held in the worst pit of the station itself with the rest of the flesh traders too unsavory to ply their trade on the regular levels—didn't exactly show her around the place. I'm warring with the temptation to do so myself, but it's smarter for both of us if we keep things brief until she's got some equipment to defend herself.

Which is why we're here.

Dora presses herself against my side as we move into the front of Zakoar's shop. It looks the same as it always does—cluttered from top to bottom with every kind of junk and broken part known to civilization. He caters to those that prefer to fix their own equipment, from ships to environmentals to cybernetics. I've never seen him actually sell anything here, at least not from the front office. But he must do enough business that no one asks questions. Behind a glass counter in the back, a mesakkah male who still has a baby face looks up from the old data-pad he's hunched over and jerks in surprise at the sight of me. "Oh no," he says. "You."

“Where’s the big daddy?” I ask cheerfully. “Spanking that sweet little human of his?”

Dora gives me an aghast look. “So it is a slave trader?”

“Nope. Just a male far, far too in love with a human, like the great big fool he is.”

Zakoar’s assistant Tikosa gives me a grimace of pure displeasure. “He’s in the back, yes. And I’m pretty sure he doesn’t want to see you.”

“Pfft. You don’t know that. I have real business today, anyhow. And I even brought credits.” I shake my money pouch, letting the credits clink against one another. “Surely he’d want to see me for that.”

Tikosa continues to eye me as if I’m vermin. His gaze slides to Dora, who quivers under my arm, and then back to me. He thinks for a moment, and then with a long sigh, gets to his feet. “I’ll notify him, but only on one condition.”

Oho, a bargain. Now we’re getting somewhere. “What did you have in mind?”

“If you see Zebah, tell her I’ve got something for her.” And the poor male flushes, right up to the bases of his horns.

I just bet he does. Everyone on the station knows about Tikosa’s crush on the flirty bounty hunter, and how she keeps stringing him along. “You do know she’s been avoiding me lately right? Considering she stole my ship?”

“It wasn’t your ship in the first place, and I know. But you have a habit of showing up in everyone else’s business so I thought I’d pull you into mine.” He meets me with a steady gaze. “Tell her I’ll make it worth her while.”

Well now I almost want to run into her. *Almost*. “Sure.”

He grunts and goes to the wall panel, then knocks on it in a series of raps, then thumps his fist against it once. With a surly look back at me, he returns to his seat and picks up the pad, returning to his work once more. Dora gives me a nervous look, then eyes our surroundings, clearly afraid to touch anything. It’s not like she could break anything in here—

everything's already broken. Zakoar's a male who makes a business out of taking broken things and making them better... and I hope he can do so for my fluffit.

I squeeze her shoulder as the door opens and Zakoar emerges from the warren of secret rooms he has behind his store front. At my side, Dora stiffens, which I expected. There's a lot to look at with Zakoar of the Broken Back. I'm sure some of it is advertisement and the rest is probably pure stubbornness. He's got the credits and the means to have fantastic cybernetics, and instead he chooses to look like a half-metal monstrosity. From his strange eyes to his metal jaw, to the lattice of metal bolts that go down his back, he's terrifying to look at and I half-expect the fluffit to bolt in terror. She doesn't, though. She only clings to me, as if I can somehow protect her from the universe.

"Not you again," Zakoar growls in way of greeting. His metal joints creak as he moves forward, glaring at us.

"My, I sure do get that sort of thing a lot," I say coyly as I step forward. "One would almost think you don't want to see me." I force a slight pout to my lips. "My feelings, they're crushed. *Crushed*, I tell you."

"What do you want, Bethiah?" He regards me with a cool gaze, ignoring my attempts at levity. I can't help but notice that his pretty little human isn't around. Maybe that's why he's cranky right now. It certainly can't have anything to do with me. Whatever he might think, I pay my debts.

Well...mostly.

But I intend to pay this one.

I pull Dora in front of me and beam at the parts master. "This is Dora. She is a weak and defenseless human. I want to get her kitted out with a way to defend herself. I'm thinking implants, hidden weapons, the works. We need to make her an absolute terror so no one will ever kef with her just because she looks soft and sweet."

He frowns at me, his eyes narrowing as he steps forward and eyes the now-frozen Dora. "She's whole?"



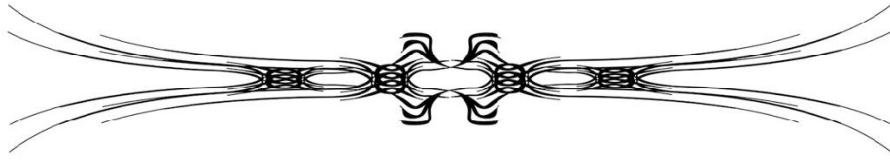
“Seems to be.”

“And you want me to cut her up and give her parts?” He eyes me. “You want me to take a perfectly healthy human and remove her arms and fit them with metal ones.”

He makes it sound positively crazy. “Unless you have a better idea?”

Dora squeaks. “Do...do I get a say in this?”

FOURTEEN



## DORA

I can't believe what I'm hearing. I thought Bethiah was my friend and that our flirtiness hinted that we might be more at some point. That she might care for me, just a little, in her weird sort of way. Instead, I'm finding out that she wants to take me apart and make me some sort of crazy cyborg. To have my limbs removed and replaced with metal ones so I can better defend myself.

The first thought I have is that she's crazy.

The second one is hurt, because she's still trying to get rid of me.

Because it's clearly not about what's best for me in this scenario. What's best for me is keeping all of my own freaking limbs. But Bethiah wants to tear me apart and re-make me into some kind of terminator like the blue alien standing in front of us, frowning. I guess she wants me to be an unstoppable machine so she doesn't have to bother with me anymore.

This woman is seriously starting to wound me.

The half-metal alien moves towards me, his face forbidding. He's the ugliest thing I've ever seen, with a metal jaw and hard, scarred eyes. He creaks when he moves, the entire effect menacing as he looms over me. "So what were you thinking?" he asks in a cold voice. "Maybe just remove one perfectly good hand and replace it with a blaster?"

"I mean, we could start there," Bethiah replies. "You're the master, Zakoar."

"Don't I get a say in this?" I repeat.

"Why not both hands as blasters?" the male says caustically. "Maybe her legs, too. She can just fall to the ground when she's in danger and just start shooting."

"You don't think that would be overly dramatic?" Bethiah tilts her head, studying me. "It might be difficult for her to use

the lavatory if she's nothing but blasters on all limbs. And she won't be able to reload." She taps her chin and then brightens. "Unless we add in some extra limbs. How much does that sort of thing run?"

He moves closer to me and touches my cloak, giving me a long look in the face. Then, he turns to Bethiah. "How much?"

"Do I want done? I came to you for ideas." She crosses her arms over her chest and tilts her head, her braids swinging back. "Rest assured I can pay." She pauses. "This time, anyhow. But I brought her here so you could tell me what options we're looking at."

Zakoar shakes his head again. "I meant how much would you ask for her? I'll buy her off you."

Bethiah bristles. She looks highly offended, and moves to stand in front of me, pushing between myself and the metallic mesakkah. In the process, she knocks something hollow off a shelf and it makes a loud sound as it hits the floor, but no one seems to notice but me. Zakoar and Bethiah glare at each other. "Kef off," Bethiah declares, and her tone is ugly. "You don't need another human to kef. This one is mine."

"To kef?" He gives her a knowing look.

"No," she grits out, and her tail lashes so hard that it knocks another canister off the shelf. Hastily, I try to grab it before it clatters to the floor. "I'm keeping her safe."

"This is how you keep her safe? By mutilating her?"

"You're right, I should just tattoo my name across her throat," Bethiah says, her voice full of sarcasm. "I hear that's effective."

Tattoo my throat? "Um...?"

They don't seem to notice me. They're too busy glaring at each other. "Is that a slam against my mate?" Zakoar asks, voice deadly. "Think carefully before you answer. Because I'll tolerate a lot, but I won't tolerate you being unpleasant to Tessa."

Bethiah's hands go to her hips. "You know I like Tessa. I'm just saying I can't tattoo her as mine. She's not mine."

"But you won't sell her. You'll just fill her full of metal and what, send her on her merry way in the universe? Is that the big plan?"

"I'm trying to give her tools to help her out! You make it sound like a bad thing!"

They're still talking as if I'm not here. I sidle away from Bethiah, the canister in my hands. I set it carefully on the counter closest to me and edge away. I'm not leaving the store. I just...don't want to hear what's decided. Sold to the metal guy or filled with metal, it's clear no one's out for my best interests. I should have guessed that Bethiah wouldn't be outfitting her ship to make it more comfortable for me. That would be a permanent sort of thing, and it's clear she's not a fan of that.

I glance over at the far end of the shop, where the assistant was sitting, but he's gone. I'm guessing he made himself scarce the moment he heard them start to argue. It's not a bad idea. I wish I could do the same, but I know better than to go wandering around the dangerous station alone. So I wander through the store as Bethiah squabbles with the metal guy—Zakoar—about "enhancements" that I'm not interested in or even want. I guess it's good that she's not interested in selling me.

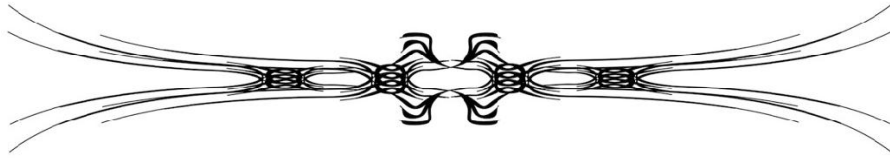
I...guess?

I move between the crowded shelves full of rusting metal and a variety of bits that look exceedingly unfamiliar to me. I turn the corner, and as I do, I realize that the store isn't as empty as I thought. That there's someone here, crouched behind one of the shelves, and he's got a long cloak over his body. He leans forward, and I catch a glimpse of a red, cybernetic eye before he lifts a hand, a canister in his grip.

Something white puffs out of the can, right in front of my nose.

“Got you now,” he whispers, even as everything around me goes black and I fall to the ground.

FIFTEEN



## BETHIAH

**Z**akoar continues to argue with me. He's a male, and therefore he thinks he's right and I'm delusional.

"You're absolutely delusional," he says, arms over his metal-plated chest. "I've known you a long time, Bethiah, but I'm convinced you've lost your mind at this point. What in the kef are you thinking?"

I mimic his angry stance. "I'm thinking that hey, Dora is soft and vulnerable and alone in the universe. She needs to be able to take care of herself. She needs to have the tools to be an absolute killing machine so she doesn't have to latch on to someone to protect her."

"You said she was your friend, right? That you're looking after her? Why does she need to latch on to someone else if she's got you?" He gestures at me. "Why make the overture if you're not prepared to commit? You know what it takes to keep a human safe around here. Why do you think turning her into something she's not and then shoving her away from you as quickly as possible is the answer?"

I'm taken aback by his blunt question. Is that what I'm doing? Shoving Dora away as quickly as possible? Because I don't want to bother? He's wrong on that aspect at least. It's not that I don't want to bother. It's that I get too attached, too fast. "She's not interested in staying with me."

Zakoar snorts. "Not if you're trying to have pieces of her amputated, no." He tilts his head, the metal in his neck creaking. "I'm not one to normally do this, but I'm going to give you a bit of advice that someone else once told me. If you want someone to stay, you actually have to *tell* them that they're wanted."

I flinch, because that hits far too close to home. "It's not like that."



“Isn’t it? I know you, Bethiah. We’ve worked together for a long time. You try to run everyone off. You think I don’t recognize the signs?”

I scowl at him. He’s wrong. I don’t try to run everyone off. I mean, it’s not my fault I’m just too much for a lot of people. That’s their problem, not mine. But this is a conversation I’ve had with Zakoar before, but usually in reverse. Before Tessa, I’d joke that he deliberately tried to scare everyone away. That the metal jaw (a choice) and the rivets and metal bracing going up his back (also a choice) are all designed to intimidate. To create avoidance. To create the illusion that the person behind them doesn’t need anyone or anything. That the heart is as hard as the outside. Wasn’t it just a short time ago that I was joking with him that he’d find some pretty little feathered slave girl and that’d be the end of it?

I was wrong. It was a human slave girl, not a feathered one. And Zakoar fell hard for her. Tried to run her off, too, but Tessa stayed, and I gave him such a hard time over things. I guess it’s my turn.

It’s not like me and Dora are a couple, anyhow. It’s not like we’re keffing.

But then I think of the sweet little fluffit and how she clings to me in bed at night. How her eyes shine when she gazes up at me. How her lips were very soft under mine when I licked her...

“You’re full of shit,” I bluster to Zakoar. I don’t like this conversation. I like it even less that it’s happening in front of the fluffit. “I’m not running anyone off. If anything, I’ve been an absolute bastion of hospitality. Tell him, Dora.”

Silence.

I stare at Zakoar. Zakoar stares back at me, challenging.

Damn it, fluffit. I turn to glare at Dora, who’s choosing the worst time to be silent. She must be hiding behind one of the clutter-covered shelves in the shop, so I crane my head, trying to see around the closest one. “Could really use your help here, fluffit.”

No answer.

Frowning, I stalk across the store, glancing down each aisle. No yellow hair.

No Dora.

The store is empty. Sometime during the argument with Zakoar, Dora decided she'd had enough of me and left. My chest immediately feels tight, and there's a low, lingering ache behind my ribs that speaks of remembered betrayal.

Well. It sure didn't take her keffing long to get sick of me.

Not that I'm going to show that I'm hurt. I toss my head at Zakoar. "See? I don't have to run them off. They do that on their own."

"She's gone?" He sounds surprised, and even looks down the aisles himself. "This isn't a prank you're pulling?"

I put a hand to my chest in mock offense. "How dare you. As if I would prank you." When he glares at me, I sniff and continue. "It's true. You have zero sense of humor. As for the human..." I shrug. "If she doesn't want to be around me, I'm not going to force her."

Zakoar rolls his eyes at me. "You really think this is about you?" Before I can answer, he gives me a derisive look, gesturing at the door. "She's a human female. Think for a moment. Where on this station is she going to go?"

I blink, some of the wounded hurt in my chest dissipating. He's...got a point.

"Is she stupid enough to run straight into danger?"

That makes me pause. "My fluffit? No. She's smart. She's not very brave, but she's smart. And soft. Too soft. And far too trusting." My tail lashes back and forth, and I knock a broken transistor off of the nearest shelf. "Did your assistant —"

"No," he answers before I can finish the statement. "Tikosa wouldn't."

I know he wouldn't. I'm just grasping at answers. The truth is, I turned my back on Dora for a brief moment and

someone snatched her from under my nose. Everything inside me clenches up, and not in a good way.

My fluffit is in danger. Here I've been busting my ass trying to protect her, and I still failed. It's going to turn out just like it did with Rhonda, and the thought fills me with pain. I can't be enough for her, and I'm going to lose her before I even had her.

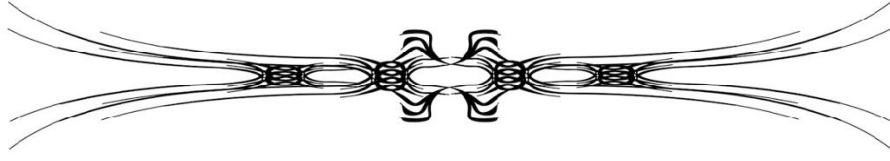
"Someone stole her," Zakoar says unnecessarily. "What are you going to do?"

"Burn shit down," I say, cracking my knuckles and pretending like this is fun instead of terrifying. "Pull the limbs off of anyone that touches my human."

"Your human —"

"We'll dig into semantics later," I say, pulling my blaster from my belt holster and heading for the door. "Time's a-wasting."

SIXTEEN



## JAMEF

I haven't really been around many humans before. Maybe once or twice when I was first starting out as a corsair, and the ship I served on sold a batch of them. Didn't particularly sit right with me, the trading of living people. Reminds me too much of how the military would just ship us low-caste soldiers off as if we were playing pieces in a game, the sticks you toss away to set up the bigger pieces. Didn't much like that then. Don't like it much now, either.

It makes me lose a little respect for Bethiah, knowing she's trading this human in. A bounty is one thing. Those are criminals. People that have done wrong and are evading the law. In a way, I'm helping the universe clean itself of the riffraff. But trading flesh for credits? It annoys me in a bone-deep sort of way. I watch the human as she sleeps on the couch that doubles as my bed, at the collar that I snapped. It hangs loose on her throat, the red light dull and broken. I should reach over and take it off of her, but I'm loath to touch her while she's unconscious. Feels wrong.

So I move around my apartment, tidying things as I wait for her to awaken.

I watch her, too. Seen a lot of humans from afar, but it's been a long time since I've been this close to one. The extra finger on each hand doesn't seem as repulsive as I once thought. It's just different. The lack of a tail is unnerving, but the yellow hair is nice and she looks very soft to the touch. No wonder Bethiah licked her.

The human's eyes flick open and they widen as she gazes at me. She freezes in place as our eyes meet, and I know she's taking in my hideous appearance, the cybernetic eye, the replacement arm and shoulder that show through my form-fitting tunic. I wait for her to finish panicking so I can determine how to proceed.

When she remains frozen in place, I decide that she's too scared to attack (wise) and will remain where she is, like a rodent that stills itself in times of danger, hoping predators will pass it by. I move across my small apartment towards the kitchen area and the food dispensers. "What can I get you to eat? Do you have any allergies?"

"W-where am I?" she asks, voice trembling.

"My apartment on station." I study the noodle choices, but I don't recall which ones humans like. Sweeter ones? The more sour flavors? I'm partial to chski noodles myself and the ultra-cheap brands, because they remind me of home. But she might have different tastes. "You like sour?"

She doesn't answer, and when I look over, her frantic gaze is darting around my small apartment, as if she's trying to figure out where she is. I can help with that. "You're still on Three Nebulas," I point out. "But I don't live in a great area of the station, so if you bolt out that door, I can't promise you won't find yourself in the hands of another slave trader. And if you run, I'm not coming after. Take that for what it is, good or bad." I pull a bowl out of the tiny cabinet above the dispenser, blow the dust out of it, and then set it in place. "Most bounty hunters tend to live on ship, but sometimes that gets quiet. Too quiet. I grew up in a barracks with a hundred other males, and sometimes the quiet gets to me. So I keep an apartment here on station when I need to be around people. Sometimes it's enough just to hear other voices in the background. Makes you feel less adrift. You want sweet noodles, maybe?"

Her voice quavers. "W-what are you going to do with me?"

"Feed you."

"Why?"

"You don't want me to feed you?"

She shakes her head, trembling. "I-I don't understand what's going on. Why did you steal me?"

Oh. That. I shrug, the sound making a comfortable creaking noise. Once upon a time, I hated my cybernetics, but

now they're a reassuring part of me, a sign that I can't be so easily destroyed as I once was. "It's a game between us, me and Bethiah. She steals my ship, I usually steal it back. We do a little dance, see how far we can push the other, and then she runs away. She's the only female I've ever met more scared of commitment than me." I shrug, and push a button for sweet noodles. Females like sweets, don't they? "This time, though, I saw you."

*And I was jealous. And I don't like being jealous.* But I don't say that part out loud.

"Me?"

I nod, watching the noodles as the bowl fills up. "You weren't a bounty. She hasn't tagged you, and her name's not attached to anything that meets your description in the guild database, which means it's a private job. I take it you're not a criminal?" When she makes a sound of distress, I nod. "Figured as much. So...I'm not a big fan of slave trading. Thought it'd piss her off if I took you instead of the ship this time. I'm not much inclined to give you back, though."

I turn and hand her the bowl and then a pair of eating sticks. Part of me wonders if she's going to try and attack me with the smooth metal sticks. It's a test, just like the way Bethiah and me test each other. Give the other party a stimulus and see how they react.

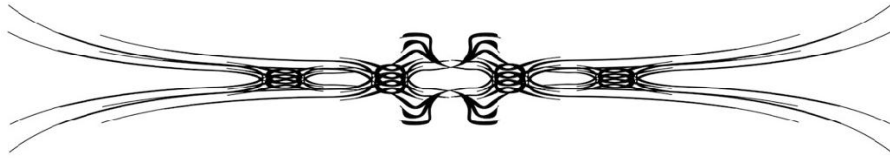
But the small female doesn't attack me. She takes the eating sticks, trusting thing that she is, and the bowl, and gives me a confused look. "If you're not going to give me back, then what are you going to do with me?"

"Now that, I haven't exactly decided yet. Didn't think much past pissing her off. Tends to go that way with me and her."

"You and Bethiah," she echoes. "You're the boyfriend?"

"Am I?" Now why does hearing that please me so much?

# SEVENTEEN





## DORA

I eat a bite of noodles and watch the man cleaning up the tiny kitchen area of his apartment.

If that's Bethiah's boyfriend, he's both exactly what I expected...and not.

He looks as rough around the edges as his ship. His face is hard and unyielding, as if he's not the type to smile much at all...or ever. He has scars around the red glowing eye that must be cybernetic, and his horns are capped with metal that looks as battered as Bethiah's ship. The form-fitting tunic he wears is tight enough that I can see a ridge where the metal on his chest ends and the rest of him begins. He's got a lot of replacement pieces, and the parts that aren't replacements seem to be covered with black, busy tattoos that are stark against his blue skin. He's got short black hair that's ever so slightly messy and hangs in a tousled flop over his ears, just brushing against his neck.

The sight of him is utterly menacing, which is why it's so genuinely bizarre that he's being nice...for a kidnapper.

I'm also weirdly getting the feeling that I haven't been kidnapped so much as borrowed. Like stealing someone is just something they do. That it's part of their routine, their courtship.

In that case, he's absolutely Bethiah's man.

I eat another bite of noodles and take a furtive look around the apartment. It's small, but I guess that's to be expected. There's a door on the other side of the space and I can hear the distant hum of voices, the buzz of life in the station, even through the walls. The place looks a little beat up and hard-used, with scuffs on the metal walls and a dent on the ceiling (I'm not sure how that got there). But it's neat as a pin and tidy, and as I glance at Jamef (because this has to be Jamef), he swipes a cloth over the touch pad on the dispenser, getting rid

of fingerprints. He likes things clean. I wonder if that's why he's not with Bethiah. She's a mess and she's made a mess of his poor ship.

Is it possible for a couple to break up over a conflict of cleanliness? I suspect it is. I guess that means Bethiah is... single? The thought fills me with a vague sense of pleasure.

Well, single...ish. Because Bethiah's ex kidnapping me isn't exactly a "leave me alone" signal. Worried, I shove another bite of noodles into my mouth.

"So." Jamef tosses the rag down and turns, and as he does, his metal parts creak a little. He eyes me, that red gaze unnerving. "Why's Bethiah trading human slaves? Who does she owe a favor to?"

"Why?" I manage around a mouthful of noodles. She's not trading me, but it's supposed to be a cover story, right? I just wonder if we have to cover from her ex-boyfriend.

His expression grows hard. "Because I'll kill him. Or her. Whoever's blackmailing her into this nasty line of work."

I nearly choke on my food. In an instant, Jamef went from friendly to utterly frightening. "I don't think she's being blackmailed," I manage to say.

"Then she's doing this on her own? And you're defending her?"

I grimace, putting the food aside. "Will you believe me when I say it's complicated?"

"It's Bethiah, isn't it?"

I nod. "And you're Jamef, right?"

He gives me a quick, curt nod. "Jamef sa Raan. Bounty hunter. So she's mentioned me to you." There's a hint of pleasure in his voice.

"Once or twice," I evade. More like everyone that warned me not to go with Bethiah cited him as an example. How she'd robbed him over and over again and how Bethiah thought it was all a game between them. "Can I...ask what your relationship is with Bethiah?"

“Does Bethiah have relationships?” he asks, voice harsh. “Or does she just toy with people until it’s time to push them away?”

“You know her well.”

“Too well.” He eyes me. “Is that why you’re no longer scared? Because she’s mentioned me so often to you?”

Man, this guy really wants to know if Bethiah is hung up on him. I guess I can’t blame him. She’s dynamic. Strange and unpredictable, but utterly dynamic. “Oh, I’m still afraid,” I confess. “But I’m also a little relieved. If you hadn’t kidnapped me, Bethiah would probably be trying to strap me down to a table right now so that scary guy could fit me with prosthetics.”

He looks offended. “She was going to remove perfectly good limbs and replace them with synthetic ones?”

“Right? That’s crazy, isn’t it?” I’m a little bolstered by the fact that he’s as affronted as I am. “I thought she was my friend and we were close, but it seems to me that maybe I was wrong.”

He grunts. “She’s impossible to know.”

Either that, or we already know her too well. She’s determined to run me off like she did him. If I stay, I become a cyborg. If I leave, well...no more Bethiah. Either way I lose. I sigh heavily and peek over at Jamef. “You still haven’t said what you’re going to do with me.”

The big mesakkah male shrugs. “Not giving you back. Not if she’s going to treat you like that. You got any friends on station that can look after you? Or on another station?”

I shake my head. “I was supposed to go to Risda, but I chose to go with Bethiah instead.”

“Yeah, we all make that mistake at some point, it seems.” That red eye watches me. “You still want to go to Risda?” When I shrug, he continues. “I’m heading that way for a bounty in a few days. You’re welcome to come with me. You can stay here until then. I promise no harm will come upon you.”

“Thank you, Mr. sa Raan —”

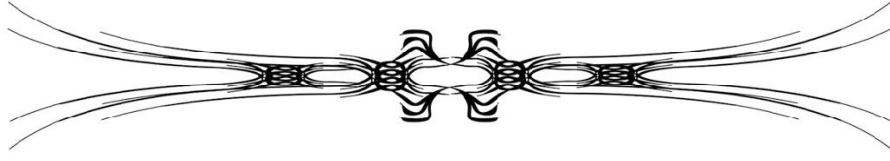
He lifts his chin. “Call me Jamef. sa Raan just means I come from Raan Outpost. No family affiliation.”

Oh. He doesn't have anyone in the universe either, except Bethiah...and she's messing with both of us. I feel a kindred spirit here. “I'm Dora. No last name, either. I didn't get that part in my memories.”

“Memories?” he echoes.

“I'm a clone.”

EIGHTEEN



## JAMEF

I *'m a clone.*

She says it so easily, so trustingly, that the words haunt me long after she goes to sleep on the only bed in the apartment. What the kef is Bethiah up to with a human clone? The yellow-hair is clearly an illegal one, because her skin doesn't have the bright red marker that states that she's been created to acceptable standards. I scan her when she sleeps, just to make sure I haven't missed anything, but no chips or trackers of any kind.

Absolutely not a legal clone. If someone found out that she exists, she'll be destroyed instantly and Bethiah arrested.

Kef me.

There's a small part of me that thinks I should turn her in. If I get caught with an illegal clone—a human one to boot—I'm going to be looking at hard time on a prison planet, where I'll likely be jumped for my prosthetics until they're stolen from me. It's not the way I want to go out.

But looking at the small, trusting human as she sleeps on my bed, I can't dump her. She's achingly sweet and innocent, and I can see why Bethiah is attracted to her. I think of Bethiah, licking the human's mouth earlier, and my groin tightens.

If I keep the human secret, it protects Bethiah, too. She might have given up on me, but I haven't given up on her yet. She's still got my ship, which means she has unfinished business with me. I'm going to take that as a good sign. So while the human sleeps, I quietly sit at my table and clean my weaponry. I'm obsessive about maintenance. Started when I was in the military, and I got my first prosthetic, a hand that only worked properly if constantly kept oiled. At first I hated it because it was an older model, but I found the more I tended to it, the more I appreciated that older design. It wasn't as

heavily wired as some of the others, which meant that I could take several more hits before it stopped working. That hand is what led to my obsession with older things, things that look as if they're meant to be scrap but can be coaxed into new life. Often those older components have hidden secrets that make them worthwhile.

And I do love something with hidden depths.

The human—Dora—sleeps for several hours. She wakes up with a lazy stretch, her arms over her head, and I appreciate her form. Not in a sexual way, but in the pleasant sight of a young, fully whole being with zero scars or prosthetics. There's a beauty to that, too. "Sleep well?"

She straightens and looks around the room with bright eyes, but that brightness fades quickly. "No Bethiah?"

"Were you expecting her?"

Dora bites her lip and gives me an embarrassed look. "Part of me was hoping she'd come rescue me."

I don't tell her not to rely on Bethiah. That no one in their right mind does. There's something achingly sweet about her trust, and I don't want to be the one to rip that from her. "Just me, I'm afraid. You hungry?"

She slides out of bed and moves to sit at the table with me. "I'm okay. Did I take your bed? I'm sorry."

I shrug. "I don't need much sleep."

"But you need some, right?" She gets to her feet, and moves across my tiny apartment to the kitchen. "If I make myself a bowl of noodles, will you eat, too?"

Is she trying to take care of me? I'm amused. Funny how a beat-up cyborg and a fresh-faced clone can be such polite roommates. "Sure, I'll eat."

Dora makes two bowls of noodles and sets them down in front of us. Mine is chski noodles, and it surprises me at how observant she is considering she picked out my favorite. I grunt my thanks and dig in, and the room is quiet for a time. Dora eats delicately, aiming her eating sticks with careful

precision. She peeks up at me a few times, and I wait for her to ask whatever it is that's bothering her.

Finally, she speaks up. "So...Jamef. What is the plan?"

I continue eating. "What plan?"

She sits back, setting her eating sticks down, and regards me. "There's not a plan? But I thought you stole me for a reason."

I did. Reason was I didn't like how much attention Bethiah was paying to her.

But I don't say that. She's a sweet one and doesn't deserve to be drawn into our games. "Didn't like that she was trafficking humans, that's all. Figured she would know it was me at some point and come say hello."

Dora dips her chin, as if encouraging me to go on. When I don't, she says, "And then what?"

I shrug. "Risda?"

She bites her lip, picking up her eating sticks and toying with them again. "Right. Risda. So we're staying here for now? As roommates?"

I shrug again. "Got any better ideas?"

The human stirs her noodles and considers. "It's hard. Part of me is angry with Bethiah because she wants to cyborg me up. No offense."

"None taken. I'd prefer to be whole myself." Or I would have, once upon a time. Now I've become comfortable with my new parts. I like 'em. Ain't much of a point in mooning over the past anyhow. You go forward or you don't go at all.

"But...she's also been my friend, and I'd miss her if she was gone." Dora sighs. "It's complicated."

"You've just described Bethiah perfectly. You either want to kill her or nuzzle her. There's no in-between."

She blushes when I mention the word "nuzzle."

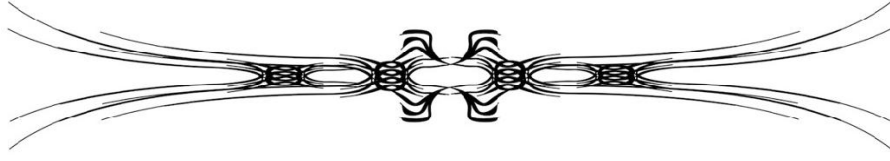


“So maybe we talk to her. Get her to see how wrong she was in trying to change me. And we can get you your ship back, too.”

I eye the human. “How so?”

“You could always set a trap, with me as bait.”

# NINETEEN



## DORA

It's been two days in Jamef's small apartment. Two days since I got kidnapped and offered to be bait to lure in Bethiah. Two days since we established the plan and laid clues. Two days...and absolutely no sign of the lady herself.

Figures.

I should be miserable. I really should be. Bethiah's my friend-slash-slightly-more-than-friends and I should be anxious to get back to her, if nothing else so I can yell for her wanting to switch my parts out like I'm a Mr. Potato Head doll. Instead, it's nice here in Jamef's tiny flat. He's got a few plants that he grows, and everything is tidy. I'm not entirely sure what to do with myself most of the time, so he buys me a learning program and I practice the Homeworld alphabet on his data-pad. Rooming with him is quiet and comfortable and even if the quarters are cramped, the company is good.

For all that he's a kidnapper, Jamef is a very kind host. He's allowed me to take over his bed and hasn't tried to be creepy in the slightest. From what I can tell, he sometimes "sleeps" in one of the chairs at the table in his kitchen...or more like he shuts down and meditates for a bit. He doesn't crowd me, either. Maybe I'm suspicious of men after my experiences with the slavers, but he's very gentlemanly. From what I can tell, Jamef has a code of honor that he sticks to, no matter what. Molesting humans is not in that code.

Messing with Bethiah is absolutely in the code, though.

I sit at the table across from Jamef, eating another bowl of his delicious sweet noodles and watching as he checks the "trail" he's set out for Bethiah. From what I understand, it's a series of signals that will indicate that she's tapping into databases and looking for a blonde human for sale. So far, though, Jamef's leads haven't turned up anything. I still haven't told him that she didn't intend on selling me. It feels

like a betrayal of my friend, so I keep quiet. It feels wrong, though, because Jamef has been a good friend, too. He's different than Bethiah, but kind in his way.

I can see why Bethiah is obsessed with him.

"What's she doing today?" I ask, my chin propped on my hand as he taps away. "Any signs that she's looking for me?"

"No. Either she's on to my plans or there's another aspect I haven't considered." He doesn't seem frustrated though, just fascinated. As if trying to figure out Bethiah's mind is a delightful puzzle for him. "She hasn't left the station, though. Hasn't refueled, so she doesn't plan on going anywhere soon. Hasn't taken any new bounties. That means she's preoccupied with something. I'm betting it's you. I'm just not clear what her next move is."

I try not to preen at the "betting it's you" comment. I like the thought of being important to Bethiah far too much. "So what happens if she doesn't access any of the flags you've placed in the station database?"

"We set up a DNA trail. Leave a few strands of your hair in public locations to throw her off and then have someone broker a meeting. She'll think she's buying from a szzt when really, we'll be lying in wait for her." A hint of a smile curls the corners of his mouth. "And then we trap her and retake my ship."

This really is like flirting for them. Sometimes it makes me feel like a third wheel. I don't ask what happens to me after Jamef retakes his ship. He's made it clear that he'll help me do whatever I like, but I somehow don't think it involves staying with him and Bethiah aboard the *Pleasure Spot*, or whatever we're calling it now. I'm a little unsettled, as if I'm helping them with their romance, but I'm not sure what it means for me in the end.

I'm trying not to think about that right now. "All right."

He grins to himself, getting to his feet. "I think we'll set up the DNA trail tonight. I'll establish a protocol in the station cameras that will ignore my presence and I'll plant the strands

to direct her to us before she gets distracted or bored. You up for that?”

I nod.

“Great. I’m going to shower, then.”

“All right.”

He heads to the far side of the small apartment. Jamef is very clean, and he’s showered twice a day since I arrived. It was a little unnerving at first, considering that his flat is very much intended for just one person, and the shower itself isn’t very private. Even now, I watch as he strips off his clothing and steps into the tiny cubicle that acts as a sonic cleanser, since water showers are far too impractical on a station. I’ve seen him naked several times now, and while he always looks away when I shower (or focuses on his tablet so I can have privacy), I watch him.

I tell myself it’s because I’m still figuring out the missing part of my brain that has my sexuality memories.

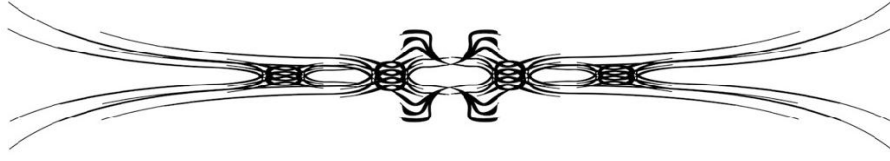
I tell myself it’s a test, too. A test to see if I like the sight of his male body more than I like the memory of Bethiah’s teasing kiss. And maybe there’s some switch in my head that doesn’t toggle, because I like his body. I like the lean strength of it, and the tightness of his limbs. I like the scars on him, and the way his arms move with strength, even the cybernetic one. I’m fascinated by the way his tail slowly flexes back and forth.

I’m especially fascinated by the thick hang of his cock, and the piercings that stud all the way up his length to the small protrusion just above the base.

So...yeah. I like Jamef’s body. I like his kindness and his sense of honor. And I like Bethiah’s kisses and her wildness.

And I’m not sure where that puts me. Am I just looking for any safe port in a storm? Or can I truly be attracted to two very different people...who are attracted to each other and not me?

TWENTY



## BETHIAH

**F**or some reason, realizing that whoever stole Dora is playing a game with me doesn't sit well.

Normally I love a game. Keffing *adore* it.

But the fact that Dora is in danger changes things. It makes the game not fun at all and turns it into something that both enrages me and makes me feel helpless. She's a keffing fluffit, and someone's endangering her to lure me out. I want to choke the bastard that thought this was funny. So each time I run across an obvious tracker in the station's systems, or a bit of Dora's DNA left in a conspicuous place, I'm even more convinced that it's a game. They're toying with me and expecting me to take the bait they lay out.

Which goes against everything I am.

Bethiah's Rule of Corsairing number two—never let them anticipate your next move.

I collect the bits of Dora's DNA—because I don't like the thought of it just lying around in the station for some other unscrupulous jerk to clone—and I try to think what wouldn't be expected. It's clear they either expect me to come after Dora and put myself in danger, or they expect me to leave the station and forget all about her. Those are the obvious choices.

I need something less obvious that won't cause Dora to be in danger.

A ransom? Nah. Something tells me this isn't about credits.

A trade? Now that sounds nice and logical and like something I would absolutely not do...which means it's on the table. But what could I trade for a pretty little human with a clever mind and a big heart?

The answer comes to me immediately—another human, of course.

I'm not going to replace Dora. It's strange, but I miss the fluffit terribly. I miss her clinginess. I miss the way she curls up behind me in bed and nuzzles her face against my back, as if I'm her safe place in the universe. Didn't take long for me to disappoint her in that aspect—I couldn't keep her safe at the first station we visited, and that gnaws at me. I wonder if I'm doomed to have emotions for humans that inevitably leave me for one reason or another.

Maybe the humans aren't the problem. Maybe it's me.

Nah.

Humans are fickle creatures. For all I know, Dora is just like Rhonda—she's found a new master to latch onto, one that will promise her all the safety in the universe and actually *deliver* in a way that I can't. If that's the case, I'll never see the fluffit again. Never see her tremulous smile as she punches the controls on the ship, looking up to me in the hopes that I'll praise her. Never see the sleepy expression on her face in the morning as she's tucked in next to me, never...

Bah, now I'm getting all maudlin.

I get dressed and head out of the hotel room I'm staying in. I'm not a big fan of staying on station, but if I went back to my ship, it'd be a sign that I intend on leaving Dora behind, and I don't want her to think that. For some reason, I hate the thought of hurting my fluffit's feelings.

So...maybe I shouldn't buy another human. I think about Dora and how hurt she would be once she found that out. It's that hurt that makes me pause.

All right, so I can't purchase a new human to throw things off. I can't follow the trail that they're leaving for me. I can't leave the station. I head towards the main atrium of Three Nebulas, where most of the trading takes place. And as I do, I think. How do I get Dora back without making it seem like I want her back?

The easiest solution would be to walk into the trap that's being set for me and let them have me. It would be a little expected...but would it really? They should know I'm smart



enough to know it's a trap. Maybe that's the point. Maybe they know that I know, and so if I go in to it, that's unexpected... my head hurts just trying to process this. I head for my favorite leaf vendor—the one that's not working for the guild—and get myself an extra-large basket of disgustingly greasy leaves to munch on as I walk the station and consider things.

If I turn myself in to Dora's kidnapper, there won't be a meet-up with Jamef whenever he finally makes it to the station. That's a little disappointing. Okay, a lot disappointing. I'm going to miss out on our games, but what can I do? I know he doesn't have Dora. His code of honor won't let him touch a human unless there's a bounty attached...

Just like he won't touch me unless there's a relationship attached. Such a difficult male.

I walk and eat, and I think. I could always turn myself in to the station's authorities. Take myself out of the equation entirely. Now *that* would be unexpected. But with my luck, they'd immediately ship me off to the nearest prison planet. No thanks.

Strolling through the narrow halls as I munch on my leaves, I find myself heading for the seedier vendors, the ones I know that trade in goods they shouldn't. Next to a nose-spice smuggler who's trying very hard not to be noticed, I see a wealthy-looking ooli hovering at the front of a feminine-seeming tent. He beams at me and steps backward, allowing me to see the goods he's selling—three humans. Two females and a young male. All three of them have red eyes and tear-stained cheeks.

I lick my fingers clean of the last of leaf-grease, filled with distaste for this male. "This all you got?"

"Are you looking for something specific?" the ooli asks. "I have one in red that I can acquire, but she is very expensive. Somewhat skittish but well-behaved." He moves toward one of the cringing females and strokes her hair. "This one is a dull brown coat, but I assure you she is quite obedient. Very healthy."

"Got anything in yellow?" I ask casually.

“Nothing, but give me a few days and I am sure I can find something,” he says in an unctuous voice. “Do you wish to put down a deposit to hold your place? Humans sell very quickly when we get them. They are quite rare.”

“So rare you have three of ’em, eh?”

He glares at me. “Very rare,” he states again. “As their price shows. If you are not interested, please leave so I can spend my time with paying customers.”

I eye the three sad-eyed humans for a moment longer, warring with my plan to buy a Dora replacement. Is any one human worth so much effort? I shake my head, deciding that no, they are not, and walk away from the vendor’s tent. As I do, though, I keep seeing Dora’s tears. Her sad eyes and shy overtures. The way she said she wanted to please me.

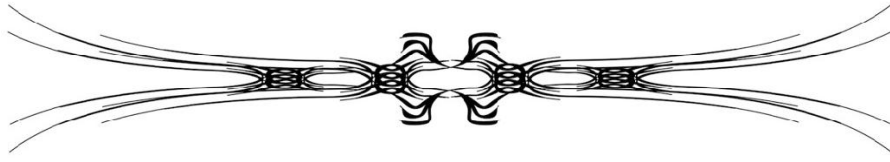
To be my friend.

I get about two tunnels away from the slave trader before I grit my teeth and pause. Kef. Kef twice.

I’m going to end up turning myself over like a blooming idiot aren’t I? If word of this gets out, my reputation as a fearless bounty hunter will be ruined. Still, I’m out of options that won’t make Dora think I’ve betrayed her, and it’s been three days already. I hate the thought of someone hurting my fluffit or making her doubt me.

Damn it. Fine. I’ll turn myself in...just as soon as I buy three weepy humans and dump them on Zakoar’s doorstep.

# TWENTY-ONE



## DORA

“This feels like a trap,” I tell Jamef as I follow him through the back service halls to the “secret” meeting room where we’re going to rendezvous with Bethiah.

“It is a trap,” he tells me. “But it’s one that we’re setting.” He sounds confident as he removes a panel from the wall with a touch and then sets it aside. Gesturing that I should enter, he waits in the hall, his red eye gleaming.

Jamef is very kind, but he’s not listening to me. I move to the entrance and then hesitate. “No, I mean...you know Bethiah. Her brain is always thinking two steps ahead of everyone else. If she’s agreeing to this, I feel like she knows what we’re up to and is going to turn the tables on us.”

“She might,” Jamef agrees, putting a hand to my back to nudge me into the room. “But the risk is on me, not you. I promise you’ll be safe either way. I wouldn’t put you in danger.” His thumb moves briefly on my back, as if he’s trying to reassure me—or stopping himself from doing so.

“I know. But I don’t want her hurting you, either.” I pause to gaze up at him. For all his fearsome appearance, Jamef has been such a kind host. It’s strange to think that I’ve enjoyed my time with him the last few days, but I truly have. If I didn’t have Bethiah and I lived my days out with Jamef as his friend and roommate...it wouldn’t be miserable. It might actually be pleasant.

Jamef’s hard face creases in the hint of a smile. “Bethiah won’t hurt me, either. This is all part of the game.”

Right. Because kidnapping and captivity are their way of flirting. With a hint of reluctance, I step into the room.

It’s a meeting chamber set in the back of one of the more upscale hotels. Jamef paid a lot of credits to a male that looked as if he knew him, and led us through the back way. It all feels a little...obvious? But I could be reading too much into things.

Maybe Jamef wants Bethiah to turn the tables on him and that's why we're being so blatant in our scheme.

I'm a little envious of their strange dance. Okay, a lot envious. When was the last time someone cared about me enough to go to so much effort? Oh, that's right, *never*, because I'm a clone. I'm not even the real Dora. With a sigh, I cast one last worried look at Jamef and then sit in the lone seat at the table.

"Hands up please, sweetheart."

Blinking in surprise at the endearment, I do as he asks. He loops a bit of plas-rope around my wrists, deliberately leaving it loose enough for me to break free should I need to. He does the same for my legs and then pushes my chair in under the table. He squats next to me, his prosthetics creaking as he does, and his tail lightly slaps against the floor.

"Comfortable?" he asks.

I nod. Even though he's reassured me that this is completely safe, I'm still a little anxious about it. Okay, a lot anxious. What if Bethiah doesn't want me back? What if she and Jamef passionately kiss and then they both decide I'm an unwanted third wheel? Or what if Bethiah is hugely angry and tries to hurt Jamef on my behalf? I'd feel so guilty.

Or what if she just straight up murders him? My stomach clenches uncomfortably.

A cool metallic hand touches my chin. "It will be fine, sweetheart. Don't worry. I know Bethiah well enough that hurting me isn't part of her plan. And I won't let her sell you. If I have to clean out my savings to assure your safety, I will. Understand?"

"Okay. Though I don't like the thought of you losing your savings, either."

His thumb strokes along my jaw. "Credits are just credits. There are more important things. You know the word to say if you're frightened?"

It takes everything I have to resist the urge to lean into his caress, to nuzzle at that hand. Gosh, I am such a touch-hungry

fool. "Earth."

"Good."

My skin flushes with heat at that purring word of praise. He's excited about seeing Bethiah, nothing more, I remind myself. This simmering excitement in his voice isn't for me. "I'm ready."

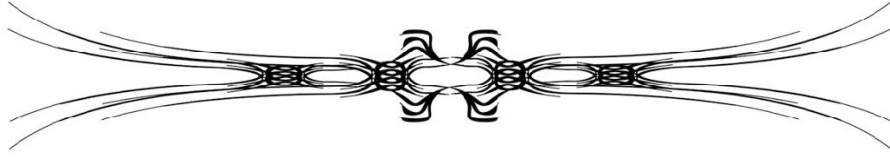
He nods, strokes my jaw one more time, and then steps away. For a moment he hesitates, studying me as if he has more to say, but then he turns and leaves, his tail swishing slowly behind him like a pendulum. I watch him go, my throat knotted with anxiety. I know this is all a performance. I know I'm safe. Bethiah has no intention of selling me. Jamef won't let her sell me. I'm both excited and nervous to see Bethiah again. I want to be around her, of course I do. But I'm also worried she and Jamef will be so lost in each other that they won't remember me.

After all, Bethiah is fine being alone. Jamef is a solo bounty hunter. I'm the one that's dependent on people for safety and goodwill.

Biting my lip, I test the ropes at my wrists. Loose. Perfectly fine. I glance back at Jamef, where he's replaced the wall panel and waits in the secret passage. I guess I'm more or less ready. I do wonder what Bethiah will think when she sees me here. Will she be annoyed that I've been stolen and derailed her plans? Or just relieved?

One thing's for sure, though. I've never been more aware that I'm not in control of the situation.

TWENTY-TWO



## JAMEF

I watch from the shadows as Dora twitches in her seat and bites her lip. Poor little female looks terrified, yet she's sitting there so bravely, determined to play her part. It makes me want to rush out from my hiding spot and squeeze her.

In the last few days, I've grown increasingly attached to the little human. It's easy to do so. She's sweet and soft and doesn't have a cruel bone in her body. She's also innocent as kef and that's concerning, and I can see why Bethiah is so fascinated with her. It's easy to see someone so very trusting and innocent and want to drink that in. To experience that delightful wide-eyed view of the universe. It makes you protective.

Granted, I first found her appealing because Bethiah was so clearly attached to her. But in the last few days, Dora has shown herself to be clever despite her naïveté. She's been a good co-conspirator and companion. She's just as eager for me to capture Bethiah, even though she's worried that Bethiah will get hurt. I've reassured her that there are a great many things I'd like to do to Bethiah, but hurting her isn't one of them.

And after Bethiah and I are done with our dance, I'll ask the human if she wants to stay with me permanently. Bethiah never stays, after all, and I find that the older I get, the more I find myself seeking out company. Maybe I'm just tired of being a loner, but when I wake up and see Dora in my apartment, making breakfast for both of us...it makes me strangely content. The universe is a lonely enough place as it is, and I'm tired of this back and forth with Bethiah. Either we start something real, or we end this.

At the table, Dora stiffens and her gaze goes across the room, to the door leading out to the hall. The sensors light up,



alerting me to the presence of a two-legged sentient. That has to be Bethiah.

I tense, waiting to see what she's going to do. With Bethiah, sometimes it's hard to tell. The message I left was obvious and simple—an exchange: Bethiah herself for Dora's release. Now I'm waiting to see what Bethiah plans. Is she going to break in and steal Dora back? Attempt to sneak around the side and outwit me? Bring in the authorities?

To my surprise, she opens the door and steps inside, as bold and fearless as ever.

The breath hitches in my chest, because she's keffing beautiful. Stunning. It's less in her features themselves and more in the way she carries herself. There's something so arrogant and yet wild about Bethiah that stuns me every time I see her. It's like she doesn't care what the universe thinks of her. That she's daring it to give her everything it's got, because she can handle it. There's a swagger to her step that tells me she thinks she has everything under control yet again. It's in the sway of her long black braids, artfully holding back her thick mane. It's in the vivid tattoos that cover her skin and the erratic decor on her gilded horns. It's in the cocky sway of her tail and the tight fit of her flight suit, at odds with the loose belt that hangs just over her hips, taunting someone to try their luck.

She hasn't changed an iota, and just the sight of her makes me grin.

Her gaze immediately homes in on Dora, and the corners of her mouth curl up with a hint of pleasure. "Here I thought you'd run away, fluffit."

Bethiah's voice is flirty. Sultry. I'm curious if that sultry tone is for me or for Dora. My tail thumps at the thought that it might be for me. That she knows I'm watching and lusting after her like some cadet freshly spat out of schooling.

Dora holds up her bound hands. "Why would I run away? Where could I possibly go that would be safe?" She sounds exasperated. "Give a girl some credit, Bethiah."

Bethiah saunters fully into the room, grinning. She crosses the room toward Dora's seat, not even pausing to look around to see if it's a trap. It's sheer folly. It's ballsy as kef, too. "Maybe I just thought you were sick of my charming personality," she flirts. "So many are."

"Oh please. You know I like being with you." Dora glares up at her. "At least when you're not trying to switch out all my parts." She pauses and then adds in a softer voice, "I missed you, by the way. I'm glad to see you, even if it's under these circumstances."

To my surprise, Bethiah's cocky swagger falters ever so slightly, her tail flicking erratically. She leans over the edge of the table, giving Dora a lazy smile even as she reaches over to brush the human's hair back from her face. "You didn't miss me. You were off having adventures. You never tell the enemy anything they can use against you, fluffit. I'm positive that's in my rules for piracy somewhere."

"Who says you're my enemy?" The human lifts her chin defiantly.

"You're not mad I tried to switch your limbs out?" She tilts her head, her horns gleaming in the light of the hotel room. "I do promise to get you nothing but the best."

I should make a move soon. But I'm fascinated by the two females, especially when Bethiah's gaze tracks Dora as if she's a favorite tidbit just waiting to be nibbled upon.

Dora shakes her head. "I just don't see why you keep trying to change me constantly. Why am I not good enough for you?"

Bethiah flinches. "That's not it at all." Gone is the flirty manner. "I'm just trying to protect you the best way I know how." She touches a finger under Dora's chin, and I wonder for a brief moment if they're going to kiss again, that obscene and fascinating melding of mouths and tongues. It should be utterly repugnant, but my cock twitches with interest at the thought of them doing so, especially in front of me.

Which probably makes me a sick male. Still, I can't look away as Bethiah leans closer, and Dora instinctively moves toward her, face angled.

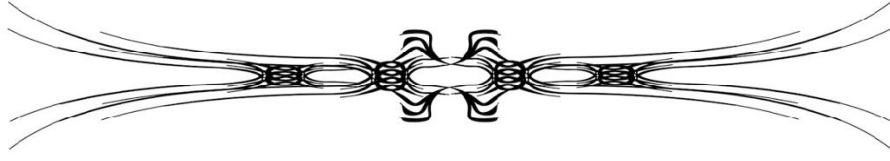
“Protect me? While waltzing into what we both know is a trap?” Dora asks, her lashes downcast.

“Waltzing?” Bethiah echoes, a hint of a smile on her face. “What's waltzing? And it's only a trap if one gets caught.”

That's my cue. I set off the remotely activated gas canisters in the air filters, filling the room with the sweet scent of a knockout drug. I tap a button behind my ear, activating the filter that fits into my nostrils, preventing me from being affected.

Bethiah knows very well she's being caught, too, and I get the impression that I've played right into her game...whatever her game might be.

TWENTY-THREE



## DORA

**W**hen I wake up, I'm back on Bethiah's ship...and I'm hopping mad.

Jamef and I had agreed that I'd be bait to bring Bethiah in. That we'd meet in a hotel room and he wouldn't let her take me away to put modifications on me or sell me. That he'd keep me safe and the moment Bethiah was in the room, he'd "take care of things." Apparently "taking care of things" meant gassing us both and kidnapping once more.

Why is it that the people that I'm supposed to be trusting are the ones kidnapping me? What the heck is wrong with this universe?

I climb off the table in the med-bay and before I can get to the door, it opens and Jamef steps through. He holds out a drink for me. "Take this. It'll ease the headache."

Glaring at him, I still do as I'm told. "I wouldn't have a headache if you hadn't gassed me. Pretty sure friends don't gas friends."

"My apologies," Jamef says. "It was necessary. You know Bethiah. She wouldn't come willingly." He pauses for a moment, his expression grave, and gazes at me. "As for friends...I'm not sure I have them."

"Not if you treat them like you treat me," I huff. "I trusted you. You think I wouldn't go through with it if you told me the gassing part? You need to share everything about a plan, not just the parts you think people will agree with." I glare at him and take a sip of water. "And for the record, my mouth tastes awful."

"I will make it up to you." He gives me a curiously intense look. "I promise. I did not realize you would be so...unhappy. My apologies, sweetheart."

How can he expect me not to be unhappy? I went along with things willingly, and then he does a one-eighty on me. But the look on his face is grave, as if he's truly upset that he's made me mad. I hmp and finish drinking the water, then hand him the cup. "Let me guess, she's in the holding cell?"

He nods once. "She will not be upset. She will be expecting it."

We'll see about that. "Okay, that's where you'll find me, too."

Jamef pauses, reaching for my arm when I move past him. "Wait, what do you mean? You can't let her out."

**“I**’m not going to let her out. My quarters were in the holding cell. I’m going to my quarters.”

“She kept you in the holding cell?” He frowns mightily. “Now that I’m in charge of the ship, you’re not a prisoner, Dora. You’re my guest. I would never keep you in the holding cell. Never. You’re free to move about as you like.”

He’s totally misunderstanding. Of course, explaining that Bethiah let me sleep in the holding cell because I “picked” it and she didn’t correct me doesn’t make her look good either. Still, I feel strangely upset about the situation and loyal to her. I trusted Jamef and he betrayed me by gassing me. I trusted Bethiah, and she betrayed me by deciding I needed prosthetics.

I guess if I have to pick a devil, I’ll go with the devil I know slightly better. I’m curious to see how she’s going to take being a prisoner. Not well, I imagine. Bethiah likes to be in control at all times. Even her “chaos” is a form of control, because it’s designed to keep everyone off-guard except her. She’s going to need a friend right now.

And speaking of friends...

Glancing over at Jamef, I let him see how upset I am. “I still consider you a friend for now, but if you lie to me again

about something important, we're not going to be friends anymore. Understand?"

He looks surprised at my words, but then nods. "Very well...and thank you, Dora. I am sorry I hurt your trust."

At least he sounds sincere. "I'm going to go see Bethiah."

Jamef nods. I can sense his gaze following me as I leave, and I feel strangely empowered because he seemed to listen to what I had to say and wasn't mad when I asserted that I was upset. Unlike Bethiah, who tries to laugh away when I'm mad at her, Jamef actually seems to listen to me. They're such opposites in some ways, I wonder how they possibly get along.

I move through the ship that Bethiah calls the *Pleasure Spot*. I can hear Jamef moving around on the bridge, and when there's a gentle surge under my feet, I know we're moving. I guess we're leaving the station behind. It doesn't surprise me. Instead of feeling anxious, I'm relieved. There's no safe place for me on that station. I'm much safer out here in space, no matter if it's Jamef or Bethiah at the helm of the ship.

The door to the holding cell opens when I press my hand to it, and closes again behind me. On my old bed (at least the one I slept in before I started sharing), Bethiah is laid out. Her hands are folded just under her breasts, her face serene, her black hair spilling over the pillows. She looks a bit like a princess from a fairy tale like this, slumbering peacefully and waiting for her prince to come and awaken her.

Is her prince Jamef? Why does that make me jealous? Bethiah's made it clear for all her flirting that she views me as a problem to be solved rather than a friend, so Jamef's definitely got a leg up in that situation. Even so, I can't help but lean over her sleeping face.

Impulsively, I press my lips to hers. I feel a bit like a wild animal marking its territory, as if I need to stake out that I'm here first. That Bethiah should be attracted to me and not Jamef because I was here first. Her mouth is just as soft as I remember, and I linger there, wondering if I'm absolutely crazy for imagining there might be more to us—

A hand slides to the back of my neck, cupping my head, and then Bethiah is kissing me back, her mouth hot on mine.



## C hapter Twenty Four

### BETHIAH

Waking up with a sweet mouth pressed against my own isn't the worst way to rouse. I know immediately that it's Dora, of course. I can tell by the soft feel of her lips, the scent of her against my skin. She gasps when I kiss her back, and I half expect her to pull away. Instead, she sinks her hands into my hair and slants her mouth over mine, her tongue brushing over my lower lip in a silent invitation.

Who am I to resist such a delicious invite?

It's been so long since I've truly kissed another lover. Humans are the only ones to happily ignore sanitary laws in bedsport. They'd rather swap fluids and touch all over than settle for the anemic, hygienic embrace of most society. Maybe that's what makes them so keffing appealing. When they love, they're all in.

And I know I shouldn't kiss her because the last thing I need in my life is love, but...kef it.

I stroke her small, smooth tongue with mine, and have to bite back a sigh when she makes a sound of pleasure. She leans into me, her lips nibbling against mine, and then Dora flicks her tongue against mine once more. "Bethiah," she breathes. "I missed you."

That brings me to my senses. Because I can't have a human missing me. I can't have her getting attached, because then I'll get attached, and I know humans don't stay. They dance around love, pretending that they want it as badly as you do, and then when a better offer comes along, they take it.

So I gently push Dora away. "Did he send you in here to distract me again?"



She recoils, the look on her face one of hurt. “Maybe I just wanted to kiss you. Maybe I was just glad to see you. I guess that was wrong.”

“Eh.” I shrug, and swing my legs over the side of the bed, sitting upright. Dora retreats to stand near the door, her arms crossed over her chest. She’ll forget about me hurting her feelings soon enough. “I’m glad to see you whole, fluffit, don’t get me wrong. But the fact that you’re not locked up with me tells me that you’re working with Jamef.”

I wasn’t wrong. Humans really do change their loyalties quickly. Dora’s already Jamef’s creature, and that stings far more than it should. I shouldn’t be surprised. I expected this, but did it have to happen so soon? I was enjoying spending time with her despite myself. I was enjoying her adoring looks, and her bright conversation, and the feel of her body against mine at night.

By the stars, I really am an idiot sometimes. They’ve both played me.

I suppose it’s time for me to play them right on back. I give Dora a bright smile, hiding my wounded sensibilities. First I get out of here. Then I take over my ship again. Maybe throw in a little flirting and a grind session with Jamef, though I’m feeling decidedly less willing to fool around now that I know he’s turned Dora against me. I can’t blame the little fluffit, but I can still be keffing annoyed by it. I turn toward the door and try my hand on the panel. Locked out. “So are we in space now or still at the station?”

Dora lets out a little huff.

That’s fine, she can be annoyed at me. I’m annoyed at her, too. To think I stressed for days over how to get her back only for her to betray me so quickly. “So what did you think of Jamef?” I ask. “He’s good with his fingers, isn’t he?”

“What do you mean?”

As if she doesn’t know what I mean. “So you went straight for the dick? Girl after my own heart.” I chuckle, even though I don’t feel like laughing. I use my thumbnail and pry up the

control panel, then smile down at the tiny override chip that I've left in the panel itself. It's not connected, and I stored it there for such emergencies. I connect it now and then replace the panel itself, swiping my hand across the front of the panel.

Override.

Dora gasps in surprise when the door opens. "Hey—wait! Where are you going?"

I shrug, glancing back at her. "Jamef wanted me back on the ship, right? I'm gonna go say hello. Maybe go have dinner with my traitorous boyfriend. See if he's been missing me."

She flinches back the moment I say the word 'boyfriend'. "Oh."

Her innocent reaction bothers me. Does she think she can just pair up with Jamef and I'm going to be fine with it? That I'll keep kissing her and acting like we're still friends? If that's what she wants, then she's going to have to harden up. I turn around, take two steps across the holding cell to Dora's side, and put a finger under her chin. "Does that hurt your feelings, fluffit? That I'm going to kiss you and then turn around and ride my boyfriend's cock?"

She gives me a wounded look. "I shouldn't be surprised. That's the type of person you are, right? Kissing and playing games. Making everyone fall in love with you and then pushing them away."

Is that what she thinks I'm doing? Making her fall for me and then pushing her away? How cute—she's cast herself as the victim. I lean down, and when she doesn't pull away, I kiss her again. "Nice try," I whisper. "But you can sleep in Jamef's quarters tonight since you're so chummy with him. I'll make sure to send him back to you hot and bothered."

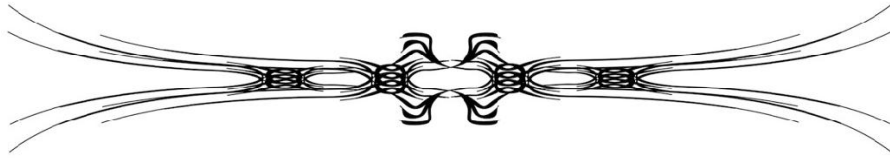
"I'm confused," Dora says, her brows furrowing. "I feel like we're having two different conversations here."

"All you need to know is I don't plan on keeping him. You can have him back when I'm done." And I saunter out of the holding cell, heading for the bridge.

Now to do what I do best—torture Jamef sexually and then retake his ship. I'll wrest her from him again, dump him—and the fluffit—at the nearest station, and head off on my own once more.

I don't need anyone. Or anything. I'm doing just fine on my own.

TWENTY-FOUR



## JAMEF

**Y**ou stop being surprised by anything Bethiah does after a while. So when I'm sitting at the helm of the ship, charting a course that will skirt the more trafficked parts of this particular galaxy, and Bethiah saunters on to the bridge? I'm not surprised. A little irked that she's somehow escaped the holding cell, a little amused that she *has* escaped, and wholly not surprised in the slightest. Bethiah is always unpredictable. That's the only thing that is predictable about her.

"Hello lover," she purrs as she approaches my seat.

"Is that what we are? I thought one had to mate to be a lover," I retort, swiveling in my chair to regard her. This is just more of the dance between us, the push-pull game that goes on endlessly as we try to figure out our boundaries and how far we're willing to push the other person. "I see you've freed yourself."

She chuckles. "I'm good at wriggling out of your traps, Jamef. That one was particularly easy. I'm hurt that you're not trying very hard to keep me."

"No one can keep you if you don't want to be kept."

"True enough." She approaches me directly and then straddles my lap, facing me as she mounts me. Once again, unpredictable. I wasn't sure if she'd be angry or in a fighting mood. Flirty wasn't expected.

But I can flirt back. "Sometimes I think you want to be caught. You walked right into my trap. Didn't ask a single question. Didn't investigate the room. Didn't try to undermine things. Now who's not trying very hard?"

She puts her hands on my shoulders and grinds down against my cock, her movements sensual. "Mmm. Parts of you are glad to see me."

“Parts of me always are,” I rasp, sliding a hand to her waist. She lets me keep it there, rocking down on my erection again, and she’s keffing beautiful. Deadly, dangerous, but beautiful.

Bethiah grinds her hips in a small circle, her lips curved in a smile as she regards my face. “Besides. I knew it was you that had my fluffit. No yellow-haired humans were up for sale. No one left the station with a new human in tow without the proper paperwork. That told me whoever grabbed her was waiting for me. I knew what that meant.” She bears down against my shaft, her face a breath away from mine. “You wanted to say hello. Well here I am, lover.”

This time, I put both hands on her hips and when she tries to lift up, I drag her back down against my cock, thrusting against her. It’s the angriest grind session we’ve had yet, neither of us willing to give over control to the other. “You keep using that word ‘lover’ but we both know that I told you I wanted more than just teasing and you ran away...with my ship, I might add. So you don’t *get* to call me lover.”

Bethiah gives a throaty laugh, wriggling against my cock in a way that sets my senses on fire. “I’m here now. I could ride your cock until we both come.”

It’s the most she’s ever offered me. This is the closest I’ve come to having her. There’s a challenging look in her eyes that tells me she knows it, too. This is part of the game, but a new angle...which means there’s a new motive.

I lean back, regarding her. “You mean to tell me that if I said yes, you’d take my cock from my trou and ride on my piercings until I made you squeal my name?”

That makes her eyes flare. She leans against me, her slender body pressed to mine. “First of all,” she murmurs, stroking a hand along one of my horns. “If anyone’s squealing a name, it’s going to be you. And second of all...hmm...yes. I’d ride your cock and take all of those piercings, Jamef. Say the word.”

Kef me, I desperately want the “word” to be yes. “And you’d do this in front of the human? With her watching?”

Bethiah's mouth curls into a hard smile and she reaches between us, her hand moving over the fastener to my trou. "I don't mind if she watches."

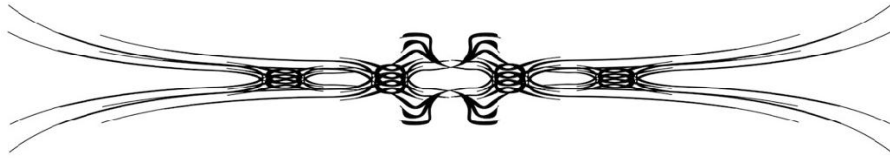
I grab her hand and stop her before she can free my cock. "I do."

Because now I know her game. She's going to mate with me to hurt the human's feelings and drive her away, because for some reason, she's upset at her. It has just as much to do with me as it does the human, and that's why I stop. Because I'm not going to perform on stage for Bethiah's little revenge game.

I deserve better than that.

Dora deserves better than that.

TWENTY-FIVE





## JAMEF

**B**ethiah might think we're all play-pieces in her game, but I have lines I won't cross. And deliberately hurting the feelings of her human—the sweet, wide-eyed female she was kissing moments ago—is a line I refuse to cross. It's not just that I don't like being used. It's that I've gotten to know Dora in the last few days. It doesn't sit right with me that Bethiah can come from kissing her straight to my cock. For all that Bethiah was planning on selling Dora, it's clear to me that Dora still adores her.

And it's not right to crush that.

My refusal makes Bethiah scowl, though. She grabs my jaw with hard fingers, forcing me to look up at her. "Here I thought you wanted nothing more than to get between my thighs."

"Not like this," I tell her calmly. "Not if our mating will hurt Dora. Not if that's the plan behind this."

Her hand tightens on my chin. "So you've got a thing for the little human now, too? Is that why you've turned her against me?"

Do I have a "thing" for the human? She's delicate and sweet, and if I wasn't knee-deep in this crazy dance with Bethiah, maybe I'd think long and hard about human kisses and human caresses. Maybe if I wasn't already claimed. But I am. The female straddling me that has my jaw in a vise also has my heart in one. "I've turned nothing against no one."

She squeezes my mouth into a circle, gazing down at it. "You stole her. You're keeping her, aren't you? Tell me that's not for bedsport."

"I stole her from you to get your attention. And I'm keeping her because selling humans is wrong." The words come out garbled, thanks to her grip on my mouth. "You're

better than that. Being a skin trader is the lowest of the low, Bethiah.”

She snorts, studying my face. Then she leans in and nips at my lower lip, her teeth scraping my skin. A hot curl of shock flares through me. She’s going to mouth me—kiss me—like she did the human? My cock gets impossibly hard at that. I’ve never thought about mouths on mouths, but now that I’ve seen Bethiah do it—and now that she’s done it to me—I’m fascinated. It should be wet and disgusting and unsanitary... but instead, I want her to do that again. “I’m not selling her, you bucket of bolts.”

“You’re not?” I manage, pressing against the hand clenched on my jaw. I gaze at her mouth, so close yet so far away. “She never corrected me.”

Bethiah’s mouth curls into a smile. “Sweet little fluffit. Maybe she’s on my side after all.” She studies my face and then leans in and nips my lower lip again, and I nearly come in my trou. “I wasn’t going to sell her, Jamef. I was going to fit her with prosthetics so she can protect herself.”

I pant, hard. She rocks against me, her hips working over mine, teasing the hard bar of my cock in my clothes.

She’s insane. I know she is. You wouldn’t remove perfectly good limbs and replace them with something that requires maintenance. That needs repairs. Limbs are expensive, too. But I can tell from Bethiah’s expression that she’s earnest. That she truly thinks that outfitting Dora with bionic arms or legs is the answer to keep her safe.

If I wasn’t so keffing aroused at the moment, I’d have probably laughed in her face. As it is, I can barely control myself. “New...limbs?” I clutch the arms of my chair, and when she rocks against me again, I buck my hips, trying to drive into her. “And...then what?”

For a moment, Bethiah looks distracted. She releases my jaw, her hand sliding to my shoulder, and she leans in close to my face again as if she wants to kiss me once more. “What do you mean?”

“What happens after you make her strong and fierce?” My fingers itch to touch Bethiah, to pull down the enticing fastener that bobs at her throat. But Dora’s future is important, too, and I feel like we all need to figure out what the kef we want before anyone does any touching. Bethiah isn’t mine if she’s *hers*, after all.

Bethiah gives her head a little shake. “Whatever she wants?”

“I thought it was clear that she wants *you*.”

A look of pleasure spreads over her face. “You think so? My goodness, it’s so hard to be so appealing. What am I going to do with all these people that have crushes on me?” She taps the tip of my nose. “Any ideas?”

“Kef them so hard you get it out of your system?” I rasp.

She laughs with delight and tilts her head, as if considering. “Maybe so.”

It’s what I’d do if I was her. Grab the object of my affections and use them until I no longer feel as if I’m going to lose my mind if we don’t get some sort of release. I’d keffing love it if she’d decide what she wanted to do with me—and make it about me. But I know that if she mounts me on this bridge, in this chair, it’s because she’s thinking about Dora. I’ve waited this long for Bethiah to come back to me.

Perhaps I need her to toy with the human for a bit, get it out of her system, and then come back to me once more.

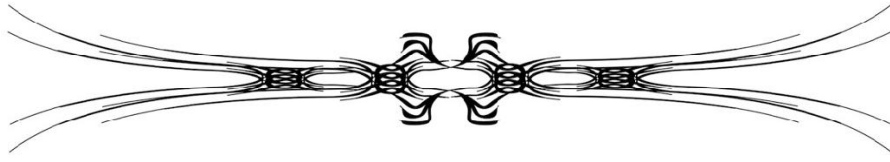
And if I don’t lose my mind from sheer jealousy, maybe she’ll be waiting for me when she’s tired of the human.

But Bethiah continues to sit atop my lap, her expression going from fierce and in control to a hint of vulnerability. “Do you know, for the first time in a long time, I don’t know what to do? If I take you as my lover, it’s going to hurt her. And if I take her as my lover...” She sighs and shakes her head at me. “Unless you wanted to watch, of course?”

There’s a hopeful note in her voice. “Kef off,” I growl. “I’m not going to watch.”

Even if the idea is...enticing.

TWENTY-SIX



## DORA

I pace in the hall, worried as Jamef and Bethiah are on the bridge. Together. This is the moment it all turns, I realize.

Now that they're together as a couple, it doesn't matter if I'm flirty with Bethiah. It doesn't matter that Jamef is my friend. They won't need me around. I'm the third wheel no one asked for, and that means my time here is limited.

Bethiah's throaty laughter drifts from the bridge, and it makes me want to cry...or punch something. I could be happy as Bethiah's friend and flirt-partner. I could be happy as Jamef's friend and buddy. I'm comfortable with both of them. But when I put the two of them together...it feels like there's no room for me any longer.

And that hurts. It feels as if I'm a convenient stand-in and not a true person to them. Because I hear them laughing and I know they're probably kissing and doing whatever weird flirting-slash-attacking-each-other thing they do to get their rocks off, and it makes me realize I've never been more than a speed bump in the long-term plan. Bethiah's goal has always been to get rid of me.

I just...don't know what to do. If they leave me behind somewhere, I'm screwed. Hot desperation crawls up the back of my neck. I have to figure out a way to get them to keep me around, then. Some sort of ploy to stall things, to get Bethiah or Jamef to realize that I need more guidance. Maybe I'll get something small switched out if Bethiah really wants it. A couple of fingers or a hand, or a knee or something. I can trade a knee for ongoing security. I—

My tongue glues to the roof of my mouth as Bethiah stalks off the bridge. She spots me, frozen in place in the hall, and then narrows her eyes in my direction. With a toss of her head, she heads in the opposite direction, toward the private quarters.

I follow after her, a moth to flame. Sure enough, when I turn the corner to follow her, I see her open the door to the bedroom. “Everything all right, Bethiah?”

“Nope.”

And because I can’t seem to walk away when she’s around, I slink forward. The bedroom has been tidied, and I can see Jamef’s clothes in the nook that serves as a closet. The bed is made, too. Bethiah thumps down on the edge of it and tugs off one boot, tossing it to the ground. Then, the other. Once that’s done, she flops back onto the bed dramatically and folds her arms behind her head, staring up at the ceiling. She doesn’t look happy. “You wanna talk about it?”

“What’s there to talk about? I’m not having sex at this moment because there’s unfinished business between you and me, and Jamef won’t have it, even though I threw myself at him.”

I flinch. “Unfinished business?”

“Very unfinished. He thinks you might get hurt if you come across us mating like wild animals.”

My brows furrow. “Because of...claws? Or if someone kicks a leg out?” I try to imagine what it would look like with them “mating like wild animals” and I’m imagining a lot of teeth and snarling...which probably isn’t too far off the truth.

“Because you’ve got a soft heart, fluffit.” Bethiah sits up in bed and then gives me a speculative look. “He thinks you’ll cry big, sad tears if you see someone else licking my cunt.”

I give her a wide-eyed, alarmed stare. She makes it sound like a bad thing. She also makes it sound completely and utterly one-sided, which is crap considering she’d moved on me first. “Are you just looking for someone to blame because you’re not getting laid?”

“Yes.” She leans toward me, her hands on the edge of the bed. “Is it true?”

“Is what true?” Answering her feels dangerous.

“Keffing hells, pay attention, fluffit. Do you want me or not?” Her eyes narrow and she pats the spot on the bed next to her. “Because if you do, we can make Jamef really jealous. You can take a seat right on my face and we’ll squirt all over his bed. It’ll make him wild with irritation and his cock will be so hard he won’t be able to walk for a week.” She winks at me. “What do you say?”

I’m speechless.

Part of me is shocked at her crass words. Part of me is utterly titillated—sit on her face? Ride her beautiful mouth until she makes me come? My body flushes with interest just thinking about it. But...I’m not sure I like her phrasing or the hard look glittering in her eyes. “So is this because you want to be with me or because you want to make Jamef sorry?”

She tilts her head, her long hair spilling over her shoulder in a mess of braids, and gives me a wicked, carefree smile. “You should know that I don’t form emotional attachments, fluffit. It’s just sex. It’s meant to be fun.”

“What if putting on a show isn’t fun for me? What if we just have very quiet sex somewhere private and don’t tell Jamef?” What if it’s just about me and pleasure and not about throwing it in the face of others?

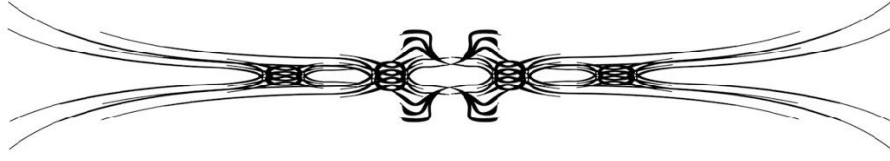
Bethiah gives me an incredulous look. “But why wouldn’t you want him to know? Think of how crazy it’ll make him to smell us all over his bed.” Her eyes gleam, her smile spreading enough to show a hint of sharp fang.

Her answer makes my heart ache. It’s not about being with me as much as it is punishing Jamef. It would be about emotion for me, but not for her. To her, I’m just a tool to be used.

“Pass,” I say, voice wobbling. It takes everything I have to turn around and walk out of the room without crying, but I manage.



TWENTY-SEVEN



## DORA

The ship feels too small for three people at odds with one another. I can't go to the bedroom because Bethiah is there. I can't go to the bridge because Jamef is there. I feel like I can't go to the holding cell, either, because they'll just judge me if I do. So I flee towards the cargo hold and squeeze my way against the wall, huddling between two crates of noodles. Once there, I hug my legs to my chest, bury my face in my arms, and have a good long cry.

"Can I join you?"

I look up at Jamef's hard face, his red eye and the flat line of his mouth. He doesn't look like one to dole out sympathy. I sniff, swiping my hand under my nose. "There's no room. Crybaby corner is full."

He scowls down at me. "Who told you that you were a crybaby?"

No one had to tell me. I know I am. I shake my head, ignoring him.

One of the massive crates scrapes against the floor and then in the next moment, it's lifted into the air. I see Jamef's bionic arm flexing as he stacks it atop the crate nearby, and then he moves to my side, sitting down next to me with a creak of limbs. His back is to the wall like mine, but his legs sprawl out in front of him. He sets his hands on his thighs, awkward, and then glances over at me. "You wanna talk about it?"

I shrug. "Not really."

"Let me guess. Bethiah's being an ass."

His simple words make fresh tears stream down my face. "I'm not sure I can talk to you about it."

"Because you're in love with her?" he guesses.

Love is a strong word. Am I fascinated with her? Yes. Do I want to murder her right now? Yes. I just don't understand her, and it seems that every time I learn something new, it's designed just to push me away. Strangely enough, I suspect Jamef would know just what I'm talking about. I glance over at him and wipe at my wet cheeks. "Kinda hard to be in love with someone when the only reason they want you is to throw it in the face of someone else."

He grunts. One big hand goes to the back of my neck and he gives it a comforting squeeze. "Yup. I was right. Bethiah's an ass."

He tugs me in his direction, and instead of balking, I allow him to pull me against him, tucking me against his chest and hugging me. It feels like he actually cares, and fresh tears erupt. "Relationships suck."

Jamef chuckles, stroking my hair. "You're telling me? I've been dancing around the same situation with her for months now. I don't know what we are, just that we can't seem to stay apart from one another, and we can't get along when we're together. As for you, I think you're wrong, Dora. She might want to rub what she's doing with you in my face a bit, but that's not the only reason she's interested in you. She has feelings for you."

"No she doesn't."

"Trust me, I know Bethiah. The fact that she wanted you around at all speaks volumes. And she came after you, didn't she?"

I glance up at him. "So?"

He lifts his chin in my direction. "She willingly stepped into a trap for you, sweetheart. And look at how she's acting right now. She's not fighting me to take back the ship. She's in her quarters, sulking because neither of us wants to play her games. With Bethiah, sometimes you have to look at what she's not saying instead of what she is. The fact that she's not trying to shove my metal ass into the holding cell and steal my ship tells me that she wants to be here...and I suspect it has a lot to do with you." His hard mouth lifts up in one corner.

“Just because she has feelings for me doesn’t mean she doesn’t have feelings for you.”

I swallow hard. Bethiah really cares for me? Yet everything he says rings true. No one can hold her if she’s not interested in being held. And when I kissed her, she kissed me back, and it felt like she meant it. I don’t answer him for a long moment. I have to think about what he means. “I don’t know, Jamef. It feels like she’s using me sometimes. I...I don’t know that she likes humans that way.”

He chuckles. “You’re wrong about that. Just look at you, Dora. You’re sweet and wholesome. You’re loving and trustworthy. Anyone would be lucky to have even a hint of your attention.” With gentle fingers, he brushes my hair back from my forehead. “Don’t base your self-worth on Bethiah. Just because she can’t say aloud that she cares doesn’t mean you aren’t worthy of affection. If anything, she’s trying very hard not to care. Sometimes that’s easiest.”

There’s a sad note in his voice that makes me ache. More than that, I want to curl up against his touch and just...let him pet me for a while. I love that Jamef will hug me and touch me. I love that he can tell that I need affection desperately, and he’s willing to step in. I rest my cheek against his chest. Through the fabric of his clothes, I can feel the metal plating the upper part of his chest, but I don’t find it offensive. It’s just...part of what makes Jamef himself. “What about you?”

“What about me?”

I glance up, our faces close together. “Is it easier for you not to care?”

His eyes grow heavy-lidded as he gazes down at me. “I think my problem is I care too much. It’d be far easier for me to just walk away. Hide out in my apartment on station and try to forget about her.”

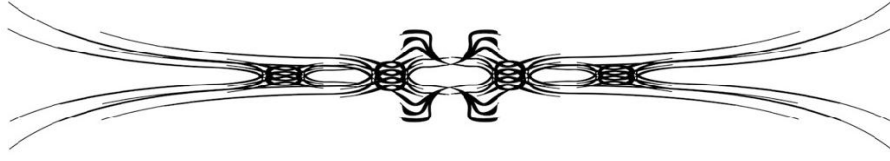
Forget about Bethiah? It sounds utterly impossible. “Sounds like we’re both suckers.”

Jamef chuckles, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. “Probably.”

He sounds so rueful and sad despite his laughter that I lean into the hand that brushes against my cheek. His expression changes, and we gaze at each other quietly for a long pause. I realize suddenly that our mouths are inches apart. That he's warm and kind and appealing, a comforting shore after the tempest that is Bethiah. That Jamef could kiss me in this moment...

...and I'd like it.

TWENTY-EIGHT



## DORA

**J**amef's hand strokes along my jaw and he gazes thoughtfully at my mouth. I'm full of yearning for his kiss. I want to see if it's similar to Bethiah's, if it affects me differently, if he makes a sound of pleasure when he touches me, if it smooths that vague worry from his brow...

But he just continues to stroke my jaw, his thumb skimming close to my lower lip.

"Are you going to kiss me?" I whisper.

"I am considering it."

The fact that he's pausing doesn't surprise me. Jamef is not a creature of impulse. "Because you want to make Bethiah upset?"

His mouth curves into a rueful smile. "No, because someone should kiss you until those tears go away." His hand skims higher, brushing the wetness from my cheek. "It pains me to see you so sad, sweetheart."

"Then you should kiss me and make it better," I say boldly, moving a bit closer. I'm practically up on my knees now, and I loop my arms around his neck. My nose is practically brushing his, but I hesitate before eliminating the distance between us. I don't want to shove my mouth on him if he doesn't want it. In addition to hygiene laws, there's a whole other entanglement. But his gaze goes to my mouth and I can tell we're both thinking the same thing, and a hot yearning curls through my body, filling me with a delicious ache. "Will Bethiah get mad if you kiss me? Or if I kiss you?"

"Will she?" he muses, and his thumb moves to my lip, skimming it.

I part them, and he eases his thumb inside. It's metallic, his hand cybernetic, but it's still his, so I close my lips around it and suck.

“And do we care?” His gaze is locked on my mouth.

It’s a bluff. We both know we care.

I release his thumb and give the pad a little kiss. Neither of us makes a move.

“It’s all right,” I tell him. I can feel the tension brimming in the air like an electric charge, but we don’t kiss. Not until we figure out what’s going on between the three of us. If Bethiah doesn’t want him—or me—then we’re free to kiss. If she does...things are complicated.



I sleep in the holding cell that night. Bethiah has taken over the bedroom and hasn’t emerged. I suspect she’s sulking because we’re not playing her games. Either that, or planning revenge for the same reason. She plays at being lighthearted but I know her well enough at this point that I can tell when her feelings have been hurt. Our situation—the three of us and our weird attraction—is entirely in her control and she’s hesitating.

If Bethiah declared that she wanted Jamef and only Jamef, I’d find my peace with it. I’d wish them the best, because I really do adore both of them and I want the best for both. I want them to be happy even if it’s not with me. I would just find a ride to this backwater Risda place and...manage, I guess, even if the thought makes me want to cry.

If Bethiah decided she wanted me and not Jamef, I’d be utterly delighted...and hurt for Jamef at the same time. I’d miss him and his calm, organized presence. I’d miss his comforting shoulder when Bethiah makes me crazy, and the ship wouldn’t be the same without him.

And what if Jamef decided he wanted me instead of Bethiah? I think of our almost-kiss earlier. I think of the way I sucked on his finger and how being in his arms felt natural and right and good...and yet still like a betrayal. Bethiah would be broken-hearted if we got together without her. She’d laugh it off with jokes and go try to work it off by attacking someone



at a cantina, but I know she'd be hurt. She expects everyone to leave her, and I feel like it's both a dare and a vulnerability.

Oh god, what if they make me choose between them?

There's got to be a solution to this. It'd be so much easier if we could all three just be in a relationship together—

Wait.

Why can't we?

It's clear that Bethiah likes both males and females. I like both Bethiah and Jamef for very different reasons. I like Bethiah's wildness and unpredictability just as much as I like Jamef's protective nature. I know Jamef likes both of us—or at least I think he does. They consider themselves boyfriend and girlfriend, in a strange quasi-relationship they've been pursuing but unable to move forward with.

What if I insinuate myself into their relationship and make it a triad? I'd be safe. No one would dump me on a distant planet.

We could be free to explore this strange attraction between all three of us. I don't know if I'd be all right with Bethiah and Jamef kissing and making love, but it's different if we agree upon it and I get my turn next, isn't it? It's not cheating then. It's just...taking turns.

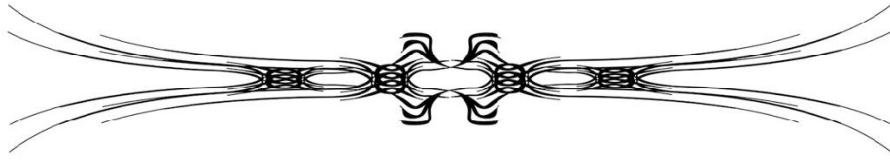
Best of all, we can all stay together.

I have no idea if this is going to work. I have no idea if they're even going to like the idea. But I feel like it's the best solution we have at the moment and it's worth a try. I mentally picture myself and Bethiah kissing while Jamef watches and... I don't hate it. I picture Jamef touching me while Bethiah watches and...I don't hate that either. I might like it.

The true test would be how I feel if they touch each other and I'm forced to watch.

But if we all agree to it and it means I don't have to get dumped on a farm planet in the middle of nowhere...could I learn to like it?

TWENTY-NINE



## BETHIAH

**I**t's far too early in the morning when the comm buzzes into my room. "Bethiah? Are you up?" Dora's voice is chirpy and sweet and far, far too happy for this hour. "Hello?"

I reach over and turn the comm off. That can be my answer. Rolling over in bed, I put my back to the door and tuck my arm under my horn, trying to get back to sleep. She can wait for a decent time. I need my rest. And besides, I'm mad at both her and Jamef at the moment. Let them stew a little.

Just as I'm drifting back to sleep, the door to my room opens. In the next moment, the blanket is ripped off of me. "Get up." It's Dora's voice, no longer sweet. Now she sounds furious. "Quit being a damn baby."

I roll onto my back, yawning. "Give me back my blanket, fluffit."

"I need to talk to you," Dora says, tucking the blanket under her arm and clearly not about to return it. "Jamef, too. And it needs to be this morning."

Does it *really*? I'm pretty sure it can wait. "Is someone's life in danger? Because *yours* is if you don't give me my blanket back and let me go to sleep." I hold my hand out and wiggle my fingers, indicating she should return it. "Give."

"No. Bethiah, come *on*. I'm serious. We need to talk." Dora's face is sober and absolutely no fun. She's not crying, though, which means she hasn't reached her limits.

I consider getting out of bed for a hot moment. I sit up, and Dora's face brightens. And when I sit up...I grab the blanket and snatch it back from her, then lie back down again. I'm being childish, sure, but I also feel like making her suffer for turning me down.

A hand grabs my horn, and to my surprise, Dora yanks on it, trying to tug me out of bed. “Would you quit being such a darn jerk?”

She’s not strong enough to haul me around, but I admire the fluffit’s spirit. I let her “drag” me upright, and the look of determination on her face is the cutest thing I’ve ever seen.

Dora scowls, tugging on my horn. “I know this is hard to believe, but both Jamef and I care about you and I think we should all three have a nice logical conversation and work things through.”

“Oh please,” I say as she tries to tug me forward again. “You’re both plotting behind my back.”

When I don’t move, instead of giving up, Dora flicks my nose and gives me an exasperated look. “It’s not behind your back if you show up to our meeting, now is it?”

Hm. She’s got me there. And she’s asserting herself. I’m liking this new side of my sweet fluffit. I stand upright. Dora squeaks in surprise, her body slithering down my front. I catch her in my arms so she doesn’t fall over, and grin down at her for a long moment. Her cheeks are getting pink and she looks flustered to be in my arms. “Fine,” I say. “You want me to try and have a conversation at the ass-crack of dawn, you’ve got me. But I can’t say I’ll be coherent.”

“I’ll do all the talking,” Dora says excitedly. She takes my hand in hers, smiling, and gives it a squeeze. “Are you dressed? Do you need to get more clothes on or are you good? I’ll put on some night tea. Just come on.”

I look down at the loose sleeping tunic I’m wearing—which is nothing more than a sleeveless scrap that covers a hint of my torso and not much more—and a pair of comfy, loose trou in a fuzzy material that feels good against my skin. The waist of the trou is low so my tail can be free while I sleep, and I hitch them up just a little with one hand while I let Dora tug me along with my other hand.

I’m not changing clothes for whatever this meeting is. If they want early morning Bethiah, that’s what they’ll get.

Yawning, I follow along with shuffling steps.

Dora leads me to the mess hall of my small ship and to my surprise, Jamef is there, looking as sleepy as I am. He straightens at the sight of me, pulling his legs in from their sprawl, and I have to admire his form. Every time I see him, he looks good enough to eat. There's nothing quite like the sight of a male that's been broken and remade stronger. Maybe that's why I want the fluffit to get cybernetic parts. I find them sexy.

"Good, you're both here now," Dora says. Her voice is a little nervous as she leads me toward a seat that puts Jamef to my right. His eyes are hooded, and I'm guessing he hasn't yet gone to sleep. I deliberately yawn widely again, and the little human puts a fresh cup of night tea in front of me, and then sets one in front of Jamef. She takes the third for herself and sits at the table as well, her seat to my left.

She holds the mug in front of her as if it's made of precious metals, and when she lifts it, her hand trembles. She's nervous.

My stupid heart squeezes at the sight, and I want to pull her into my arms and comfort her.

Instead, I kick her under the table.

She gives me a scowl and sets her mug down. "Okay. I'm just going to say this quickly and get it all out on the table. I know there's some...vibes between myself and Bethiah, and Bethiah and Jamef, and, well..." Dora looks at Jamef and then blushes.

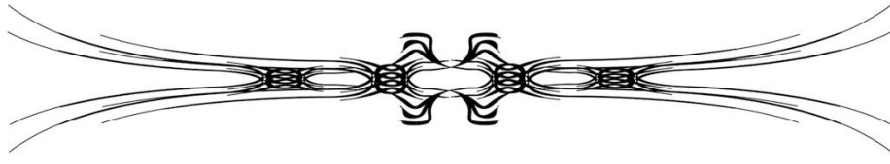
And I hate that I'm a little bit jealous.

"What I'm trying to say," Dora continues, "is that there's a lot going on between the three of us. And I think we should explore it." Her gaze locks on me, and then on Jamef, and then back to me. "Together."

Does she...

Does she mean what I think she means?

THIRTY



## BETHIAH

I rub my ear as the human female blushes. “I’m sorry, I don’t think I heard that correctly. Could you repeat what you just said?”

Her face gets redder and, under the table, she kicks me back. “You know what I said, Bethiah. And I wanted you both in here because I wanted to talk it over with both of you.” She bites her lip and looks over at me. “Please don’t joke. I’m being very serious.”

Don’t joke? If I don’t joke, I might have absolutely nothing to say. I cross my arms over my chest, noticing that Jamef’s gaze is drawn to the skin I’m exposing. I’m tempted to pull my entire tunic down and show all the goods, but Dora is looking so woebegone and worried that it amps up the protective instincts I’ve been fighting to hold back so hard.

I know it’s a bad idea—I know it is—but I reach over and take Dora’s hand and give it a reassuring squeeze, because she looks as if she’s about to collapse. “Why don’t you tell us what you have in mind, fluffit?”

She clings to my hand, and my traitorous heart gives an involuntary squeeze. *This is bad*, I tell myself. *This is bad, this is bad, take your hand from hers. Protect yourself.* But the harder she holds on to me, the less inclined I am to let her go. I let her squeeze the kef out of my fingers as she gathers her thoughts.

Dora takes in a deep breath and then looks over at Jamef. “I just...we all want to be here, right? On this ship? And no one wants to back off of the relationship. I know I don’t want to leave...and I don’t want either of you to leave. So I thought maybe we’d try this. Just the three of us. Not an open door, of course. We’d stay faithful to each other and maybe see where this leads?”

I eye Jamef. If he says something cruel to the fluffit, I might have to rip that red eye out of his face. “What do you think?”

“Shouldn’t we be asking you?” he retorts, voice raspy. “You’re the one with commitment issues.”

“We,” huh? As if I wouldn’t catch that. Are they already together in some way, then? Did Dora latch onto him while I was gone because she needed safety? I understand if she did, but it still makes me feel oddly left out. “I mean, I’m down to try new things.” I lift Dora’s hand to my lips and kiss her knuckles. “But I would assume this means that I’m in a relationship with you and in a relationship with her, and you’d be in a relationship with both of us, Jamef. And Dora would be with both of us. Is that what you both intended?”

Dora watches me mouth her knuckles and says nothing.

Jamef just shrugs. “This is all news to me. I’m just listening and taking things in.”

“It was my idea,” Dora says in a small voice. “I thought it might solve all of our problems. I know it’s not conventional, but I don’t think any of us are.”

A triad. Me with a human clone who’s afraid of her shadow and a bounty-hunting cyborg with a code of honor. No, I don’t think we’re alike in the slightest. I chuckle to myself. “So what’s the plan, then? Trade off who gets the bed? Take turns on his cock and face? Or do you just sit on both of our faces? Do we need to schedule times? Because I want to go first for whatever it is. I like going first.”

I also like face sitting, both giving and receiving, but that’s probably obvious.

Dora pulls her hand from mine, making a face at my crude words. “Right now we’re just figuring things out. I know this is a lot to take in. And I-I don’t have any memories of my past so I don’t have any sexual experience. I’d like to go slow... with both of you. If that’s all right.”

“Of course, sweetheart,” Jamef says, and the look he gives her is downright tender. Instead of making me jealous, I’m



oddly glad to see that. I want him to be as protective of her as I am.

“Bethiah?” She looks over at me, a question in her gaze. “Are you all right with taking things slow? We could have a few dates and figure out things from there.”

“Dates,” I echo.

“Dates,” she agrees. “Some together, some separate if we want to. Just getting to know each other and moving the relationship forward.” Her expression is so earnest, so full of yearning that I can tell she truly wants this. She wants both me *and* Jamef?

I can see her with him, possibly. Haven’t I been dancing around the idea of taking that particular cock for myself for a while? Just settling down and letting the connection happen? Stop running for once? But two people feels like a lot. It feels overwhelming to consider a relationship with not one person, but two. It’s like I’m just asking to have my heart stomped on twice as much. I shrug. “I dunno, fluffit. Just between you and me, I think you can do better.”

Jamef snorts.

Dora frowns at me. “How so?”

“I’m not exactly the staying kind, and this one”—I gesture with my thumb over at Jamef—“isn’t exactly a dream. He’s got a stick up his keffing ass the size of a black hole. And we’re both bounty hunters. It’s not a safe sort of job...and you don’t want to get prosthetics.”

“Bethiah,” Jamef warns. “She’s not getting prosthetics unless she wants them. Her limbs are perfectly fine.”

“They are,” I agree. “Perfectly fine and very, very soft. Vulnerable, soft, and apt to get her killed if she sticks with us.”

“You’re both bounty hunters,” Dora says. “The way I see it, if I’m with both of you, I’m doubly protected.” She smiles as if this answers everything. “And you both need me to smooth things out between you because you can’t get along. You might want each other, but you’re not good at conveying that.”

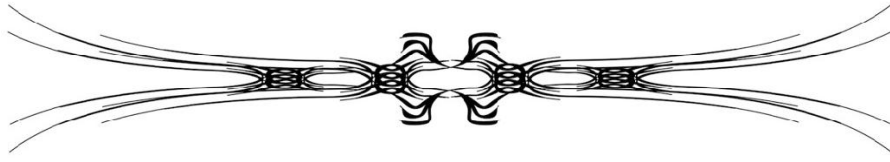
“I am *wounded*. Positively wounded,” I say. “I thought I made it very clear to Jamef that I wanted him.”

Dora gestures at me. “Then get up and give him a kiss.”

A...kiss?

Jamef? Kissing isn't a mesakkah thing. But I look over at him, and at Dora's expectant face. “I will...but you have to kiss him and then me, too. We all kiss, and then we decide if we want to move forward. I think that's only fair.”

THIRTY-ONE



## JAMEF

Whatever circuit board is lodged in my head must be misfiring. Surely that's how I'm hearing that not one but both attractive females on this ship (the ones driving me absolutely mad) want to be in a relationship with me. Me, a cold mercenary who's more metal than male. Who's got few friends and zero family name.

But both look at me, waiting for my answer.

"Do you really think I'd turn this down?" I ask with a scoff. "As long as you're both interested, I am." I would never take an unwilling female, and I wasn't sure how Dora felt. But she's looking at me with pink cheeks and shining eyes and I think perhaps...perhaps this could work. I raise a finger. "There's just one condition."

"Here it is," Bethiah mutters.

"I want us to sleep in the same bed. All of us. None of this bed-hopping nonsense or hiding in rooms. If we're doing this, it should all be out in the open. I don't care if you two touch each other as long as you don't keep it from me, and I promise I won't keep any of my actions from the two of you."

"Fine," Bethiah says, her arms crossed. "Dora?"

"We'll need a bigger bed," the human immediately says.

"What, that's your only concern?" Bethiah teases, a smile spreading across her face. "We'll get you fixed up, fluffit. Don't you worry." There's blatant affection on her face for the other female, and it warms my heart...and reminds me that I have another condition.

"I also want meetings like this," I say. "Once a week. We check in and make sure everyone's still on board. And if someone wants out of this triad, they have to tell us face to face. No running away like a coward."

And I gaze at Bethiah meaningfully.

She scowls in my direction. “Kef you.”

“I wish you would.”

Her mouth twitches and she eyes me lasciviously. “Be a good plaything and maybe I will.”

I can’t help it. I grin. I know she doesn’t mean it yet. Bethiah needs to be completely confident in our relationship before she’ll truly give herself over to us, but I like that she’s flirting.

“Excuse me,” Dora says, interrupting our banter. “Are we going to kiss?” We both turn to look at her and the human’s face turns bright red. “I’m just curious!”

“Curious...?” Bethiah purrs.

“Or hungry for a kiss,” I add. There’s an excitement in my chest I haven’t felt in a while. Not since I first met Bethiah. The excitement of anticipation...a good kind of anticipation, not this miserable shit we’ve been putting ourselves through with our games.

Dora’s breathing quickens, her gaze flitting between the two of us. “So...who goes first?”

If we leave it up to Bethiah, she’ll twist it into some sort of martyr complex, so I decide to take charge. I pat my knee, indicating the human should come sit on my lap.

Bethiah makes a sound of interest, getting to her feet and sitting on the edge of the table so she can watch more closely. Good. She’s on board.

Dora makes another one of those squeaking sounds that tells me she’s probably both excited and a little overwhelmed, but she gets to her feet, trembling. I remind myself that she’s a clone. That this is new to her. That she’s not the jaded creature I am, and she’s certainly not the world-weary whirlwind that Bethiah is. We need to be gentle with her. “We’re going to take it slow,” I remind Dora. “This is just a kiss. Think of it as proof of commitment.”

“You don’t even have to use tongue, fluffit,” Bethiah says encouragingly. “Jamef doesn’t know how to kiss, so you can’t

even do it wrong.”

That gets her attention. Some of the tension eases out of Dora’s shoulders and she moves toward me, sliding into the open circle I’ve made with my arms. “He doesn’t? Why not?”

They talk as if I’m not here, but I don’t mind. I just smile in what I hope is a reassuring way and watch Dora for cues. If she’s too skittish, kissing can wait. “We can go as slow as you need,” I reassure her. “It doesn’t have to be a kiss.”

“Sure it does,” Bethiah says, and I shoot her a glare. She just gives me a winsome smile, completely unconcerned with my irritation. “But Dora’s going to control the kiss. You just sit there and take it.”

I want to snort with amusement at “sit there and take it,” but Dora lowers her slight weight onto my leg, her hands going to my shoulders. Her gaze is on my face, her expression thoughtful, and the light, delicate scent of her fills my nose. “You’ve really never kissed? Not even Bethiah?”

“Kissing is a human tradition,” I agree. “And I’ve never been with a human before.”

“That’s right,” Bethiah encourages, her voice taking on a sultry note. “You’re going to be his first kiss. Yours will be the first lips his have touched. It’s like you get to break him in, fluffit.”

Dora’s gaze goes to my mouth. I’m about to tell her that she can ignore Bethiah’s goading and just kiss me on the cheek. Humans do that, too. I’ve seen it in vids. I don’t mind if we go even slower. If we go so slow that Dora doesn’t want to kiss for months. Whatever she needs. But Bethiah’s words seem to be working magic on the skittish human, because before I can speak, Dora leans forward and presses her lips to mine.

I stay perfectly still, not wanting to alarm or startle her. In truth, I don’t know how to react. Dora’s mouth is soft and sweet against mine, her lips lightly tugging at my own. Her breathing is fast with excitement, her scent clouding my senses, and my cock twitches to alertness when her fingers

skim my jaw. “Your mouth is too tight,” she breathes, and then nips at my lower lip with her small teeth. “Loosen up for me.”

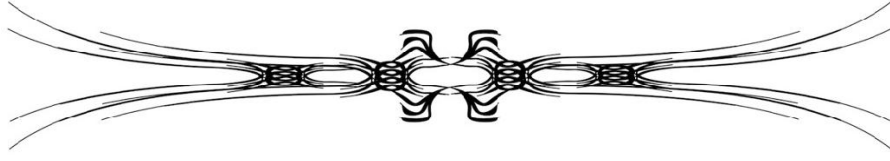
“Open up for her,” Bethiah encourages, her voice just as soft as Dora’s. “So she can lick you if she wants to. Let her take what she wants.”

I do.

I part my lips, stroking a hand over the back of the pretty human perched on my thigh. The moment I do, her tongue dips into my mouth and a ripple of heated pleasure moves through me.

Take what she wants? Dora can take absolutely everything. In this moment, I’m hers.

THIRTY-TWO





## BETHIAH

**A** triad.

They don't work. Haven't I been told by others who have toyed with that sort of unorthodox mating that it never works out? That someone gets jealous and ruins it? Maybe I should be the one that's jealous right now, watching Dora kiss Jamef so tenderly. Maybe I should be worried that I'm going to be the one pushed out, that I'll be abandoned all over again, rejected for not being enough.

But...I like watching their kissing. I like watching Dora's mouth gently coax his open. I love watching the way Jamef's hardness eases away just a bit as the fluffit tongues him with increasing confidence. I love the sight of his big hand, protective on her small back. I love that she's growing in her assertion with the kiss and he's content to let her explore. They're such a good pairing. He'd be so keffing gentle with her, I know.

And I'm still not jealous. Because Dora gives his mouth one last taste and then immediately turns to me, her cheeks flushed and her lips pink. It's like she's looking to me for approval. Like she trusts me and wants me in on this, too.

So I pat my thigh, just like Jamef did, and wait for her to come over to me. With a hint of a flush, she does, pulling away from his embrace and moving toward me. I sit down in my chair again and cast a look over at Jamef, to see his reaction. His thumb skates over his lower lip, as if he's wanting to taste her again. Yeah, I think he likes kissing.

Dora sits on my knee and slides her hands into my hair. She's bolder now, leaning in to kiss me before I have to encourage her. Her tongue brushes against mine and it feels so keffing good. She tastes like Dora...and a hint of something else. Is that Jamef? It makes me want to kiss him myself and see.

Our kiss is brief, as it's not our first one, and when she lifts her mouth, Dora smiles at me. "Now you two kiss and I get to watch."

"So sassy," I tease, even though I'm glad to hear her encouragement. I glance over at Jamef to see what he thinks.

He gives me a heavy-lidded stare and pats his knee. *Come sit.*

That bastard. I'm tempted to laugh at the sheer arrogance of it. I can tell by the smile playing on his mouth that he's expecting me to put up a stink, to not give over control. Well, he doesn't get control if I sit on his knee. He just gets me up close, or as I like to call it, striking distance.

So I set Dora back on her feet, touching my hand to her chin and giving her one last quick kiss before I turn my full attention back to Jamef. I prowl over to him, letting my every step be lethal and full of deadly promise. I move toward him, and when he spreads his thighs, indicating that I should move in, I kick his foot out, spreading his legs wider, and step directly between them. I press my weight forward as he gazes up at me, a challenge in his eyes.

I grab his horn and force his head back.

"A kiss, Bethiah," Dora tells me, her voice unsteady. "If you want this to work between us, we have to all be willing to try."

Right. Because she wants us to try to have a triad. Where I'm hers as much as I'm his, and they belong to each other, too. Where we all theoretically get what we want. Where I have the chance to have my heart trampled upon twice instead of just once. Where I can be doubly broken by those I trust.

I hesitate, because this feels vulnerable. I hate being vulnerable.

"It's all right," Jamef says in a low voice, his gaze locked on mine. "We can go slow for you, too."

Keffing bastard. A hard knot forms in my throat at his gentle words. I glance over at Dora, and I'm startled to see fear on her face, too. She's anxious, because if I don't do this,

she feels like she's going to be sent away. It was in her words earlier, in the hunted look on her face as she mentioned going our separate ways.

And I promised her I'd keep her safe.

Swallowing a growl of frustration, I ignore the smug look of satisfaction I imagine I see on Jamef's face and lean in. I brush my mouth over his, and instead of being passive, he opens his mouth enough to let his fangs scrape over my lower lip. I take over the kiss, tugging hard on his horn to force his head back even more, my lips slanting over his in a controlling way. I'm in charge here. This is my kiss and he has to take it.

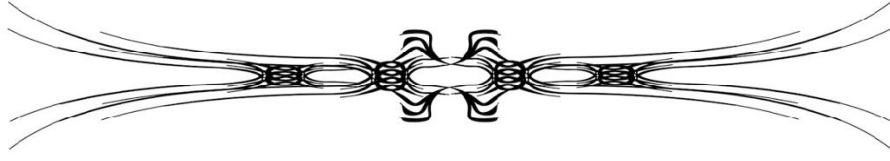
Jamef makes a low, growly rumble in his throat that sounds like pleasure. He *likes* my fierce kiss, as much as he liked Dora's timid one. Heat pulses through me, a different heat than I felt with Dora. Different, but just as good.

It makes me a little panicky. I break off the kiss, tap him on the cheek in an affectionate slap, and walk away to Dora's side. "There you go, fluffit. Feel better?"

She takes my hand and clutches it to her chest, beaming affectionately up at me. "This is going to work for us. Wait and see."

I'm not so sure, but if it makes her smile like that, I'll give it a try.

THIRTY-THREE



## DORA

I don't think I'm exaggerating when I feel things are weird for the next several hours. After our initial agreement, I guess I expected things to be different? But Bethiah mumbled something about needing to clean her weapons and disappeared. Jamef gave me a wry smile and retreated to the bridge, and it's been just me alone for a bit.

That's all right, I tell myself. We said we'd take things slow. We can go as slow as we need to.

For me, I can breathe a sigh of relief. If I'm part of a triad, no one's going to dump me on a farm planet. Bethiah might want to, but Jamef would never let her, and vice versa. They'd have to agree on it and those two never agree on anything. I feel safe. We're all staying here on the ship, nice and cozy.

I'm home now, in a way that I wasn't before.

My mood is a cheery one with that realization. I hum as I go around the ship, tidying up. I pack up my things and remove them from the holding cell, placing them in the bedroom. I make the bed with fresh sheets and add my small pillow, wondering how all three of us are going to squeeze into the small frame. I put away my clothes next to Bethiah's, and straighten up the bedroom. Bethiah remains in the weapons room, cleaning what looks like every weapon on the ship, so I bring her a cup of tea. I bring one for Jamef, too, and peer over his shoulder for a bit as he sets out some flight charts. He has a "turn in"—whatever that is—at a station called Haal Ui, so we're heading there next. He's tinkering with generated navigation paths, trying to determine which one is the most cost-efficient for fueling and won't take us near danger.

Me, I think he's just wasting time. It's a comfort thing, like Bethiah with her weapons. I understand that, and I head off to try and do my own thing. Unfortunately, I don't have a lot of memories of "my own thing," so I mostly wander the ship,

trying to figure out what to do with myself. I need to come up with a hobby, something that's mine and gives me pleasure. Something that I can do to bring value to my presence here.

I scratch at one of the rusty-looking panels in the hall and wonder just what that would be.

Mealtime is quiet, and both Bethiah and Jamef seem reluctant to leave their posts. I allow it, bringing them both bowls of noodles and chatting for a bit. We avoid all mentions of our triad and talk about stupid stuff, instead. Bethiah and I talk about Ruthann and wonder how she's doing with Ruth and Ruthie. Jamef chats a bit about a prior job he did where he chased a praxiian convict on the run for nearly a full year before the guy ran out of credits and the debt collectors handed him over with disgust.

I listen and I listen, and it occurs to me that I've paired up (triaded up?) with two loners that don't know how to be around other people for long periods of time. This might be difficult for both of them.

So I'm patient until bedtime. The ship's time is set to match the standard Homeworld time, which is just some arbitrary number that people in space use to keep on a similar schedule (or so Jamef tells me). I wait until it's late enough, and then I head to the bridge and hold out my hand. "Let's go to bed, Jamef."

He sits back in his chair, gazes at my hand with a small smile, and then nods. "Very well. I'll turn on autopilot." He taps a few buttons and then gets to his feet with a creak of metal and takes my hand.

His is big and comforting and pleasant, and I give his fingers a squeeze. I beam at him and then head across the ship to retrieve my other partner, who probably won't come along as easily. She's going to feel vulnerable, so I need to distract her.

The moment Jamef and I appear in the doorway to the weapons room, Bethiah gets a wary look on her face.

“Bethiah’s rule number one,” I remind her before she can make a comment. “You always take what you want, and I want all three of us to sleep together tonight, so don’t even try to argue with me.”

Her lips twitch with amusement and the wariness disappears from her face. “You’re turning into a bossy one, fluffit. I like it.”

“I thought you might. Come on.” I hold my other hand out to her.

“You’re really excited to sleep squeezed between a male full of metal and my tail, huh? In that tiny bed?” She shrugs and takes my hand. “Weird creature.”

Oh, do I get to sleep in the middle? I hadn’t dared to hope, but a warm flush of pleasure races through me at the realization. “Back home we called a tight fit like that ‘sleeping like sardines.’ They’re tiny fish in a canister that are lined up in rows.”

“Why?” Bethiah asks.

“Why what?”

“Why are the fish in rows in a canister?”

Oh. I chuckle. It seems obvious to me but maybe not to an alien. “You eat them. You pull one out and eat it whole.”

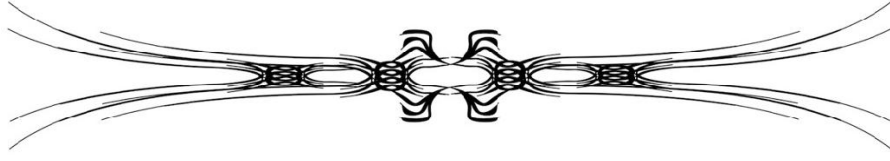
“Disgusting. If you want to tell me bedtime stories, maybe not gross ones, fluffit?” Bethiah makes a revolted sound. “Tell me sexy stories instead.”

“I don’t have any sexy stories,” I say with a chuckle.

“Not yet,” Jamef agrees, and that sends a thrill through me. It’s a bold statement, and yet I like it. I like it as much as his hand in mine.

“Not yet,” I agree, and for the first time in a few days, I’m excited for what the future holds.

THIRTY-FOUR





## JAMEF

The bed looks smaller than I remember. I should point out to the females that I don't truly need to sleep. That I can power down some of my cybernetics and part of my brain—almost like hibernation—and it works well enough. But us sleeping together in the same bed is part of the deal, and I can tell this means a lot to Dora.

So I don't say anything at all.

While Bethiah pretends to be busy fixing the latch on an overhead compartment, Dora fusses with the bedding. She lays out fresh blankets and the thin sheets, making and remaking the bed and smoothing out wrinkles. She's nervous, I can tell. I pull off one of my boots as I stand in the doorway, watching Bethiah's nonsense as much as Dora's, and both of them jump when my boot hits the floor.

All right, it's not just Dora that's nervous.

Strange that I'm not, I suppose. But Bethiah's twitchiness coupled with Dora's anxious responses brings out the protective side of me. The side that knows one of us needs to remain calm and in control before things spiral. "I can't stay all night," I comment as I pull off my other boot and then cross the small room to set them into their place. "I'll have to get up and check on the bridge, but that can wait a few hours."

"Coward," Bethiah teases.

I snort at that. No male in his right mind would abandon a bed with two attractive females in it, and she knows it. She's just being her usual spitfire self. "Just making sure we steer clear of trouble, that's all."

"Should we make a rule about what we wear in bed?" Dora asks. "Just so no one feels uncomfortable?"

"You mean you don't want us sleeping naked, fluffit?" Bethiah teases. She gives the latch a pat and then puts away

her tool, and I wonder if the damned thing was even broken. Probably not. She just needed something to occupy herself.

“I’m not opposed to naked,” Dora says, gazing at her and then at me. “But we all want to be on the same page.”

Bethiah looks over at me, a challenge in her eyes.

Before she can volunteer for us to all wear something scandalous, I shake my head. “Let’s keep all important parts covered while we go slow.”

Dora beams at me. “That sounds good.”

“In that case, have you seen my sleep tunic, fluffit?” Bethiah moves to the closet and shoves a few hanging tunics aside. “I don’t see it anywhere.”

The human hums, her expression thoughtful. “The laundry bots might have it. Let me go check.” She brushes past me in the narrow room with a little smile, and my pulse speeds up as I watch her go.

The moment Dora is out of the room, Bethiah moves over to stand in front of me. She grabs my jaw in a pincer hold, forcing me to look into her eyes. “You’re loving this, aren’t you?”

“Having two gorgeous females in my bed? Yes, I am.” I give her a challenging look. “Don’t pretend like it doesn’t excite you.”

“She’s going to get her feelings hurt,” Bethiah hisses.

“Not by me.”

With a scowl, she releases my jaw and crosses the room again, heading back over to the closet. She jerks off her boots and tosses them on the floor, then begins to undress fully. Dora’s not going to be the problem in this triad. It’s going to be Bethiah. She’s going to kick and scream all the way because she doesn’t know how to trust.

She’s just going to have to learn.

Dora races back into the room just as Bethiah pulls her tunic off and slings it to the floor as well. “Oh, you’re naked,”

Dora exclaims as she clutches a thin tunic to her chest.

“Like what you see?” Bethiah winks at her, and then tosses her head, giving me a challenging look. And even though I want to murder her half the time, I have to admit she’s an absolutely glorious female. The lines of her body are perfection, and I love that she’s muscled and strong. I even love that she’s annoyingly bold. It suits her.

Dora just giggles, her cheeks turning red. She shoves the sleep tunic at Bethiah and then heads into the adjoining lavatory. I pull off my tunic and belt, leaving my trou, and my senses pick up the sounds of rustling clothing from inside the lavatory. She brushes her teeth, and I decide that this is the most awkward part, all of us waiting to climb into bed together.

When she emerges, her cheeks are pink and she won’t look either of us in the eye. “Ready for bed?”

“I’ll be on the outside,” I volunteer. “Since I’ll have to get up before the two of you.” Plus I won’t really mind if my tail hangs off the edge of the narrow bed.

“Then I’ll take the inside,” Bethiah says, now wearing the thin tunic and nothing else. Her nipples are visible through the fabric, along with the scrawling lines of her tattoos against her skin. “Since the fluffit likes to sleep against my back, she can be in the middle.”

Dora just meekly nods.

Bethiah climbs into the bed, and I suspect she’s pushing her ass out deliberately, her tail swaying as she crawls over the mattress to the far side. She flops down on her side, facing the wall, and then pats her flank. “Come on, fluffit. We’re all going to have to sleep on our sides if we want to squeeze three bodies in here.”

With a chuckle, Dora does as she’s bid, fitting herself neatly against Bethiah’s back and sliding her arms around her. Now it’s down to me. I shove back any awkwardness I feel about the situation, about if my prosthetics might be uncomfortable against soft human skin or if I might

accidentally crush one of them. We're a triad. These things need to happen.

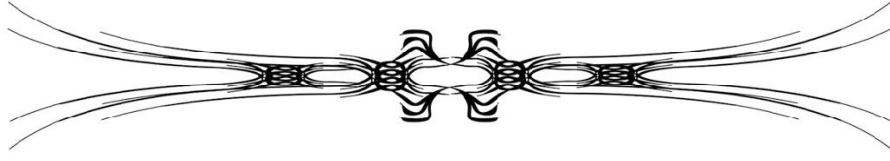
So I carefully slide myself into bed next to both of them. It's definitely a tight fit. There's no room for me unless I press myself fully against Dora's smaller frame, and she's shoved between us. We're a mixture of limbs and tails and arms that have nowhere to go, and I hold myself stiff, not wanting to disturb.

Dora takes my arm and wraps it around her waist. "Relax, Jamef," she whispers, patting my hand before putting hers back on Bethiah's waist.

Relax. Sure. As if my cock isn't already turning hard in my trou, nestled up against Dora's rounded backside, and my hand practically rubbing up against the base of Bethiah's tail.

Gonna be a long night.

THIRTY-FIVE



## BETHIAH

This should be more uncomfortable than it is.

My face is practically shoved against the wall, and Dora's small, warm body is plastered against my backside. Jamef's heavy hand brushes against the small of my back, and I know he's got his arm around the human. But there's something comforting about the squeeze of all three of us in bed together. The heat and warmth of three bodies joined in a common task. It feels...cozy.

I should keffing hate cozy.

But I don't. I think I'm getting soft. Dora was the start of it, and Jamef is going to finish me off. By the time they're done breaking me down, I'm just going to be one big, overcooked noodle, limp and useless.

I should get up. I should tell them I can't sleep with them both breathing on me and ruin the moment. Make them both unhappy with me so we all realize this dumb idea isn't going to work. That I'm not the right person for one person to put their trust in, much less two. If I was smart, I'd get up right now and activate my ship overrides. Take the keffing thing over and toss them both in the holding cell for making me try to be soft when I'm not.

I don't get up, though. I'm already weak. Already ruined.

"I think she's asleep," Jamef whispers, tapping a finger against my back.

Is she? I turn my head slightly, mindful of my horns, and try to peer at the human clutching my waist. Dora's breath fans against my back, and sure enough, her breathing seems even and relaxed. Unbothered. "She does sleep like the dead," I admit, keeping my voice low so as not to wake her. "I could probably thrash her with my tail and she wouldn't rouse."

"She's been worried."

There's affection in his voice, and I'm a little jealous it's not for me alone. But he's not wrong. Dora has been anxious. I keep thinking of the utter relief on her face when we agreed to this, and I knew in that moment she'd been worried that with Jamef in the picture, I'd send her away. That she wouldn't be needed anymore.

My stupid heart squeezes painfully again. "Humans are fragile."

"She's got both of us looking out for her, though," Jamef murmurs, misunderstanding me. "We can teach her how to defend herself. No need for prosthetics."

It's not a bad idea, though I'd still feel better if Dora had a nice hand-cannon instead of five wimpy fingers. "I'll start showing her some basic moves tomorrow."

"Be gentle with her."

"I'm *always* gentle."

"No, you aren't."

"I'm not getting out of this bed to murder you for not letting me sleep, am I? That's pretty keffing gentle if you ask me."

He doesn't laugh. His finger pokes me in the base of my spine, though, right next to my tail, and I twitch despite myself. "You're not murdering me because it'd upset Dora and you don't like it when she cries."

Damn it. He's right, and I hate that he's right. "Shut up."

"I think you just hate that you're no longer in control of the situation," he muses. "Whether you like it or not, this sweet little human has us dancing to her tune. She's the one in charge now and we're just going to have to follow her lead." His fingers skim over my flank, daringly near my tail. "You're just fussy because you like it and you don't want to like it."

"I want a bigger bed is what I want," I mutter. "So I don't have to hear your nattering."

He laughs, and then that bastard pinches my backside. If Dora weren't sleeping so peacefully between the two of us, I'd

let him have it. As it is, I just growl.

“Mmm,” Dora whimpers, and snuggles closer to me.

“Go back to sleep,” I tell her, patting her hand. “It’s just a bad dream, fluffit. We’re here.”

It’s quiet for a long moment, and then Dora’s breathing settles down. I hate that she still has nightmares. I know humans aren’t treated well, and I can only imagine what kinds of horrors are in a clone’s memories. Jamef’s right, though. This soft, ridiculous human has both of us wrapped around her finger.

“So what now?” I ask Jamef when I’m positive Dora is asleep again. I’m trying to ignore the hand on my flank again, because it both arouses and irritates me...kinda like Jamef himself.

“Now we sleep?”

“No, you bucket of bolts. What now that we’re a triad? What now that we’re no longer chasing each other across the galaxy?”

And what now that we can’t hide from our feelings anymore?

His laughter is soft, and his hand pets my hip. “First, I think we get a bigger bed. Maybe we get an add-on for the ship. Get her reworked and add a few chambers, since there’s three of us living here now. And then I suppose we go back to work.”

Hmm. Not the most romantic of lists. I don’t know that any of that helps our triad out in the emotions department. “Where are we getting a bed and ship enhancements? Station?”

“I know a male,” he says, his tone vague.

“My cousin can do it for us.”

“I know someone,” he says again. “He’s not far from our current location. Lives on a moon-base with his wives. He’ll do a good job and keep his mouth shut.”



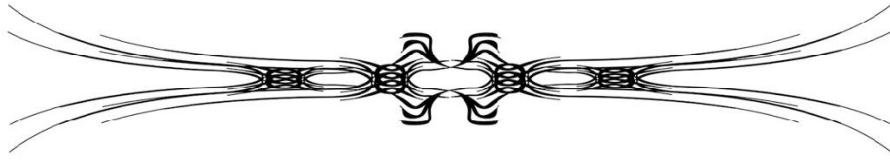
“Great.” I consider this and then add, “And we should all three go on a date, too.”

“A date?”

“A date,” I repeat, smug at how rattled he sounds. “So we can work on the romance just like the ship.”

He shuts up after that, and I eventually drift off to sleep.

THIRTY-SIX



## DORA

“A date?” I echo Jamef’s words the next morning in the mess hall. “Really?”

He nods. “Bethiah said we should have one.”

*Bethiah* did? I’m a little startled to hear that. It doesn’t sound like something that would come out of Bethiah’s mouth. She’s been a little snarly since we woke up, and I suspect it’s because she must have slept weird or something. We were kinda crammed in the bed. But...it was nice. I liked being squeezed between them. I liked that I could feel both of their bodies pressed up against mine. I slept really well, too.

But now I’m cleaning up the mess hall (Bethiah apparently had breakfast and made a mess) and considering making lunch for both of them, and Jamef threw this new situation at me. A date. I mean, it makes sense. People date. We’ve barely even kissed and yet we’re a triad. I feel like a date is something we should do. “What kind of a date?”

“You tell me, sweetheart.” Jamef’s mouth quirks with amusement. “It’s a human tradition, isn’t it?”

Is it? I suspect his people date too. Maybe they’re just not as official about that sort of thing. “Well, I guess we could have a nice dinner together.” The more I think about the idea, the more I like it. “We could do it tonight, even.”

He frowns. “We don’t have to go somewhere for the date?”

“Not at all. We can enjoy ourselves here.” I smile at Jamef, my mind racing. “We can have a nice dinner together, maybe open a bottle of wine —”

“Wine?”

“Um, an alcoholic beverage? Something smooth and tasty and a little special that you have with a dinner?”

He grunts. “I’m sure there’s something in the stores. So... tonight?”

“Tonight,” I agree, beaming. “Dress nicely to impress your women.”

Jamef looks down at his tunic and trou. They’re a dark gray shade. I’m pretty sure most of his clothes are of the exact same make, and the confusion on his face is adorable. I giggle and impulsively step forward, crooking a finger at him.

When he leans in, I reach up and kiss his cheek. “Tonight,” I remind him. “Okay?”

He nods, his tail flicking, but there’s a smile on his hard mouth. He gazes down at me and I wonder if he’s going to kiss me back, but he only pats my head like a child. That makes my mood sour.



“**A** date tonight?” Bethiah groans. “On the ship?” She shakes her head, then lowers the mask she has over her face, turning on the blowtorch-like tool she’s holding. I found her in the hold, hard at work at a very dangerous-looking workbench covered with all kinds of strange things, most of which look like weapons. “We need to save the good stuff for the next station. And besides, I’m busy today.”

Ugh. She’s such a pain in the ass sometimes. “You don’t look busy. You look like you’re playing with your guns again.”

“*Playing with my guns?*” She emphasizes the words as if she’s offended. Bethiah turns off the tool again, setting it down, and then turns to face me once more. “I’ll have you know that I’m working on a blaster for a human-sized hand. One that only works for you, you needy creature.”

Oh. I beam at her. “Well in that case, thank you. But we still have a date *tonight*.”

“No thanks.”

“Bethiah! This was your idea!”

“Yeah but...” She shrugs, not looking at me. “I thought we’d have time. Aren’t we taking things slow?”

Oh my god. Sometimes she’s so damned stressful. “It’s just a date. Don’t you want to get to know me and Jamef better?”

She snorts. “I know plenty about both of you, thank you.”

I know about her, too. I know she gets skittish when emotions come into play. I know she tries to push everyone away the moment she feels the slightest bit vulnerable. I also know she pretends to be tougher than she really is. So I move toward her, blinking up at the tall alien woman and hoping I look sad and wistful. “It would mean a lot to me if we spent this bonding time together.”

“You don’t want to bond to me, fluffit.”

I sigh dramatically. “I guess it’ll just be me and Jamef, then.”

“You and Jamef what?”

“Having the date tonight. If you’re too busy. He’s already agreed to it and I’m making a nice dinner and we’re going to have wine and conversation and get to know each other. And there will be more kissing.” I’m totally making up the last part, but I figure if that doesn’t draw her in, nothing will.

Bethiah frowns. “You guys aren’t supposed to kiss without me.”

“Without you *knowing*,” I correct and then smile sweetly. “You know about it, so I don’t see the problem.”

She eyes me, and then her lips curve into a smirk. “You’re a dangerous woman, fluffit. Fine, I’ll be there, but I won’t like it.”

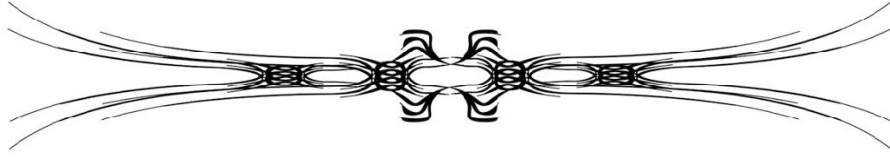
“You’ll like it,” I tell her. And when I gesture for her to come close, she rolls her eyes. I kiss her on the cheek anyhow, and she looks flustered, muttering about how she needs to focus on her work.

As I walk away, it occurs to me that both Bethiah and Jamef don't know how to respond to affection. Jeez. Jamef acts like he's afraid he's going to break me, and Bethiah acts like a damn porcupine the moment she thinks someone is getting close. And that was just a silly kiss on the cheek. No one even tried to cop a feel last night.

I said I wanted to go slow. I didn't realize it was going to be "glacial creep" slow. It's growing clear to me that if I want this triad to move forward, I'm going to have to be the one encouraging things along.

Now to find some wine to loosen inhibitions, because I intend for this date to be effective. I'd better be thoroughly kissed by the end of this damn thing.

THIRTY-SEVEN



## BETHIAH

I can't believe I'm dressing up to have dinner on my own ship. It seems like the height of foolishness, but Dora gave me that pleading look and that was all it took for me to do as she wants. I might talk a big game but I'm still keffing weak to a pair of pretty human eyes. I eye my reflection in the mirror. If she wants me dressed up, I'm going to be irresistible. I've pulled my hair—intertwined braids and all—into a high ponytail between my horns, and wrapped the casing of each horn with long, glimmering chains that catch the light. My top is little more than a circle of silk with a neckline that goes almost to my navel and drapes strategically over my breasts. One wrong move and I'll be tits out, but I anticipate being tits out anyhow, even if it's just to make Dora blush.

Jamef will blush too. I like that thought. I smooth my hands down my tightest pair of trou, add an eye-catching cuff to the end of my tail, and decide to leave my feet bare. That'll be even more distracting than my nearly bare torso, I suspect. They're going to expect me to pull out all the stops when it comes to my clothing, just because of who I am, but the bare feet will throw them off. I like being able to confuse. It's fun.

I slick a bit of sweet-tasting gloss to my mouth to make it shiny, then head out to meet the others in my so-called triad at the aforementioned time. This whole triad thing still feels like a huge mistake, but I can't find it in me to break it off. If Dora wants to try this, I need to be there to supervise so that she doesn't get her heart broken. Even if I'm a little mean to her, I still feel protective. She's mine.

Until she keffs off and leaves, of course. But I'll cross that asteroid belt when I get there.

To my surprise, Dora is already dressed up the moment I enter the mess hall. She wears a plain tunic belted at the waist, which reminds me that she needs a better wardrobe. Her hair is smooth and freshly washed, and her cheeks glow with healthy



pink. The room is ready, too. She has the lights dimmed to a low, sultry shade, and there's a cloth on the lone, beat-up table. Three chairs are parked in front of it, and places are set. There's a bottle of something that looks expensive and as I enter, her face brightens. "You came."

"Of course I came. I said I would." I huff as if I'm offended, even though I'd considered backing out. "Where's Jamef?"

"He's on his way." She eyes me, smiling. "You're so beautiful."

A thousand tart answers spring up, but it feels wrong to slap her down when she's trying to be sweet. "I know," I say, moving to her side. "And you need a better wardrobe. Was this all you had, fluffit?" When she nods, I tsk. "We're going to steal some of Jamef's credits and go shopping at the next station we visit."

And because she looks so sweet and cute, I lean down and press an affectionate kiss to her forehead, my hand on the back of her neck.

Dora practically preens at the gesture, beaming up at me. "I'd love that."

"You don't have to steal my credits," calls a voice behind us. "I'll happily give them over to my *mates*."

I turn to look at Jamef, even as Dora loops an arm around my waist. He's not very dressed up, either. His short hair is neat and clean, and the smudges removed from the plating on his horns, but other than that, he's wearing the same tight-fitting trou and tunic in gray that he always does. It only highlights just how much of him is cybernetic and a replacement, but I find that sexy. I like that even though the universe tries to bring him down, he still keeps going.

I won't tell him that, though. I just give him a prejudiced look. "Seems that Dora isn't the only one that needs to go shopping. Why am I not surprised that this is all you've got?"

He looks down at his tunic, touching it with a metal hand. "This is brand new."

“It looks just like your last one,” I comment dryly. And because he won’t be expecting it, I saunter over to him and give him a platonic kiss, just like Dora. It’s on the cheek instead of the brow, but the result is the same. He looks utterly stunned.

Clearly no one expects a sweet Bethiah at dinner. That makes me all the more determined to be as charming as can be, just so they’re off-guard.

“Well, Dora, my fluffit,” I say as I turn away from Jamef. “You set this up. How do you want this to go?”

She clasps her hands together, looking delighted. “I made a casserole.”

“A what?” Jamef asks. He puts a hand on the small of my back—and I don’t hate it—and pulls out my chair. He moves to Dora’s side, leans down to kiss her cheek, and then pulls her chair out as well.

“It’s a human dish with noodles and a sauce, and you bake it,” she says enthusiastically. “I took some of your dried veg and added them to it, but I skipped the meat since I wasn’t sure if you both ate it or not.” She sits down and picks up the bottle and starts to pour a bit into the first glass. “And this drink you suggested smells heavenly, Jamef.”

I take one of the glasses and smell the contents. It’s a fermented fruit drink that’s popular in a lot of the station slums. Smells great, though, and I take a sip. Strong, too.

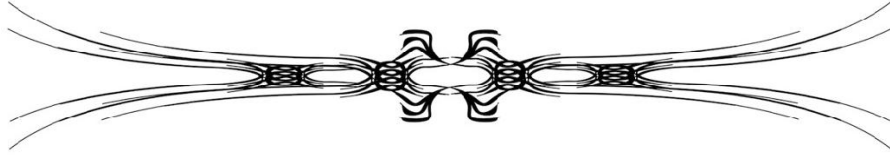
“Should we do a toast?” Dora asks, handing a glass to Jamef and then taking one for herself. “To us?”

“To us,” I agree, holding up my drink when she does.

Jamef’s eyeing me as if he doesn’t trust my agreeability, which just makes me smile wider.

I take another sip and then set it down and beam at Dora. “Shall we eat? I’m starving.”

THIRTY-EIGHT



## JAMEF

**B**ethiah is being sweet and accommodating at dinner, chatting with Dora about the blaster she's resizing for her and the weapon lessons she intends to give her. She eats the horrendous casserole and sips her drink, acting like she's having a wonderful time on our "date."

I don't trust it.

I know Bethiah put her foot down about the date being on ship. I should have known that suggesting a date was another stall tactic on Bethiah's behalf. She could wait until we were at the next station, and then stall again because they were too busy, or it wasn't safe, or some other excuse. Knowing Bethiah, the date would have never happened, but Dora took over and we're having it now.

Dora's more crafty than I give her credit for. Behind that sweet expression is a core of steel, and it makes me smile as I lift my drink to my lips.

"Do you like dinner?" Dora asks me, her smile wide. "You're barely eating."

Under the table, Bethiah gives my booted foot a kick with her bare one, though her smile remains. "It's delicious, fluffit."

I actually don't like the dinner. The noodles have a strange consistency and an even stranger sauce on them. But Dora's looking at me for encouragement and it's clear Bethiah wants me to pretend it's amazing. So I take a bite, forcing myself to chew. "Very nutritious."

"It's a human thing, I think. Casserole." She toys with her eating sticks, poking at the noodles. "I've never seen it out here, but my memories might be failing me. You guys are more into soup, right?"

"We like it because you made it, fluffit. Are you enjoying your date?" Bethiah's tone turns sultry.

Dora gives us a shy smile. “I’m liking that we have a chance to get to know each other better. You’re both a little quieter than I expected, though.”

Bethiah kicks me under the table again.

Am I supposed to come up with something to say? A topic for discussion? My mind goes blank. I’m not used to entertaining. I keep to myself, and my interactions with people tend to be me lurking in the background, watching them go about their lives. “Ah...perhaps you should pick the topic, sweetheart. Bethiah and I are unfamiliar with dating.”

Dora takes a sip of her drink, and her face grows flushed. The fruit brew is rather potent, but maybe that’s part of the dating experience? I just hope she doesn’t get too drunk too fast. “I have a better idea,” Dora tells me. “Let’s play a game.”

“A game, you say?” Bethiah asks. “What sort of game?”

The human taps her lip with her fingers, thinking. “We could play a drinking game?”

I shake my head. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea. Bethiah can’t hold her drink.”

Bethiah snorts, but she doesn’t kick me under the table. Instead, she reaches out and touches Dora’s hand. “Can we play something that doesn’t involve drinks?”

“We could play truth or dare.” Dora takes another drink and then frowns to herself. “Except I know how this is going to go. Jamef is gonna be truth every time and Bethiah will be dare.”

“Maybe I’ll pick something different if you tell me how the game is played,” I say, using the excuse to push my uneaten food aside. “Tell us the rules.”

She does, draining her drink. It’s a simple game. One is posed a question and must choose whether or not to employ truth to answer or do a dare. I’m not entirely sure there are consequences, but just thinking about the game makes Dora’s face flush with excitement.

Seeing her excitement edges mine on. “Let us play, then.”

“Very well. I’ll start.” Dora tosses her yellow hair back and gives me a confident look. “Jamef, truth or dare?”

“Now that we know the rules, I agree with you, fluffit,” Bethiah says slyly. “He’s going to pick truth, isn’t he?”

And she nudges my leg with her bare foot.

I shift in my seat, my body pricking with attention. Her little nudges all night—as if we’re a team of some kind—is rousing my lust. Between that and the slip of a tunic she’s wearing, it’s clear Bethiah came out tonight to seduce. I wonder if it’s for my benefit or for Dora’s.

“Well?” Dora asks, leaning towards me. Her eyes are bright with anticipation, her smile wide.

Right. “Truth.”

“Ha,” Bethiah gloats. “I knew it.” She scoots her chair closer to Dora and gives her a smug look. “I called it, didn’t I?”

Dora giggles, her gaze darting between us. “Jamef is reliable,” she says in a sweet voice. “I don’t think that’s a bad thing.”

Her praise feels...good. Which is stupid. I mostly picked “truth” because I don’t trust Bethiah with a dare, not the way her foot is playing against the inside of my leg. But I like Dora’s interpretation of me.

I wait as Dora taps her lip again. “I know. Okay, since you picked truth, you have to answer truthfully. You *have* to.” Her tone, slightly tipsy, has an ominous edge to it that makes me want to smile. “Now,” she continues. “you must tell us your favorite thing about each of us.”

Ugh.

It’s not that I don’t have things I like about them. It’s that I don’t like leaving myself vulnerable. But at Bethiah’s smug look and Dora’s expectant one, it’s clear that this is what this game is about—pushing boundaries. I rub my jaw and think about my answer for a moment. “I guess I’d say that my favorite thing about Dora is her sweetness —”

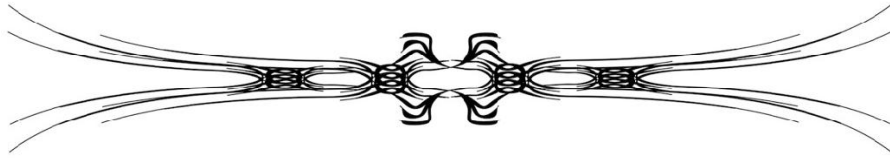
“No, no,” Dora interrupts. “Your favorite physical thing about me.” And she giggles, drunkenly squeezing her breasts. “It’s my tits, isn’t it? You can tell me.”

I can feel the heat on my face creeping up to my horns.

Bethiah leans in with great interest. “Well don’t just sit there, Jamef. Go on.”

Kef me.

THIRTY-NINE





## DORA

**T**his date is going better than I thought.

I finish my drink, licking the rim of my cup. It's strong stuff, and I'm probably more than a little tipsy. I figure that's fine. If I need a bit of liquid courage to get me to steer this date, I'm all for it. I reach for the carafe of fruit wine as Jamef goes quiet, staring at his hands. Bethiah keeps looking at him expectantly, waiting for him to answer what he likes best about me, physically.

I really didn't think they'd want to play my silly game.

This. Is. Awesome.

"Are you shy?" Bethiah asks him in a sweet voice. "You can tell us. We're your mates, remember?"

"Here," I say, and lean forward to refill his drink...except it's almost full. Damn it, am I the only one drinking? "I bet it's my hair."

He makes a sound in his throat and glances up at me. Jamef shifts in his seat, and then his gaze moves over my face, my body. "I like how soft you are," he says in a low voice. "How pettable."

Oh. I flush with heat, because that's a very good answer.

"Mmm, she is really pettable," Bethiah agrees in a sultry tone that makes me squirm. "Now do me. What do you like best about me?"

"That's easier. It's your eyes. They're always full of wickedness." He grins.

She chuckles, delighted by this answer. I am, too. He's not wrong. Bethiah is always up to something. It makes her both terrifying and fascinating.

"Good answers," I tell Jamef. "Now it's your turn. Ask one of us to truth or dare."

He gazes at Bethiah thoughtfully, then turns to me. “You, sweetheart. You want truth or dare?”

It’s nice to be the center of attention. I want to preen with delight. I consider for a moment and then take another sip of fruit wine. “Truth.”

I’m not quite ready for a dare. Not when I don’t know what direction things will head.

“Booring,” Bethiah declares.

“Quiet, you,” Jamef says, and focuses his gaze on me. “Truth, then. Tell us if you have any memories of sexual experiences.”

“Oh, I changed my mind.” Bethiah puts her chin on her palm and leans towards me, suddenly all interest. “Go on, fluffit. Tell us all the filthy details.”

I bite back a giggle. I’m a little surprised that Jamef is asking such a pointed question, but at the same time, it makes sense. They need to know my sexual experience so we know how far to go, right? So in that way, it makes perfect sense that Jamef would ask. Even now, he’s looking out for me. I suspect if I said that I had zero experience and didn’t know what a penis was, this game would get real innocent real fast.

But I’m pretty sure I’m not a saint. “I have some memories, but they’re really vague. Mostly flashes of images here and there. I don’t know if Clone Dora is a virgin, but I’ve had sex in the past. I know what I’m doing.”

“Well thank kef for that,” Bethiah says dryly.

I close my eyes and try to get specifics from my hodgepodge of memories. They’re mostly feelings, these memories, of warm bodies pressed together, and hands on skin. Of fingers diving under waistlines to find what lies beneath, and hot mouths exploring and tasting. Of lying in bed afterward, replete. I don’t see faces, but it doesn’t matter. That wasn’t even really me, was it? I’m a new person, just grown with the memories of someone else who lived in an entirely different place. “Not a virgin,” I say again. “You don’t have to worry about me. I know what I like.”

Jamef's eyes narrow with interest. He tilts his head as he regards me. "And what is it you like, sweetheart?"

"That's another question, isn't it?" I feel brave taunting him, giving a teasing smile and then drinking from my cup as if my heart isn't fluttering like a trapped bird.

"You didn't ask me my experience," Bethiah taunts.

Jamef just smirks. "We don't have all day."

I gasp, but Bethiah hoots with amusement. I guess she doesn't mind that he knows she's been around. Maybe alien morals are different in that aspect. Back home that'd be offensive, but Bethiah clearly likes the taunting jab. "I like that she's experienced," I say, giving Bethiah a loyal look. "It makes me feel safe with her. Like she's in control when we kiss."

She turns toward me, a thoughtful expression on her face, as if my answer surprises her. Her lips curl into a smile and she reaches over and grabs my cup and takes a sip, drinking from the same spot that I did. "You really are the sweetest thing, fluffit."

Her words make me blush with pleasure.

"Now it's your turn, I suppose." Bethiah hands my cup back. "You get to ask."

I beam at her. "Truth or dare, Bethiah."

"Dare," she scoffs. "Of course it's dare. We'll be here all night talking about our feelings if I leave it up to you two."

I think for a moment, my drunken mind throwing all kinds of wild scenarios out into the open. Bethiah nudges her cup toward me and I fill it with more fruit wine, deciding that I'm going to go big. "I dare you...to make Jamef come."

Jamef sucks in a breath.

Bethiah grins widely. "You don't say."

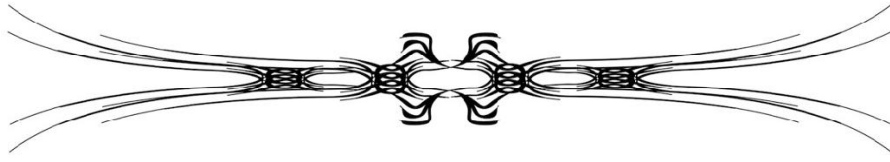
"I do say. And I get to watch." I lift my chin, liking this more and more. "We're a triad, right? And you're attracted to

him. And I'm attracted to both of you. So I dare you to make him come. Right here. Right now."

It's too much too soon. I know it is. I should be daring her to kiss him, or to unbutton something (except she's not wearing any buttons). Something tame and playful.

But Bethiah just gets to her feet and tosses her hair. "Now we're getting somewhere."

FORTY



## JAMEF

I watch Bethiah as she approaches, thinking this is how prey feels just before it's downed by the predator. She's got a little smile playing on her lips and I can see her mind working. Either she's trying to figure out how to get out of this or she's working out how best to make me suffer. It's not going to be straightforward touching with Bethiah. Never is. We've flirted and teased in the past, but we've never gone so far as to make each other come.

An orgasm feels like a commitment, and I know I'm not the only one that thinks that way.

But I know Bethiah loves a game and a challenge, so I lift my chin, daring her to do just as she's commanded. I can smell Dora's excitement in the air, her sped-up heart rate registering on my ocular monitor. She's excited for this, and I have to admit, her anticipation is fueling mine...along with the sultry look Bethiah is sending my way.

Most males count themselves lucky to get one mate. I get two. How the kef did I get so fortunate?

Bethiah approaches me with a contemplative look, then looms over me in my chair. She eyes the table and then nudges it with her hip. "We need to move this."

"I'll help," Dora says, getting to her feet.

"Yes you will," Bethiah purrs, and my sac tightens in anticipation. What is she referring to? I watch, frozen in my seat, as the two females move the table out of the way. Instead of turning to me where I sit, my cock hard in my trou, Bethiah turns to Dora and touches her chin. "You're not too drunk to play, are you, fluffit?"

Dora blinks in confusion. "It's Jamef's turn —"

"I mean in general. I don't want to play naughty games if one of us is too sloshed to enjoy it."

“Oh.” The human smiles up at Bethiah. “No, I’m good. Just drunk enough to feel loose and relaxed.”

“Excellent.”

I wait for them to kiss, but Bethiah just turns back to me. Well kef, that’s a bit disappointing. I enjoy watching the females kiss...probably a little too much. The female mesakkah turns back to me and then straddles me in the chair, her long legs slipping over my hips. She grins down at me and winks and then reaches for the belt to my trou.

“Any preferences as to how you come?” she asks in a light voice.

As if I can think right now. Her fingers brush over the auto-fastener at my belt and then she rubs the bulge in my trou. “Preferences?”

She nods. “Fast? Slow? Hard? Soft? Anything you don’t like having touched?”

“I’m a keffing male. I like all of it.”

Bethiah chuckles. “No surprise there.”

“I’m an unsurprising sort,” I rasp. When she doesn’t get up off my lap after my trou are undone, I taunt her. “Are you just gonna sit on me all night, then?”

“Not at all.” She grins and stands, still straddling me, and then slowly slinks backward, keeping her gaze on my face. Her hands move to my shoulders and then down my chest, and then she drops to her knees between my spread thighs. With a sly smile on her face, she bites one side of my unfastened trou and pulls the fabric away from my body, freeing my cock. It practically springs forward, brushing against her nose, and she lets out a throaty laugh that makes my tail twitch. “Look at all this metal. Did you know this was here, fluffit?”

“Yes,” Dora breathes, and I notice she’s moved closer, so she can have an unimpeded view. “I watched him shower back at his apartment on the station.”

“Such a naughty fluffit,” Bethiah coos, her fingers gripping my thighs tightly. She gives me another confident

smile, and to my shock, leans in and takes one of my piercings between her teeth, tugging on it. The one she teases is on the head of my cock and she gives me another one of those exciting, coy looks as she nips it and then releases.

I let out a ragged breath.

“Have you ever touched one of these, Dora?” Bethiah asks, her hand moving to my shaft. She tugs on another piercing, this one on the underside of my cock, decorating one of the thick ridges.

“A piercing?” Dora’s voice sounds dreamy, and she moves even closer to Bethiah, as if drawn. I’m fascinated at the interplay between the two of them as they discuss me like I’m a piece of meat. I should keffing hate it.

I’m hard as a rock.

“A mesakkah cock,” Bethiah says. “Jamef has a rather lovely one, and he’s decorated it for us. So thoughtful.” She wraps her fingers around the base of my cock and squeezes, that wicked grin on her face. “He’s even made a bit of pre-cum for us. I think he likes this.”

“How can I not?” I manage, still clutching the arms of my chair. It feels as if I’m going to fall apart if I let go, so I hold onto it for dear life. This game is going to destroy me...and I’ll die happily. Normally I’m content to let Bethiah tease me and play her games, positive that if I wait her out, she’ll come sweetly into my arms. Today, though...

Today I think I might die if she doesn’t work my cock with that strong hand of hers.

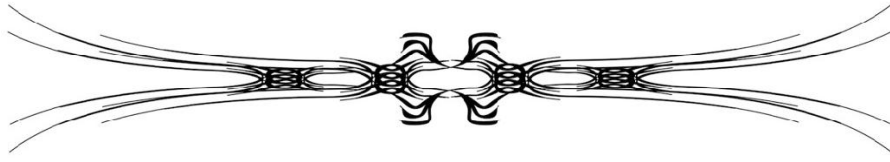
“I’ve never touched one, no,” Dora finally answers. She kneels beside my leg, next to Bethiah, and her fascinated gaze is on my lap. I imagine her breath on my skin, her little sounds of approval as Bethiah works my cock with her hand, and I groan, more pre-cum dripping from my cockhead.

“Then give me your hand, fluffit, and we’ll remedy that,” Bethiah tells her.

I suck in a sharp breath as Bethiah’s devious plan comes to light.



FORTY-ONE



## DORA

Grasping at Bethiah's suggestion, I flick a glance to Jamef's face. Does he want my touch? His eyes are narrow, his hands tight on the chair, and it's hard to tell. His cock is hard and the head slick with pre-cum, but that's because of Bethiah's touch. He might not want me to participate. "It's your dare," I remind her. "I'm not sure —"

Bethiah clicks her tongue against her teeth. "You said to make him come, fluffit. You didn't say I had to do it." She turns toward Jamef. "Unless you object?"

I hold my breath.

"No objection," he rasps. "I'm yours...both of you." And he leans back a bit more, his cock thrusting prominently into the air.

Heat pulses between my thighs. I sidle closer to her, aching. My nipples feel tight and achy, and if I press my legs together, I can feel how wet and slick my pussy is. I give Bethiah a needy look as she takes my hand in hers, smiles at me, and then places my fingers against the head of Jamef's cock.

The breath hisses from his throat.

I look up at him, startled.

"Just ignore him," Bethiah tells me. "He's determined to be noisy and distract us."

A tight breath huffs from Jamef. "No...no distractions. Please keep going."

She winks at me and then takes my forefinger, drawing little circles in the pre-cum coating the head of his cock. "He's a big boy, our mate," she says in that soft, seductive tone of hers. "The head of him is nice and thick, but the ridges are the best. Look at how prominent they are." She guides my finger down the underside of his shaft, trailing along a vein.

Like a doll, I let her move my hand, because I'm fascinated by this. I love his reactions, and I love her guidance. It's like she knows just how to drive him absolutely crazy and she's relishing it. I love her power over him...and me.

"Feel the piercings," Bethiah tells me, moving my fingertip over each one. "Those feel so good deep inside. He's going to make you come so hard when he finally claims you."

"What about you?" I ask, breathless.

Her expression is startled for a moment, and then she smiles wider. "Me, too." She presses her palm to the back of my hand and slides my fingers lower. "Grip him." When I do, she tsks. "We can't give our mate a dry rub. That won't do, will it?"

Jamef groans again, his gaze utterly fixed on us.

"No," I say softly. "We should get him wet. Slick. So it feels good."

"Absolutely." Bethiah takes my hand and lifts it to her mouth, and then sucks on my fingers, her gaze on me.

I whimper, my pulse throbbing right at my clit.

"Lick her hand," Jamef whispers, the first thing he's said in what feels like forever. I whimper again as Bethiah drags her tongue—every ridge sliding over my skin—down my palm. She does it again, and then again, and then looks over at Jamef.

He nods.

With that, Bethiah takes my hand in hers again and wraps my fingers around the base of his cock. She drags my hand up his shaft with excruciatingly slow motion, letting me feel each ridge and each piercing against my grip, and then tightens just a little when we reach the head of his cock.

I love that Jamef's breath catches as we do, and when Bethiah has me stroke him again, he groans low. I'm excited by this, fascinated by the fact that it's all three of us in action. All three of us joined in this together for one common goal. "I

dare you to put your mouth on him,” I tell Bethiah. “Suck on the tip while I stroke him.”

Her eyes flare as she looks at me, and it’s like I’ve caught her by surprise. Her gaze flicks to Jamef as if for approval, but his head is tilted back, his eyes closed, as if he’s doing his best to make this last and he’s worried it won’t.

“Pushy fluffit,” she tells me, but then guides my hand in another stroke and leans over his cock. The head of him disappears into her mouth and I don’t know who gasps louder, me or Jamef. She makes a loud, wet sucking sound and her tongue grazes my fingers as I work his shaft faster.

I watch her, fascinated, as she tongues the head of him as if he’s an ice-cream cone. She’s beautiful bent over him, and I can’t resist touching her with my other hand, brushing down her bare shoulder and over her back. “Touch her, Jamef,” I whisper. “Isn’t she pretty?”

“Keffing beautiful,” he groans, and his hand goes to the top of her head, right between her horns.

She stiffens.

Oh no. I worry she’s going to flee, or worse, say something to kill the mood. Bethiah doesn’t like to be uncomfortable, or vulnerable. “I dare you to let him come in your mouth,” I tell her. “Let him do that and I’ll kiss you.”

Jamef groans, his metal hand suddenly stealing down to cover mine. He pumps his cock frantically using my grip, even as Bethiah continues to suck the head of him. We’re joined in this, and she doesn’t pull away, even when he groans out her name and white erupts against the corners of her mouth. She swallows as he jerks, using me and my hand, and it’s the most obscene and fascinating thing I’ve ever seen.

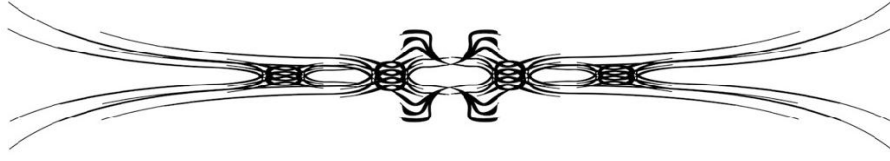
When Bethiah lifts her head, she looks right at me and licks her lips. It’s a dare if I’ve ever seen one, no words necessary. With a moan, I fling my arms around her neck and kiss her soft, wet mouth. She tastes like him, and I’m both appalled and aroused when her tongue teases mine.

So much for going slow.

Bethiah breaks the kiss, holding me against her, and I realize dimly that we're both pressed up against Jamef's knees in our embrace. My dazed gaze moves back and forth between the two of them.

And she gives me a wicked, wicked smile. "I believe it's my turn, fluffit."

FORTY-TWO



## BETHIAH

I'm so keffing weak.

I tell myself that I'm not going to get involved in this whole triad thing. That I'll do as little as possible for it and let it limp along until its natural death. Then, the moment someone throws a dare my way, I'm suddenly sucking on Jamef's cock and kissing Dora with his taste in my mouth... and I'm having fun.

So. Weak.

I'll worry about the consequences tomorrow. For now, Dora's watching me with anticipation-glazed eyes, and Jamef's rubbing my bare shoulder with his thumb. I'm in control of this little party at the moment. And I could end this right now. Just declare that we're done and kill the mood. That we've pushed too far and comfort zones have been obliterated. Mine certainly have been. I've licked human pussy in the past but never a male's cock. It was a new experience for me, and surprisingly fun. There's a heady sense of power, even though your head is in another person's lap. You're still in control despite everything because that other person desperately does *not* want you to stop.

And Dora participating just brought the fun up to another notch.

I eye her right now, the flushed cheeks, the rapid breathing, and I lean against Jamef's thigh. He's still in his seat, but his hand is stroking my arm, and I like that he's there, being supportive and solid. "So, Dora...truth or dare?"

She practically trembles, thinking of her answer, and then shyly says, "Truth."

I want to give her a hard time, to tease that she's wimping out, but Jamef lightly taps his thumb on my arm, and it makes me realize that Dora picking truth is probably a good thing. It allows me to ask the hard question that needs to be asked right

now. “All right then, fluffit. Tell me the truth—are we outside of your comfort zone? There’s no wrong answer. Just speak honestly.”

“No. I want to keep going.” Dora gives me a shy smile and slides a little closer to Jamef’s other leg, leaning against him. He reaches down and buries his fingers in her bright yellow hair, petting her affectionately, and she practically preens at the touch. I like that he’s reassuring her with a touch, but I also want to pout, because no one ever pets me.

“You tell us if we go too far, sweetheart,” Jamef says, stroking her hair. “Do you need a signal or a word that will let us know if you’re feeling overwhelmed?”

“We can safe word,” she says. “Maybe the word ‘casserole’. If one of us says that, we stop.”

Jamef nods. I do, too, though I would never, ever safe word out. Kef that business. I play to win. “It’s your turn again, fluffit.”

She bites her lip and casts a glance up at Jamef. “Truth or dare.”

He rubs a lock of her hair between his fingers and considers. “What kind of male would I be if I didn’t take the occasional dare?”

Well now, I’m surprised. Dora is, too. She blinks and then looks over at me, and it’s clear she didn’t have an idea ready for a dare. So I decide to speak up. “You should dare him to play with your cunt, fluffit.”

She gasps, the sound full of excitement. Jamef’s tail twitches.

“I mean, he came. It would be a shame if he was the only one,” I purr, knowing that I’m being bossy and controlling and it’s not even my turn. “Just a suggestion. Otherwise you could have him do something simple, like kissing. You like kissing, don’t you?”

Her lips part, and she looks up at Jamef, then back at me. “Kissing,” she agrees. “I dare you to kiss Bethiah.”



I exchange a glance with Jamef. This was Dora's game. Why's she getting shy on us now? Does she not want to be the center of attention? Does she not think she's worth being pleased? It was clear that she liked participating. I'm not imagining it either. I can still smell her keffing arousal in the air. "Did you want to stop playing, fluffit?"

"No. I want Jamef to kiss you," she says, a stubborn note in her voice.

With a huff, I get to my feet and kiss Jamef. Again, we exchange a look, and move in so he can kiss me. It's a light peck on the lips, more of a promise than anything else. Then he turns his gaze to Dora. "My turn. Truth or dare, sweetheart."

"Think hard about your answer," I say.

"Truth." Her chin lifts in defiance and she glares at me. It's keffing adorable.

"Why don't you want me to play with you?" Jamef asks.

Her eyes widen, and she looks like a trapped animal. "Dare," she quickly amends. "Let's do dare."

Jamef pats his knee. "Come straddle my lap and let me touch your cunt. Or do you not want metal hands on you? Is that it?"

Dora's expression is full of surprise as she gets to her feet. "No, that's not it at all." She lifts his hand to her lips and presses a tiny kiss on his metal knuckles. "You know I don't care."

"Do I?" He indicates his leg. "Come and sit, or tell me what the problem is."

She bites her lip and gives me a mute look, then perches delicately on his knee, her thighs together.

"That isn't what I had in mind," he says in a gentle voice. "I said straddle, sweetheart. And use your safe word if you don't want to do this."

"I want to," she blurts out. "It's just...I don't want to come between the two of you."

Come between us? The kef?

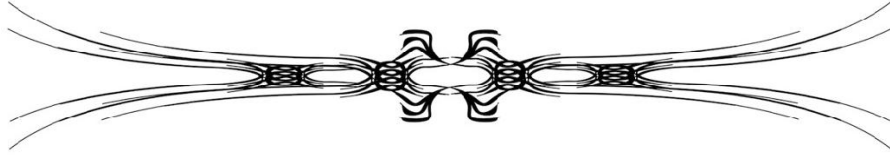
“Come between us how?” Jamef asks, and I give him credit. His voice remains soothing, like he’s gentling a wild animal. I’d probably be cussing right about now or shaking her, so it’s good that he’s part of our trio.

Her eyes grow momentarily shiny. “I mean...the two of you. You keep including me and I know you’re more interested in each other than me. I’m trying to show you that it’s okay. That I understand my place.”

Her *place*?

Oh, I’m going to have to show her her place tonight, all right. Her place is where it was last night in bed, squeezed between the two of us.

FORTY-THREE



## DORA

I'm anxious as they both watch me. Jamef's eyes are gentle, but Bethiah's have that angry spark in them. She doesn't agree with what I said, about knowing my place. It's just that...I wanted this game to bring us together. But I watched her touching him, her confidence and the way he stroked her arm, and they looked good. Like a couple.

Like they belong together.

And I feel like an interloper. Someone they're taking pity on and inviting to play with them.

It's that "interloper" feeling that's making me hold back. Making me dare Jamef to kiss her instead of touch me, even though I'm practically squirming at the thought of his big fingers skating over the inside of my thigh. Do I want to be teased and made to come? Oh god, I do. But that worried part of me, the part that thinks I'm one wrong move away from a farm planet, is afraid for the focus to be on me. I don't want Bethiah to hate me. I don't want Jamef to think I'm trying to steal his attention away from her.

"You know, for this being your game, you're not very good at it." Bethiah studies me as I sit, legs tightly together on Jamef's leg. His big hand is on the small of my back, but he hasn't touched me other than that. It's like he's waiting for something. "What makes you think this game would come between us in some way?"

I don't want to say it aloud. Saying it aloud makes it real. "I picked dare, not truth."

"Yes, but you're not doing either, fluffit," Bethiah purrs. She puts her hands on my hips and slides me over to the center of Jamef's lap, settling his half-hard cock against the back of my tunic. "He said straddle, yes?"

And she nudges my legs apart.

Jamef's hand goes to my hair again, and he gives it the most gentle of tugs. "Remember your word if you don't want to play. I'll understand if you don't, but this is a safe space between the three of us. We're going as slow as you want."

My heart aches. "I know the word. I just..."

"Do you feel like you're intruding?" Bethiah's hands are on my knees, keeping my legs apart. Her thumb brushes against my leg and she tilts her head, studying me. "That's it, isn't it? You brought up the triad and you're worried we're just humoring you."

I remain mute. It sounds a little foolish when she says it like that.

Jamef's other hand steals to my belly, and he presses on it lightly, forcing me to lean back against him. "That's utter nonsense. There was no 'us' before you came into our lives, Dora. Bethiah and I don't know how to work together, how to be a couple. You're the one easing the way for us. We need you." He tugs on my hair, tilting my head, and presses a soft kiss to the side of my neck. "You're necessary to making this work."

Bethiah's hands move up my thighs. "Do we make you uncomfortable? Do *I* make you uncomfortable?"

"Not at all." I stiffen a little, frowning at her. "You're amazing and you know it."

"I mean, *I* know that. I just want to make sure you're aware of it." Bethiah gives me a little smile and then tugs on my leggings. "So are we going to keep playing or not? Because I'd really like to see what Jamef thinks of your pretty pussy."

I gasp, my cheeks hot at her words. "You don't know that it's pretty!"

"Oh, fluffit. I've seen a lot of pussy and they're always pretty. I find it hard to believe that yours isn't." She gives me a wink. "Shall I unwrap you for Jamef?"

I moan at the thought, because even in this, all three of us are involved. Jamef kisses the side of my neck again, his hand

warm on my stomach. He trails his lips up to my ear, and I can feel his cock stiffening behind my backside. I want to ask if Jamef is interested in me, truly, but I know that's my self-doubt speaking up. No one's asked him to nuzzle my ear and he's doing so, sending shivers through my body. His tongue traces my earlobe and my entire body prickles with arousal.

“Are we playing, fluffit?” Bethiah's voice is soft. “I can smell your arousal.”

Nodding, I reach backward and slide a hand to Jamef's neck, touching him. There's a bit of metal back here, his short hair brushing against it, and I wonder just how much of him is cybernetic, and if it feels different. If it feels good when I touch him.

“Good girl,” Bethiah soothes, and those two words send another jolt of pleasure through my body. She tugs on the drawstring at my waist and then pulls my pants down, past my ankles, and discards them nearby. My legs are exposed, and I'm very, very aware that I have no panties on. There's nothing concealing me except the tunic with its long hem that almost reaches my knees, and the belt I have around my waist.

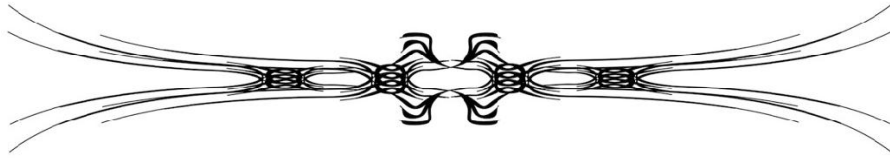
As if she can read my mind, Bethiah unhooks my belt, her gaze locked on mine. She tosses it aside and then fingers the edge of my tunic. “I think this has to go. What do you think, Jamef?”

“I think yes.” His teeth score my earlobe, and I whimper.

Oh god. In all of my fantasies about this working out between us, I didn't imagine me being the center of attention. It's overwhelming and vulnerable and...I love it.

I'm never using that safe word. Not in a million years.

FORTY-FOUR



## JAMEF

**D**ora's slight form feels delicate against my chest. It's an unusual feeling. I've never had a female to touch that felt so...breakable. I'm more used to women like Bethiah, who want to bite and strike as much as they want to caress. Mesakkah females are fierce, but Dora is too...just in a different way. She's given Bethiah a run for her credits when it comes to stubbornness. I rub my mouth against her soft neck, unable to help myself. Her skin begs to be touched, her scent delicate and perfuming the air around us.

So do I want her naked while she squirms in my lap? Absolutely.

I nip at Dora's ear. "You'll speak up if things become too much for you?"

She moans, her hand covering the one I have on her stomach, and wriggles against my cock. Her movements are getting me hard again, even though it feels much too soon.

"It's not too much," Bethiah declares. "Dora's brave."

Pushy female. It's rare to see Bethiah so invested in someone else's pleasure. She mostly likes to antagonize. Even so, I want to hear it from Dora's lips. "She can speak for herself."

"I don't see her doing it."

Dora makes a frustrated sound. "Do the two of you ever stop bickering?"

"No," I say at the same time Bethiah does.

Bethiah barks a laugh, grinning at me and then at Dora. "That's why you're needed, fluffit. You smooth down our rough edges. And my, do we have a lot of rough edges."

"Speak for yourself," I murmur, and then stroke my hand down Dora's arm. "You, too."



“I want to keep going,” Dora tells us. Her voice is shy, but she leans forward, helping Bethiah pull her tunic off. “Just...if I look too different, don’t tell me. I don’t want to know.”

“Oh, fluffit. You’re perfect,” Bethiah says, and her voice is soft with approval. “You think they clone ugly mugs like Jamef? They pick only the most appealing sorts.” She tosses Dora’s tunic aside. “And before you chastise me, I can say he has an ugly mug, because I just had his cock in my mouth. Clearly I like the way he looks.”

A little giggle escapes Dora, and the sound makes me twitch with pleasure.

Bethiah smiles at her and then puts a hand on the human’s shoulder, pushing her back against me again. “Lean against him and let him explore your body. I’m right here if you get nervous.”

Dora moans...but I notice she reaches for Bethiah’s hand and holds it anyhow. So perhaps she’s not as brave as she likes to pretend. I want her to be a willing participant, though. “Just checking to make sure you remember your word,” I murmur against her ear. “What is it again?”

“Casserole,” she replies. “But I’m not gonna say it. I like it when you touch me. Both of you.”

Well then. I stroke the back of my hand down her bare arm. She doesn’t have the light, soft fuzz that every mesakkah does, but her skin is so touchable that I just want to keep petting her. “What parts feel good?”

“Tits,” Bethiah declares. “And of course her cunt. But play with her tits a little first. She’s got nice ones.”

I wait for Dora’s reaction, and when she doesn’t protest, I reach down and cup one of her breasts. It’s full and bouncy, the tip tight and peaked. When I brush my fingers over her nipple, she whimpers, pressing her head back against the curve of my shoulder. “Does that feel nice?” I murmur. “Should I keep going?”

Dora manages a nod, and I tease her breasts, plumping one and then the other, then stroking my thumb over each nipple

until the human is squirming in my lap, Bethiah watching our movements with interest.

“You look so beautiful like this,” she coos to Dora. “All flushed and aroused by our mate’s touch. Is his cock hard again? Can you feel it?”

Dora shifts her hips against my groin, and I bite back a growl. I’m getting hard, all right.

I pinch one tight peak and she gasps, her arousal scent perfuming the air. “How does she look, Bethiah?”

My other mate licks her lips and considers, trailing a finger between Dora’s cleavage. The human makes an incoherent noise, arching back against me. Bethiah’s finger trails over to Dora’s other breast, circling her nipple. “Hmm. I don’t know. She’s pretty, but I feel parts of her are being neglected...”

“Pussy,” Dora gasps. “Please, someone touch my pussy.”

“Jamef?” Bethiah asks. “Do the honors?”

“I’d love to.” I nip the side of Dora’s throat again, reminding her that I’ve got her. That this is affection and exploration, nothing more. The moment she looks the slightest bit hesitant, we’ll stop...but I think Dora’s excitement is as great as ours. When my fingers brush over the tuft of curls that covers her cunt, her breath explodes and she shudders. That brings a smile to my lips. “I haven’t even touched you yet.”

“Please,” Dora breathes. “Please touch me, Jamef.”

Sweet creature. How can I be so keffing aroused for her innocent need as much as Bethiah’s sly confidence? They’re opposites, and yet both feel *necessary* to our mating. I skim my fingers over her mound, then veer towards one trembling thigh. “Is there something I should know, Bethiah? You’re the expert on humans.”

“Well, from what I’ve heard, they don’t like for their clits to be touched,” Bethiah says in a knowing voice.

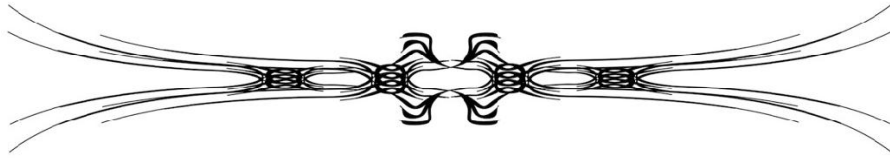
Dora immediately whines. “That’s wrong! Touch my clit. Please touch my clit.”

Bethiah's eyes gleam with anticipation and we exchange looks. "I don't know, fluffit. They're such a sensitive part that I wouldn't want you to be uncomfortable. It's best if Jamef goes slow and really, *reaally* gets to know your body."

"No," Dora begs. "Don't go slow. Jamef, please." She reaches behind her and tugs on my neck, clinging to me. "Please, please touch me there."

How can I refuse when she asks so prettily?

FORTY-FIVE



## DORA

I'm going to die. They're going to kill me before I even get to orgasm. I'll just spontaneously combust right in Jamef's arms.

This was supposed to be about Jamef touching my pussy and instead Bethiah's kneeling between my spread thighs and Jamef's hand won't go down far enough and I'm going to lose my damned mind if something doesn't happen soon.

Jamef presses another kiss to my ear. "Should we —"

"Yes," I blurt before he can even finish his sentence. "Whatever it is, yes."

They both chuckle at that, and then Jamef's hand slides lower (finally) and cups my pussy. A hot prick of delight spears me when he groans aloud. "So keffing wet."

"That means we're touching her just right," Bethiah agrees, her fingers squeezing mine. I don't know why I reached for her hand when she offered it, but touching her through this makes me feel good, like she's somehow in charge even though she's not even touching me. It's nice.

Not that I don't trust Jamef to be in charge. I do, but I'm more familiar with Bethiah and her kisses. Jamef is all new to me. His touch is new.

And his touch is slightly different, too. His fingers are thicker, rougher. I imagine the feel of one of those bigger fingers pushing deep inside me and moan aloud. "More, please."

"She asks so nicely," Bethiah whispers. "Surely you can give her a little more, Jamef."

He grunts, and then the hand cupping my pussy flexes. One thick finger dips into the cleft of my sex, and I suck in a breath as he skims down the length of my pussy, lightly

stroking. I writhe against his hand, wanting more. “Oh, please. Please please please.”

“Listen to how slick she is,” Bethiah continues. “When you touch her, she sounds so damn wet. She’s loving this.”

“I’d love it more if someone touched my clit,” I point out hopefully, my voice wobbling. “I’m just saying.”

“Mmm, what about a finger inside you?” Jamef asks, his voice ticklish against my ear.

Oooh, that works, too. I nod.

But because they’re torturing me, I get neither. Instead, Jamef continues to pet my folds, his finger sliding up and down the wet cleft of my cunt. I shift on his lap, rubbing my ass against his hardening cock, and Bethiah’s hand strokes the inside of one of my knees.

How is it that I’m spread out between them, pussy splayed wide, and I haven’t come yet? This seems cruel and unusual. I make a sound of protest, squirming against Jamef.

“Are you built the same as a mesakkah female, hmm?” He brushes one finger down my folds and then dips it against the entrance to my body.

I make an utterly unglued sound at that touch. Oh god. It feels so good. It’s making me so *needy*.

“She doesn’t have the same pleasure spots,” Bethiah murmurs, watching with a fascinated gaze as Jamef fingers me. “They have the clit, and then they have a sensitive place on the inside wall, just below the clit’s surface.”

“You know a lot about human anatomy,” Jamef comments, his voice smooth and delicious and almost as good as his touch. “Want to show me how to get her off?”

I wheeze at that, spreading my thighs a bit wider. “Yes, please,” I say before they can debate it. “Someone touch me already.”

Jamef chuckles and nips at the side of my ear, thrusting his fingertip against the entrance to my core. “We are, sweetheart. Be patient.”

Bethiah eyes him. “You want me to play? Don’t mind if I do.”

I try to clutch at her hand, but she pulls it free from my grasp. Bethiah winks at me and puts both hands on my thighs, considering my pussy with a thoughtful expression. She says nothing, and my anxiety flares. I know I’m different. I have hair between my thighs and they don’t. My skin’s a different shade and even darker between my thighs, and my folds aren’t symmetrical. Maybe a human vulva isn’t all that attractive to them? “What?” I blurt out when Bethiah just continues to stare between my legs. “What is it?”

“I’m just enjoying the view,” she says. “You worry too much.”

“Of course I worry. I’m the only human in this triad. You’d think that—eep!” I cut off as Bethiah dives between my legs and licks a line up my pussy with the tip of her tongue. “Oh... you...”

“Mmm.” I’ve never heard such a satisfied sound coming from her. “Very sweet, just as I thought. You want to taste, Jamef?”

And she looks up at him as she gives me another long lick.

I moan.

And moan again when she rises to her feet, moving over me, and leans in to kiss Jamef, her tongue flicking over his mouth. Oh god, they’re sharing my taste. That’s so...dirty.

*I love it.*

“Perfect,” Jamef says, and cups one of my breasts again. “I knew she would be.”

She grins at him, then touches my chin. “Want me to keep going, fluffit?”

As if I’d demand her to stop? Is she insane? I manage a nod, and I quiver when she drops to her knees between my spread thighs again.

“You seem like you’ve done this before, Bethiah,” Jamef muses.

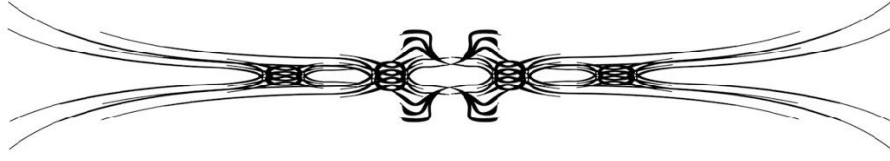
“Oh, I have. I am an expert on human pussy.”

“Then show me.” He pinches my nipple again. “Show me how to bring her off.”

“With pleasure,” Bethiah says, and leans in to lick me once more.



FORTY-SIX



## BETHIAH

**M**y poor fluffit. She moans when I tongue her, squirming hard against Jamef's lap. There's no jaded edge to her response, no comfortable awareness of another's head between her thighs, and I suspect that she has no memories of this sort of thing—and if she does, her last partner wasn't very skilled.

Lucky for her that I'm around and I have an *excellent* tongue.

Jamef's enjoying himself, too. I can see the agitated thrash of his tail that shows me he likes this. I like the anticipation in his eyes, too. Really, he's the luckiest male on this side of the galaxy—two beautiful females to pleasure each other and him. He'd have been a fool to pass us up. I lick Dora's cunt again, savoring her taste. Kef me, it's been a long time since I've done this. You wouldn't think you'd miss the taste of fresh cunt, but I guess I do. I want to bury my face between her legs and just stay there all night.

Maybe I should. First I need to make her come, though.

So I trace another line up her folds with the tip of my tongue, and then eye Jamef. He's toying with one of Dora's tits (such pretty tits, too) and watching me with heated interest. "Hold her open for me," I tell him. "So I can lick her better."

Our human moans, her hips flexing.

Her excitement fuels mine. Her scent is in my nose, her taste on my lips, and I can't wait to see her climax.

With a delicate touch, Jamef rubs his hand down the front of her cunt and then pushes her folds apart with two fingers, exposing her for me. Her clit practically begs to have attention lavished upon it. It's flushed and prominent, but I ignore it, tracing a finger through her slick heat instead. "Just like me, she's got these lovely folds that frame her sweet spots. And just like me, they get soaked when she's aroused."

“And are you aroused right now?” Jamef asks, pinching Dora’s nipple again. The fluffit moans, but I notice her attention is on me, too.

I ignore that question. I don’t want to tell him—or her—that I’m wet. That seeing Dora’s arousal makes me ache inside, that I want to make her come like she’s never come before. That I want to be the one to give it to her. Maybe I’m greedy, but I want to be her first orgasm. So I grip her thighs and lean in, giving her a thorough lick with the flat of my tongue and avoiding the question.

She gasps, the sound distracting both of us. Her quivering legs tighten, and I slide them over my shoulders. “Look at this pretty pussy,” I say, teasing a finger up and down her skin. She’s shiny with wetness, her scent perfuming the air. “The clit is the most sensitive part, but it’s fun to play with the rest of her, too.”

“Touch her clit,” Jamef demands, lifting his chin with the command. “I want to see her reaction.”

I press my face against her soft, dewy skin, nuzzling, and I can feel Dora clench around me. “You have to be gentle with it,” I tell him. “It’s very sensitive. Some human women don’t like it being touched directly. But as far as I know, they all like for it to be sucked.”

“Oh god,” Dora whimpers. “Yes, please suck on it.”

“Shhh, sweetheart,” Jamef says, and rolls her nipple between his fingers. “Don’t rush her.”

Our human makes another choked sound, her hips jerking. Dora’s so responsive that I almost feel guilty that we’re teasing her so. Almost.

I move in close, and with the tip of my tongue, I lightly trace a circle around the hood of her clit. Jamef sucks in a breath as he watches me, and Dora makes another one of those little cries in the back of her throat. My cunt clenches in response, and I’m more than a little aroused as I continue. “Sometimes it’s nice to just tease one side of the clit.”

And I give her soft, teasing licks against the hood of her clit, avoiding direct contact. Dora's thighs jerk and she reaches for my horns, her breathing ragged.

I practice a few more flicks of my tongue against her sensitive clit, and then I drag a finger lower, towards the entrance to her body. "Now, if I put a finger just inside her and curl it ever so slightly, I should feel a small rough patch of skin against her inner wall. That's the underside of her clit, and it feels really good for them. You ready for me to push a finger into you, fluffit?"

"Bethiah," she moans. "*Pleaaaaase.*"

"She's ready," I reassure Jamef, who chuckles and teases her plump breast again. I slip a finger inside her, and her channel is hot, wet and tight. Kef me, I'd forgotten how tight human females are. I clench my thighs together to stave off my own arousal and concentrate on Dora. My finger makes a slick sound as I enter her, and I curl it, trying to recall just how far inside that tricky (but legendary) spot is.

The moment I rub against the right location, Dora practically jumps, a cry escaping her.

"There we go," I say proudly, and continue to rub the inside of her channel with my fingertip once I find it. I love the whimpers she makes, the way her thighs tremble as she clenches around my finger. "She won't last long, now. Watch and I'll make her come."

With that, I lean in and close my lips over her clit and suck on it.

She sobs, clenching my horn tight as she tries to push my mouth against her cunt. As if I'm not already face-first in that zone. I continue sucking, working the inside of her pussy as I tease her, and Dora shudders and writhes against me. Jamef murmurs soft things into her ear that are drowned out by the sounds she makes as her release builds, and I concentrate on her, on making this so keffing good for her that she's going to be ravenous for more touches.

Dora deserves the best, and I'm going to give her an orgasm she won't forget.

Her thighs tremble and she arches against my face. I don't let up, determined to make her climax. A woman knows that another woman needs more of the same to come, not a change in the pattern. So I keep lightly sucking, using the tip of my tongue as I do, and I tease the spot deep inside her.

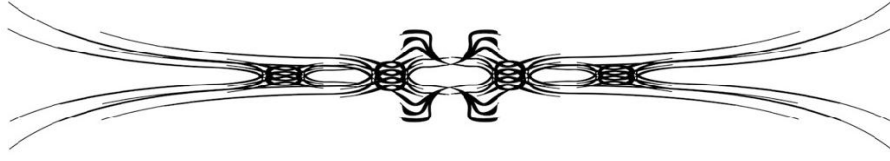
She screams a moment later, and her hot release floods my face.

With a pleased sound, I keep working her to ensure I wring out every bit of her pleasure, until she collapses, limp and panting, back against Jamef's chest. He holds her tightly, wrapping his arms around her waist and pressing a kiss to the side of her face. His words are full of soft praise, telling Dora how beautiful she is, how good she came for us. I wipe my mouth, pleased, and love that the taste of her is lingering on my mouth. She came so hard, she drenched her thighs and my face, and I couldn't be more proud of her efforts (and mine, because I'm amazing).

When Dora's eyes flutter open, the soft look she gives me is adoring. "That was amazing." Her hand steals up to caress Jamef's face. "Now it's Bethiah's turn."

Immediately, I go cold. I get to my feet. "Casserole."

FORTY-SEVEN



## DORA

I'm still trembling with the aftermath of that intense orgasm as Bethiah gets up and walks out of the room.

"I...I don't understand," I tell Jamef as I close my thighs. "Did we hurt her feelings?"

He shakes his head, his thumb rubbing circles on my arm. "I'm not surprised she ran. Remember, when things get to feel like too much, Bethiah likes to disappear. My guess is that it felt safe to pleasure me and safe to pleasure you, but getting her own pleasure would make her too vulnerable."

I frown, gazing at the doorway and wishing that Bethiah would change her mind and come back through again. "That's ridiculous."

"That's Bethiah." He strokes my back. "I suppose the games are done for now. How are you feeling, sweetheart?"

Shrugging, I turn and fit myself under his shoulder, waiting to see how he reacts to this. I'm not ready to get up and leave just yet. Bethiah might be done with us, but I'm still hazy with bliss and need a moment for my brain to settle. "I feel good. Other than the fact that she just left without taking part, I'm good."

He chuckles. "Oh, she took part. We both had her mouth on us. You can't say she wasn't participating."

I blush. Jamef has an excellent point. His arm settles comfortably over my shoulders, tucking me against his chest, and I snuggle down against him, happy to be held. "I just don't know why she didn't want to wait for her turn. It's like the moment she might show any emotion other than boredom, she's out."

"We did say we'd go slow." He slides his hand languidly up and down my back, ignoring the hard bar of his cock pressed against my side. I decide I'll ignore it, too. After all,

Bethiah isn't here and we said we wouldn't touch or engage when one of us was gone. Cuddling's different, because that's just comforting each other. Making love is something else entirely.

"Yes, but you thought it was going to be me that needed the slow-going," I grump. "I'm having a good time."

Jamef's chest shakes, and it takes me a moment to realize he's silently laughing. "I think you're going to end up being far more than either of us bargained for, sweetheart."

"I'm going to take that as a compliment."

"It absolutely is one. Unfortunately for you, both of your mates are a bit maladjusted and not good at being in relationships. Bethiah's best with a blaster in her hand, and I'm best alone."

I turn in his arms, gazing up at him. I don't know why he's so hard on himself. When I first saw him, I thought he was intimidating and frightening. He's got a lot of metal parts where he should have flesh, and his face is hard, as if he's seen too much in his life. But he's so gentle, his hands so kind as he holds me, that I can't find any flaws with him. Jamef is an itinerant knight like they used to have back on Earth, a man that lives by his own code and wanders the world, waiting until someone needs him to spring forth.

True, he's a bounty hunter like Bethiah, but...not quite like Bethiah. Jamef would save people that needed saving, I think.

Bethiah would sell them out just to prove that she's got a hard heart.

Except...I know she doesn't. I know she's soft underneath. I think of the first night I was saved from the slave traders. Bethiah didn't leave my side, holding my hand and letting me clutch her weapon so I could feel safe.

She's a softy. We just have to get her to open up...which will never happen at the rate we're going.

Bethiah's best with a blaster in her hand, hmm? I glance up at Jamef. "That's what we should do—get a blaster in Bethiah's hand."



Jamef gives me a puzzled glance. “While we’re mating?”

“Kinky, but no. I was thinking...she needs to shoot something.”

“Again, I have to ask—while we’re *mating*?”

I giggle, because he’s not following my line of thought. “No, no. I’m saying if Bethiah is most comfortable on a mission, then we go on a mission. We get a bounty or something. Keep her busy so she doesn’t notice us seducing her.” I wiggle my eyebrows meaningfully at him. “Until it’s too late, of course.”

He eyes me thoughtfully. “It’s a good idea. But...you don’t need seducing?”

It’s sweet that even now, he’s worried about me. I shake my head. “Honestly, I want stability. Safety. That’s the sexiest thing in the universe for me. Knowing that my partners will always keep me safe and have my back. That’ll have me *on my back* faster than anything.”

And it’s something I won’t have until Bethiah is fully in our relationship.

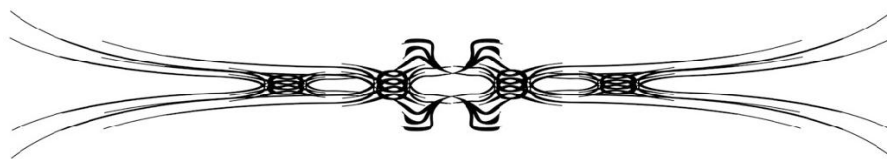
At his snort of amusement at my words, I touch his stomach. “What about you, Jamef? What is it you want in our partnership? What do you need?”

He’s quiet for a long moment, and then Jamef speaks so softly that I almost miss it.

“Acceptance.”

Something else that Bethiah is withholding from us. Ugh. I lean against his chest and hug him, wishing that all of my affection can somehow make up for Bethiah’s withholding.

FORTY-EIGHT



## JAMEF

**D**ora eventually leaves, kissing me on the cheek and telling me not to stay up too late. I promise her that I won't, but I'm probably lying.

I'm not sure if Bethiah can handle me in the bed with her tonight. Dora's slept with her in the past, so I'm sure she won't kick her out. And Dora has such sweet, soft eyes that I doubt Bethiah can get mad at her for long. But if I come to bed, it's going to remind Bethiah that we're a triad, and that's sure to send her scuttling away again.

I want to take care of my mates, and tonight, the best way to do that is to stay away from bed.

I think about what Dora said, though. Bethiah needs a blaster in her hands. She needs a mission of some kind, a bounty, to distract her from her emotions. We need her to be so busy that she doesn't have time to draw away from us.

For a human clone that's missing her memories, she doesn't seem to have any problem deciphering our emotions.

All right, then. If one of my mates needs a bounty to occupy her, we'll get her a bounty. I check flight records and the current path the ship is on. We're less than a day away from Kaatir's moon. There, we should be able to get clothes for Dora, some food supplies, and get the ship kitted out with an add-on or two. Old Kaatir was in the Homeworld military long before I was, and he's familiar with all kinds of ships and quick fixes. I met a bounty hunter last year who'd taken an ooli bride and had a couple of compartments added on to his star-skimmer. It's a matter of disassembling the existing ship, adding on additional housing and quarters to the body of the ship that interlock like puzzle pieces, and then having the entire thing welded and made climate-controlled once more. It'll be expensive, but with three of us on the ship, it's necessary.

I've been saving credits for a while. Seems like a good use for them.

Then once we get that taken care of, a bounty. I know Bethiah and I aren't going to see eye to eye on what sort of bounty, but I'm hoping we can come to some kind of agreement.



The next morning, Dora hunts me down on the bridge. Her expression is hurt. "Where were you last night?"

She's far too observant. I give her an apologetic smile and gesture at the control panel in front of me. "Just planning for the future. We're near Kaatir's moon and I wanted to make sure we had everything in order before we land."

"Everything in order?" she asks, moving to my side. Her arm goes around my shoulders and she rubs the base of my neck. "What sorts of things in order?"

"Mmm." Her touch feels amazing. I lean into her hand, groaning. I'm getting too old to stay up all night. "Making sure there are no records of us heading in this direction. Checking for trackers. Kaatir's wanted in three star systems and if I want to do business with him, I need to make sure I'm not leading trouble to his doorstep. Double-checking our engine readings. Fiddly work."

"So basically you were avoiding us," Dora says knowingly.

"I didn't want Bethiah to feel smothered."

"She won't, because I won't let her." Dora gives me an exasperated look. "How's she going to get used to a triad if one third isn't in bed with us at night?" She moves behind me, rubbing my neck, and I groan and lean into her touch. Kef *me*, that's good. "I get what you're trying to do, but she's going to have to be a little uncomfortable from time to time. I'm not going to choose catering to her over you getting some sleep."

I manage a small smile, because I'm being properly scolded. "Yes, mistress."

She laughs and wraps her arms around me from behind, her face tucked in perfectly against my neck and managing to avoid my horns. "I like the sound of that. Now I just need my turn in charge and —"

A throat clears behind us.

"Please," Bethiah says in a dry voice. "Don't let me interrupt the cuddle session."

Dora jumps away, releasing me. "Oh! You're awake."

"Surprise." Bethiah saunters onto the bridge, her expression shuttered. "You can go back to mauling each other. I just needed to check my messages."

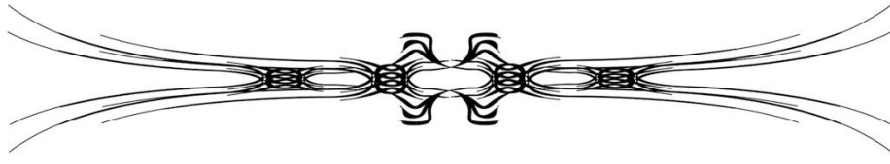
"We're not mauling each other!" Dora declares, glaring at her.

Bethiah shrugs, moving to the message station. She won't look either of us in the eye. "I could have sworn one of the rules of the triad was to not do anything when one member was absent. Looks like that went out the door pretty fast. Did you two have fun last night after I left?"

Dora makes an angry sound in her throat, her fists clenched. "Why do you immediately think everyone is up to no good?"

Bethiah gives us both a caustic smile. "Because they usually are?"

FORTY-NINE



## BETHIAH

**L**ess than a day and they're already forgetting I exist. Typical.

It shouldn't hurt my feelings that they're all over each other this morning. It's what I expected, right? That eventually they'll realize they don't need me in this relationship and they'll find ways to work around my presence and boot me out of our triad.

Because triads don't work.

I just thought it'd take longer than an evening. Damn.

Dora releases Jamef and moves to my side, all smiles. "Good morning." She beams up at me and tilts her face in my direction, clearly waiting for a kiss.

And I'm a sucker because I lean down and kiss her, even though she's already forgetting about me. "Morning," I grump. "Are we almost at this moon base?"

"Almost," Jamef says. His tone is neutral, and he doesn't get up from his seat to greet me. He watches me with those too-knowing eyes and I suspect he thinks I'm being ridiculous. Joke's on him, I know I'm being ridiculous. I just don't trust this entire situation. "Have you ever worked with Kaatir va'Nik before?"

I shake my head. "Any time I need something done to a ship, I go to see my cousin. He lives on an abandoned station and takes odd jobs, most of them junk-scrapping."

"Well, that explains the appearance of the ship after you got a hold of it," Jamef drawls, deliberately fingering one of the rusty-looking repurposed panels on the bridge.

I point a finger at him. "My cousin does a good job. And besides, would you want to rob this ship? Which is my point exactly. If we look like we've not got two credits to rub

together, then we're safe. And besides, he gives me a great discount on his work."

"So why didn't we go to your cousin this time?" Dora asks, her voice sweet and innocent.

I shrug as if I'm totally casual about all of this. As if it's no big deal. "Jamef wanted to see his friend."

And I'm leery of bringing anyone to visit my cousin. He's my family. One of the few people in this universe I trust unconditionally. Bringing Dora and Jamef would show that they're truly my partners, and that we really are committed to one another...and it's going to make me look incredibly stupid when they leave me.

So no, they don't get to meet Jerrok. Not yet.

"Friend?" Jamef gives me an incredulous look, crossing his arms over his chest with a creak of cybernetics. "Kaatir doesn't have friends. He has targets."

Dora steps a little closer subconsciously, and a small part of me feels gleeful that she's coming to me for comfort. I put a hand on the back of her neck, and she slides an arm around my waist, oblivious to my smug thoughts. "If he's not friendly, why are we visiting him?"

Jamef raises a finger in the air. "He's close by." He ticks off another finger, and then another as he lists the reasons. "He can keep a secret. He doesn't ask questions. And...he's cheap. Plus, with all the wives he's got lurking around that station, he's not going to be interested in acquiring more, which makes Dora safer."

It's pretty sound reasoning. "Lots of wives, huh?"

"Two dozen, last I counted."

Dora makes an appalled sound in her throat. "What does one man need with two dozen wives?"

"Maybe he likes variety," I joke, and both of them shoot me dirty looks. "Okay, maybe not. Sheesh. So what's the plan here, since Jamef's in charge?"



Jamef grunts, turning his chair ever so slightly and glancing over at his controls. “Kaatir’s expecting us. If this goes like my other visits, he’s going to invite us to dinner first. He’s an old male with nothing but women around him, so he’s going to want to have dinner so he can tell me all about his glory days and make himself sound impressive. Once I’ve listened to his stories and been appropriately impressed with his importance, we’ll get down to business. I figure with all the females he has there, maybe we can get some clothes for Dora, too. You need anything, Bethiah?”

“I’m good, thanks. So this friend of yours, he’ll be fine with you bringing a human with you?”

Jamef rubs his ear. “He knows I’ve got two mates with me.”

Something about that statement seems off to me. I narrow my eyes at him. “Is he going to think you’re setting up your own little harem like he is?”

He grimaces. “Possibly. But it’ll keep Dora safe at least.”

“This is starting to sound troubling,” Dora says.

And by “troubling,” I’m sure she means “annoying.” Because if this old codger thinks he needs two dozen wives, he probably also thinks that they’re lesser creatures. I’m going to guess that he’s some old wizened praxiiian that thinks his ego needs to be stroked by having weaker female counterparts. I’d bet credits that he doesn’t have a single mesakkah “wife” in the lot. I’m guessing they’re all ooli and avian and szzt, races that tend to be on the more submissive side.

It’ll probably be best for Jamef if I act sweet and defenseless and...well, like Dora. Just wide-eyed and cock-loving and worshipful. Of course, Jamef won’t know what to do with that.

Which means it’ll be fun. “Well,” I say brightly. “If we’re going to be the cute little wifeys, I suppose we should dress for the part. Come on, Dora. We need to get ready.”

“We do?” she asks, skeptical.

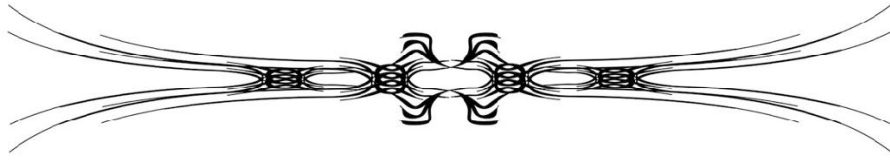
“Oh yes. Don’t worry, Jamef. Your females will make sure they don’t embarrass you.” My voice is syrupy sweet.

“Kef me,” he groans. “This is going to be bad, isn’t it?”

However bad he thinks it’s going to be? I’m going to make it so much worse. This should be fun...at least, fun for me. And Jamef will sweat metal because he won’t know what I’m going to do next.

And it’ll get my mind off of the state of our triad.

FIFTY



## BETHIAH

**D**ora makes an adorable wife. Of course she does. She's all big eyes and pretty yellow hair that I bind into a braid and tuck under the hood of her cloak.

"Do you know this guy?" she asks me as we dress in long gowns that cover every bit of exposed skin. She has to borrow one of mine because her clothing choices are severely lacking, and I use my knife to hack off the skirt until it rests at her ankles.

"I do not," I tell her. "But I've met males like him. Some think that because they live on the edge of space, they can set themselves up as small-time kings of their own little empire. They buy a bunch of downtrodden females and make them miserable. I like to think they're usually compensating for something."

Dora chuckles and wiggles her pinky finger at me, which makes me snort with amusement. Smart human.

"At any rate, stay close to Jamef and especially to me. I'll make sure you're safe. Don't go anywhere unless I'm with you. Not even to the lavatory."

She nods and holds her hand out. "Can we hold hands?"

"Ugh, fine." So needy. I hate that I actually like it.

Dora gazes up at me, her expression thoughtful. I know that look. It means we're about to have a talk about our feelings. "Bethiah..."

"Nope," I say. "Not right now."

She frowns. "You don't even know what I was going to say."

"Oh, yes I do. You're going to talk about emotions and last night and there's nothing that needs to be said." I take a step back, studying her dress. "I think we can fit a blaster at the

back of your belt, but you have to promise not to shoot off your non-existent tail.”

Dora flexes the hand she’s still holding out (and I’m ignoring), closing it and opening it again repeatedly in a way that makes it obvious she won’t relax until I put my hand in hers.

Biting back a sigh—such a demanding fluffit—I slip my fingers into her grasp. “Happy now?”

She squeezes my hand and gazes up at me. “I just want you to know that we can go slow for you, too. I know we mentioned going super slow for me, but I’m really fine. It’s you that I worry about.”

I huff.

“I’m serious.” She watches me with those big, soft eyes of hers. “I know you like to be hard and independent, but it’s okay to need people, too. It doesn’t make you weak. And if being emotional with us or having sex with us makes you feel vulnerable, I want you to know that I understand and I would never, ever hurt you.” She smiles up at me. “I think you’re amazing.”

“Quit it,” I grumble.

“Quit what?”

“Being so keffing ridiculously sweet.”

She laughs and tilts her face up toward me, obviously wanting a kiss. “I’m your mate. One of them, anyhow. Why wouldn’t I think you’re amazing? You’re strong and brave and incredibly smart. You’ve been so kind to me ever since the day I met you, making sure that I’m safe.”

Her expression turns impish and she taps the corner of her mouth, insisting upon that kiss.

So needy. I lean down and kiss her.

“And you have an amazing tongue,” she whispers, and winks up at me, the scamp.

I huff again, but mostly to hide my laugh.

Dora links her arm with mine, clinging to me. “Now, you’re going to lead when we go on board this guy’s moon, right? I’m a little nervous about the whole thing, so I’m mostly going to be silent and let you handle being head wife.”

There’s a quiver in her voice that she’s trying to hide with her jolly mood, and I realize that she’s anxious about this. It makes me feel protective of her. It has to be terrifying to be a clone, with your memories a mess (if they’re even there) and the entire universe against you. I pat the sweaty hand gripping my arm tightly. “You’re safe with us. Neither of us will let anything happen to you. Understand?”

“I just worry. This guy sounds like he’s shady.”

“I’m sure he is, but who on this end of the galaxy isn’t slightly up to no good?” I grin at her. “Us included.”

She manages a tiny smile at that.

“Like Jamef said, we’ll have dinner and simper a bit. Think of it as a game. We should be the most submissive, accepting, devoted wives to Jamef. He won’t know what to think. It’ll blow his mind.”

Dora giggles. “I don’t think it’d blow his mind if I did that, but if you did? He’d think you were planning a trap.”

“Which is why this is going to be a lot of fun. As a female, sometimes you have to play stupid and helpless around males,” I tell her. “Never let them think that you have a brain in your head. Let them underestimate you. It’s not them exerting their masculinity or taking control of the situation. It’s you letting them think they have control. You’re still in power. Because if they don’t know how smart you are, they’ll never see it coming when you attack.”

And I give her a wicked smile. “This is the biggest weapon a female has sometimes. Well, second biggest.”

“What’s the first biggest weapon?” she asks.

“In your case? Tears. If you cry, Jamef is going to lose his mind. He’s not going to know what he did to cause it, just that he *must* fix it.”

“And what about you?”

“I don’t cry,” I say, amused she would even think such a thing. Ludicrous.

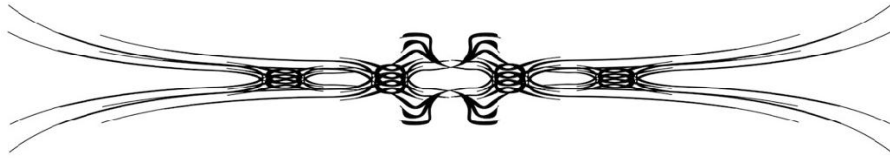
“No, I mean, how would it make you feel if I cried?”

“I wouldn’t like it. Just as much as Jamef.”

She leans her cheek against my arm. “Then I’ll try not to cry unless I’m really upset...or I desperately need control of the situation.”

“Atta girl.”

FIFTY-ONE





## JAMEF

**K**aatir's moon doesn't have a name. It's just...his. That's kind of how Kaatir works. He doesn't have time for frills and nonsense. He's all business.

It's why I like working with him. I know exactly what I'm going to get when I show up and ask for assistance with a project.

The moon station is a small, old one on a planet that was stripped for mining long, long ago. No one lives there now, and it's definitely not a tourist spot, which means traffic in this particular sector is rare. That's just how Kaatir likes it. The base itself is a cluster of circular, room-sized pods, anchored together to form a large communal living "base." Over the years, Kaatir has added on to it, and now there's a hangar and a terrarium for his wives' gardens, along with guest quarters. It's a nice, quiet set-up he's got here, and sometimes I'm envious of it. But Kaatir has more than enough company to keep him busy, and I'm usually by myself.

Well, up until I decided to be part of a triad. But that part's new. So new, in fact, that I'm not entirely sure that it's real.

Alone, I head down the ramp into the hangar. Bethiah and Dora have instructions to stay behind on the ship until I call for them. I'm sure it'll be fine. I just don't want to show up on old Kaatir's doorstep with too many people.

He says he's not a big fan of people. Any male that has that many wives likes people, all right. It's just strangers he's not a fan of.

I'm reminded of this when the moment I step off the ramp, two gray-haired females brandishing weapons stick them in my face. A blaster hums to life, and then another. The barrel of one blaster pushes against my nose.

"State your business," one of the women says.

I put my hands slowly in the air. “Jamef sa Raan, here to see Kaatir. I messaged him and said I was heading in. I want to talk ship mods.”

The woman grunts, and the barrel leaves my nose.

“All clear, honey,” she says, even as the second one moves to my side and runs a scanner over me, probably checking for hidden weapons.

I keep my hands in the air as Kaatir clanks toward me, his old prosthetics creaking and groaning as he chugs in my direction. The only male I’ve ever met that has more metal grafted to him than me, Kaatir va’Nik is an intimidating old mesakkah. His horns aren’t plated, as if he’s saying “kef it” to propriety. His lined face is covered in scars, and his short, military-length mane is snow-white. One arm is covered in tattoos and scars, the other nothing but metal. His cybernetics are from several generations ago, and I suspect that everything below the waist is a replacement part. He’s a tough one.

He creaks towards me, his steps slow but methodical. “What brings you around here, sa Raan?”

I lower my hands slowly. “I thought I’d pay a visit to you and your lovely, gentle wives, of course.”

He snorts. The one running her scanner over my body pushes it against my side, zapping me and making my tail flick. The women giggle.

“I’ve got forty-one of them now,” he says, voice raspy. “You want to take a few home with you?”

“Shut up, you old fart,” says the one with the blaster. She puts it away and moves to his side, leaning in to kiss his cheek. She’s avian, her feathers almost as gray as Kaatir, and gives me a dismissive look. “No one’s leaving this place.”

He grunts, patting her shoulder. “Tell the girls we’ve got company. Someone should probably make dinner.”

“Make it yourself,” the one with the wand declares—a crusty old szzt female. “You know how noodles get in a bowl. Hop to it, old man.” But then she giggles, ruining her tough talk, and wanders away.

Kaatir swats at her as she passes by. “Dinner! Tell whoever’s got kitchen duties this month that we need enough for one more.”

“Three more,” I say politely, amused by the interplay. “I’ve brought two wives myself.”

Kaatir always pretends like the females crawling all over his moon base are annoying him, and they pretend the same. In reality, I know they have a great deal of affection for one another. Kaatir takes on females as wives when he hears from slave traders that they’ve got an elderly or unsellable female. I don’t even know if it’s romantic. Just that he takes care of them and gives them a safe place to live, and they take care of him, too. They cook and clean...and argue. Every time I come here, one of the females is talking back to him in an utterly terrifying tone, but Kaatir just finds this funny. For all that he’s rough-looking outside, he’s got a soft heart inside that metal casing. He wants them to be unafraid, he tells me. He claims a feisty wife is a good wife, but I think he just wants them to have some say in their lives. It’s a terrible thing to be given no control over your life and have to live at the whim of others.

Both Kaatir and I learned that in the military.

“Two wives?” He gives me an amused look. “A starter pack, eh?”

I shrug, not wanting to say too much about Bethiah or Dora. “Wanted to make sure everyone was welcome before I brought them on board.”

“Two more for dinner,” he bellows into a communicator attached to his forearm.

An angry squawk comes through, something that my translator tells me is a very foul avian saying. Kaatar just laughs. “Mrrita will make it. She hasn’t learned to sass back yet like the others. Still too timid. She’ll get there, though. Just needs time. Bring your females. We’ll have dinner and share stories.”

The moment I comm the ship, the bay door opens and Bethiah and Dora step out.

And I stare.

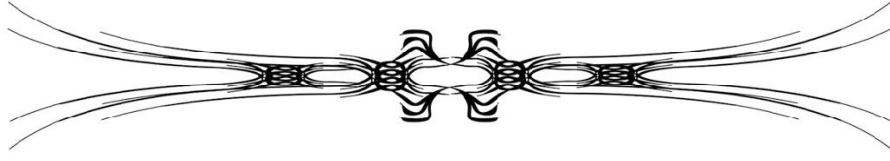
They're covered head to toe like penitents at a religious monastery. Both of them have their heads bowed and hooded, and when they reach my side, Bethiah kneels and clings to my leg. "Master," she says in a voice dripping with sweetness. "Your wish is our desire. Tell us what you require."

Dora immediately grabs my other hand and latches on like a tentacle-fish. "Master," she repeats, following Bethiah's lead. "Tell us how we can serve."

Kef me.

Kaatir blinks at this show, and I say nothing. Right now, I'd like for the docking bay doors to open and just suck me out into the vacuum of space.

FIFTY-TWO



## DORA

I'm going to kill Bethiah.

She didn't tell me that this Kaatir guy was nice and normal. That his place is a sanctuary for older women. I thought we were heading for some sister wife crap, and instead, these people are amazing. I feel like a jerk in my hooded cloak and heavy gown. I look like a nun, and all the women that we're meeting are giving us strange glances.

"What size are you, tiny one?" A stranger comes to my side, her expression sweet and caring. She's got an absolutely hideous face—froglike but with bulging eyes and pebbled, glossy skin of an indeterminate shade.

"Whatever size our master requires," Bethiah intones.

I nudge her, because the whole master/servant vibe doesn't seem as if it's required here. "I don't know if my size translates over to alien sizes," I say politely. "Why do you ask?"

She smiles at me, showing sharp teeth and a too-wide grin. "You might be able to fit in some of my clothes. Your male said you wanted some clothing, yes?"

Wordlessly, I nod, moving closer to Bethiah. The other woman might seem nice, but a mouth full of sharp teeth is always alarming.

"Hazza, why don't you go help Mrrita with dinner?" another woman announces. She prowls toward us, a feline-looking creature with a shoddy-looking coat and an arm that looks to be shorter than the other due to a birth defect. She shoos the frightening-looking woman away and then moves toward us. "Don't be frightened of Hazza. She's born from an ooli mother and a szzt father and they create the ugliest children in the galaxy. Poor Hazza loves everyone, but she scares most of our visitors. Now, tell me, what are your names?"

“Whatever our master wants to call us,” Bethiah chirps, clasping her hands in front of her chest and giving the new cat-woman a pious look.

I kick her with my foot, glancing down the hall where we left Jamef in the dining hall with his friend Kaatir. I was surprised to see the other man was a blue alien—a mesakkah like Jamef and Bethiah—and even more surprised to see he’s old and battered and covered in metal. I did not think we’d be visiting a cyborg grandpa and his harem when we were coming to this moon.

Nor did I think they’d be so kind.

“I am Yaahi,” the cat-woman says. She eyes Bethiah and then looks back at me. “Your male will be swapping war stories with Kaatir for a while, I think. Kaatir is a good husband, but once someone mentions the war...” She shakes her head and mimes a pac-man with her hand. “Constant talking. I doubt your mate will get a word in. So, you can join them, or you can come and enjoy the company of women. What would you like to do?”

“Whatever our mate wants —” Bethiah begins.

I grab her arm and try to shut her up by heaving myself at her. “You know what? I’m not a huge fan of war stories, so I’d love to sit with the ladies for a while.” I already feel guilty that I was intimidated by Hazza. It’s not her fault she looks so strange to human eyes. I’m the weird race on this end of the universe, and I need to get used to seeing odd-looking people. “And I’m Dora. This is Bethiah, and she thinks she’s *funny*.”

“Correction,” Bethiah says. “I don’t think I’m funny. I *know* I’m funny.”

Yaahi eyes the two of us. “Yes, well. You’ll be quite safe here with us. We will let the men talk and we will let the women dress the small, cute one, yes?” She beams at me. “Some of them miss their daughters, and I know they will just dote on you.”

“Dress me?”

“Oh yes. Your mate suggested that when you arrived, you’d need clothing to fit your form. That the tall angry one wasn’t sharing.”

“Is that so?” Bethiah says sourly. “Remind me to neuter him when I see him again.”

“Actually he said nothing of the kind,” Yaahi replies, swishing a fluffy cat tail that has a surprising amount of jewelry upon it. “But I have seen your sort before. You are stingy and unkind to the smaller, softer mate because your husband prefers a gentler touch. Instead of learning what he likes, you take it out on her.” She reaches out and pats my cheek. “Here, though, you are equals. We will dress you in fine, pretty things, little Dora, and if your husband likes them, even the brutish one cannot take them away. Yes?”

“Oh, Bethiah isn’t mean to me,” I protest. I don’t like that they’re disparaging her. “You’ve got it all wrong. She’s the best person in the galaxy, next to Jamef.”

“Hmmp,” is all Yaahi says.

“And I’m happy to have you dress me, if that’s what Jamef wants, but I’d like Bethiah to get dresses, too. I won’t take anything unless she’s included as well.” I move to Bethiah’s side and take her hand, squeezing it to let her know I’m on her side. “If we’re both not welcome, then I’m fine waiting here. With her.”

Yaahi eyes me, and then clucks her tongue. “Such a loyal, sweet thing. Truly she deserves better. Come. Me and the other wives will dress you. Consider us your *issahs*, your kin-mothers, while you are here.” She gives Bethiah a reluctant look and then adds, “Both of you.”

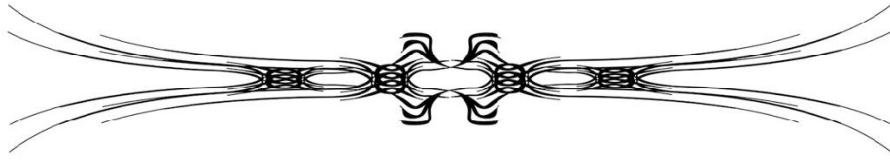
I beam at her and then turn to Bethiah. I expect my mate to have an annoyed look on her face. Perhaps an eye-roll. Something. Instead, Bethiah’s staring at me as if she’s never seen me before, her expression thoughtful.

Rubbing my thumb over the back of her hand, I whisper, “Do you not want to visit them? We can stay here if you want.”



She shakes her head. “No. No, fluffit, let’s go get you something pretty to wear, shall we?”

FIFTY-THREE



## BETHIAH

Something inside my small, dark heart thaws a little when timid, sweet Dora stands up to the praxiiian harridan and insists I get fancy clothes if she does. The last thing I want is some old biddy's castoffs, but the fact that Dora forced them to accept me makes me feel...warm inside.

Ugh. I really am becoming soft.

I can't complain about it, though. Not when Dora made them all welcome me despite my earlier antics. And right now, she's having the time of her life. The moment we entered the women's quarters, she's had a dozen women—or more—fussing over her. The motley mix of elderly females of all races surround her, exclaiming over her pretty yellow hair and her soft skin and how charming and cute she is. They pull out dresses and fabrics and Dora's eyes light up as lovely dresses are paraded in front of her. They push sweets in her direction and offer her wine, and the ugly szzt/ooli hybrid is braiding her hair as if they're best friends.

And I'm a little jealous, because that's *my* fluffit, but I also don't want to ruin her good time. Just because I'm cranky doesn't mean she has to suffer. I'm always a little cranky.

As a pretty dress of shimmering violet silk is held in front of Dora, her eyes shine with delight. I feel like a keffing arse. She likes pretty things. Here I've been handing her functional clothing and Dora's never complained or said anything about it. But I should have guessed. Rhonda liked pretty things, too. She liked them enough that she'd picked them over me.

But Dora touches the dress and glances over at me. "I don't suppose you have two of these? Bethiah would look pretty in purple, too."

Ah, kef me. If she were any sweeter, she'd melt the floor. She's not like Rhonda at all, and I don't know why I keep comparing them. I'm just keffed in the head.

“We have this in yellow,” an old ooli matron says. “Your mate’s other female would look lovely in it. Yellow is not good for you. It distracts from your shiny hair. But on her, it would be becoming.”

Dora gives me an encouraging look.

“I like yellow,” I say, just because she seems to need me to say something.

Her smile blossoms and my heart gives a funny little twist. She turns back to the ooli. “I’ll try on the purple, then.”

The fussing continues. Dora is shorter than the women here, and as one compares her to a daughter who was stunted in growth when she was young, they laugh and shorten the hem and dote on her. I watch from afar, because I don’t want to ruin the fun.

Someone sits down at a table next to me and places a large cask of wine between us. It’s the old praxiiian female with the graying ruff. Yaahi.

“So,” she says. “You and the little sweet one share a mate.”

“Yup.”

She pours the wine, offering me a goblet. “Which one was first? You or her?”

Where exactly is this going? “We were kind of a package deal.”

“Mmm. And what are you hiding?”

I eye her over my wine glass. “Hiding?”

Yaahi gestures at Dora. “She is adorable. Charming. Kind. Any male would count himself lucky to have her as his plaything. And yet instead of going to a station to have his ship upgraded, Jamef is here, listening to Kaatir spin stories of his glory days in the military and will pay far too much to get his supplies here. It smacks of hiding. So unless you are a murderous criminal, you are hiding her. And I am curious as to why.”

I'm not about to tell her that Dora's a clone. Yaahi might act like the friendly matron but that facade could be hiding a cutthroat mentality. "Maybe I *am* a murderous criminal."

"And yet you seem as if you can take care of yourself. So if you are murderous, Jamef does not need to protect you." She tilts her head, regarding me, and her whiskers twitch. "Which is why I suspect it is something to do with your tiny yellow-hair."

"Leave Dora alone," I say in a low, dangerous voice. "Whatever you think you know, just leave it at the door. As far as you and I are concerned, she's a harmless pet."

Yaahi pours herself some wine and sips it. "Kaatir is a good male. He has a soft heart when it comes to the unwanted, the useless, and the forgotten. He sees a female on a slaver's lead at a station, and perhaps that female is unpleasant to look at, like Hazza. Or she is aging out and no longer wanted, like me. He purchases her and makes her his wife, and brings her home to his moon base and gives her freedom. We do not serve in his bed. We take turns making meals and taking care of one another. Some of us are good with weapons and ship repairs. Some of us are good with sewing. Some of us are good at nothing, but all are welcome and safe here. All are cherished."

She takes another sip of her wine and goes quiet.

"What are you getting at?"

Yaahi gives me a placid look. "I am saying that your Dora would be safe here, if she needs a refuge. The women here would love to have a sweet young one to dote upon. Many of them have lost daughters. They would feed her and dress her in pretty clothes and take care of her every day of her life. I am saying that if you need a safe place for her, we can be that."

It's a good offer. A kind offer.

Dora laughs, twirling in the purple gown as the ooli female's eyes light up and she adjusts the sleeve. Another brings a tray of sweets, pushing it towards Dora. They really

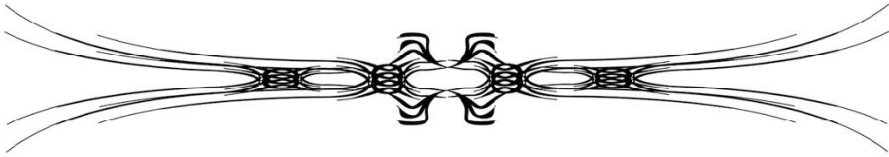
are just nice older women who want someone to take care of. It's thoughtful.

Maybe it would be best for Dora. Jamef and I are difficult to get along with even at the best of times. And we're bounty hunters. It's not the safest of jobs. It might be best for all of us if our triad dies a swift death.

I grab my wine and down the entire thing in a few quick gulps.

I don't want to be a responsible sort. I want to keep her... but maybe that's selfish. "I need to talk to Jamef," I tell her.

FIFTY-FOUR



## JAMEF

**J**ust when I think I've heard every single story that Kaatir has, he manages to pull a few new ones out. I don't mind listening. He's always been a decent sort and we have a connection with our shared military past and how it destroyed our bodies. With this many wives on his moon, you'd think Kaatir had plenty of people to talk to, but there's something different about swapping stories with someone that ate the same sort of ration bars you did. You just understand it far more deeply.

We talk until it's late, snacking on food that wife after wife brings out, and sip ooli brew as Kaatir reminisces and I mostly listen. I'm fully prepared to spend all night listening to his stories when there's a knock at the door, and instead of another one of Kaatir's wives appearing in the doorway with a new treat, it's Bethiah.

"Master," she cries dramatically and flings herself down at my feet, clutching at my boots.

I put a hand over my face as Kaatir laughs. "Please stop," I tell her in a low voice. "You're embarrassing me."

She looks up and wraps her arms around my leg, pressing her cheek to my knee. The expression on her face is downright mischievous. "Can I beg a moment of your time, master?"

"You can. Where's Dora?"

"Asleep in the guest quarters. She drank too much brew." Her teasing look slips a little, and I know she's stressed over something. Uh oh.

Kaatir gets to his feet, groaning. His limbs creak and he rotates one arm, the joints scraping and whining. "I think I'll go to bed, too. I'm sure one of my wives has to be lonely. At least one." He gives me a nod. "Look for me in the morning and we'll discuss how to modify your ship properly."



“My thanks,” I tell him. I move to get to my feet, but before I can, Bethiah jumps up and sits on my leg, sliding her arms around my neck. More of her games. Well, well. If she wants to play the sweet little wife, I’ll let her. I put my arm around her waist and rub her hip. As Kaatir leaves, I focus on her. “Speak, little one.”

She leans in, giving me a strange look. “Little one?”

“You’re still little compared to me.” She’s a handspan shorter. That counts. Besides, if she’s going to call me “master” I’m going to call her “little one.”

Bethiah makes a face, leaning in closer. She’s still wearing her heavy cloak and her robe, as if she’s fully committed to her ruse. Even in the most somber of garments, though, she’s attractive. It’s more than her lean, strong figure (which is appealing to the eye). It’s the spark of life inside her that’s just the most vibrant thing I’ve ever seen. It’s what draws me to her time and time again, even when I want to strangle her.

Instead, I plant a proprietary hand on her ass and squeeze. When she doesn’t push me away, I start thinking filthy thoughts. Like when she had her mouth on me. Kef, I’m easy to distract. Bethiah continues to press herself against me until Kaatir disappears down the hall and it grows quiet. Then, we’re alone in his dining room, just the two of us. She eyes me thoughtfully.

Uh oh. “Before you say it, we’re not robbing him.”

Bethiah mock-pouts. “That wasn’t what I came in here for.”

“You came in because you...missed me?”

She snorts, but lets one of the hands she has on my neck drift to my hair, and toys with the short locks. “No. I wanted to talk to a head that was more logical than mine because I’m starting to panic.”

Uh oh. I’m both flattered and worried. I give her ass another squeeze to distract her. “Talk to me.”

Bethiah bites her lower lip, then releases it with a subtle *pop*. “It’s Dora. One of the wives here let me know she’d be

welcome here. That they'd protect and take care of her. And this place is secure. And she'd have so many people dotting on her. You should have seen the way those women fussed over her, like they'd never seen something cute before. And this end of this particular system isn't all that trafficked, right? What with the dead planet and all. I'm wondering if maybe this is the best spot for her."

She must be worried, because I'm all but groping her ass and it's not fazing her. "And what do you think?"

"My brain says it's a great idea and my heart says kef no, she's ours." She makes a face and regards me. "Which is why I wanted to talk to you. Are we being selfish with her?"

"Did you ask Dora what she wanted?"

Bethiah huffs. "Of course not. I know her answer already. She'd blink those big eyes at us and declare that she wants to stay no matter what. She's loyal."

"But you're not sure if that's the right thing to do?" When she bites her lip again, I hold her a little tighter. "I think we say kef it and keep her."

She scrutinizes me. "Gotta admit, I find that surprising coming from you. Don't you want what's best for her?"

"Do you think we're *bad* for her?"

"Our jobs aren't the safest." She looks torn.

It's surprising to me that Bethiah's letting her guard down and showing me how vulnerable she is when it comes to Dora. This must really be tormenting her. "And she's got two of us to look after her. If Dora's happy, and we're happy, what's the problem with us being together?"

She thinks for a moment, and then a wry smile curves her mouth. "If you must know, it feels too easy."

"You haven't tried living with the two of us yet. I doubt Dora will think it's easy."

Bethiah rolls her eyes, but her smile is a little more relaxed. "I don't want her to feel like she has to stay for our sakes. I know we don't rub along well without her."

“Not yet. But I’m sure we’d manage.” I gaze up at her thoughtfully. “You stop imprisoning me every time I try to flirt with you and I’m sure we’ll get along better.”

She taps a finger on my chin. “It’s called foreplay, you fool.”

Our mouths are surprisingly close together, our breath mingling. “I prefer kissing.”

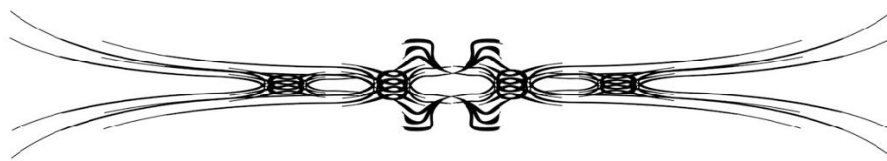
“We’re not supposed to kiss without our mate’s approval,” Bethiah reminds me, even as she leans in. “But I bet biting is all right.” And she leans in and bites my lower lip gently.

I groan. “Shall we go wake her up and tell her anyhow?”

Bethiah gazes at me thoughtfully. “Nah. Let her sleep.” She gives my cheek a light slap. “Come to bed when you’re ready.”

Backing away yet again, but still progress. I’ll take it.

FIFTY-FIVE



## DORA

I wake up with Bethiah's ponytail in my mouth and Jamef's cock pressed up against my ass.

I'm pleased, because both of them are in bed with me. It's not our normal tiny bed but a strange one, rounded like a bowl and filled with pillows. I slide my arms tighter around Bethiah's waist and hug her close, breathing in her scent. If every morning ended up like this, I'd be the happiest girl in the galaxy, I think.

A finger taps on my hip.

I turn slightly, and Jamef is gazing at me in the early morning light, his red eye bright against his face. "Did I wake you?" he asks, voice so low it's more a mouthing of the words than a whisper.

I shake my head.

He leans in closer, his gaze on Bethiah's back as she sleeps. When she makes a sleepy sound that tells us she's still in dreamland, he whispers again. "She almost kissed me last night."

My jaw drops with delight, and I give him an excited look of approval. "You two can kiss if I'm not around," I tell him. "We have to keep working on her. Make her realize she needs us."

Jamef nods. "Same. Kiss her as much as you like. We need to make sure she doesn't back off from us again." He pauses. "I'm with Kaatir today. You'll stay at her side?"

I give him a thumbs up. I'm going to stick so close to Bethiah that she's going to be sick of me.

He strokes my cheek with one hand, then caresses the edges of my mouth with his fingers. "Kiss her hard for me. I'll be back later."

Jamef gets out of bed in a creak of limbs and I'm a little disappointed he's not staying to let me—or Bethiah—help him out with his erection. Maybe later. I tuck myself against Bethiah's back again and go to sleep. Or try to. I'm thinking about Jamef's words and his suggestion.

*Kiss her hard for me.*

*Make sure she doesn't back off again.*

I've been letting the others take the lead when it comes to the sexual stuff, but perhaps the next step forward is mine. I study her sleeping form, brushing her hair off of her shoulders. What if she wakes up to me kissing her? Is she going to fuss that it's a bad idea or is she going to let me?

Only one way to find out.

I slide my arm from around her waist and sit up. She's larger than me by at least a foot so it's always a bit of maneuvering to kiss. I caress her shoulder, stroking her arm, and then lean in to press my lips to her skin. She's fascinating to touch—whereas Jamef is velvet framed by metal, Bethiah is tattooed velvet with the plated ridges that cover her body in certain spots. I'm sure Jamef has the same plating, but I notice it more on Bethiah because I keep expecting her body to be a bit more like mine. I glide my fingers over one rough, plated shoulder and then up to her collarbone, and then I kiss the back of her neck.

She jerks, and one of her horns cracks against my nose.

“Ow!” I crash backward onto the bed, holding my nose. My face feels as if it's caved in, and tears sting my eyes.

Bethiah grunts sleepily, waking up, and then rolls over. She squints at me and sits up. “What the kef, fluffit? Why is your nose bleeding?”

“You horned me in the face,” I manage, pinching my nose shut to stem the bleeding. Even that small action feels like it's killing me, and I whimper. “I was trying to wake you up and you headbutted me.”

She sighs and climbs out of bed, moving to the lavatory attached to our quarters. “This is why it's a bad idea to share a

bed with a human. You're far too fragile —"

"Don't even start that," I call after her. "I'm not sleeping somewhere else just because you're twitchy when I kiss you."

Bethiah returns a moment later, a weird look on her face and a wet towel in her hand. "You were trying to wake me up with kisses?" She crouches next to the bed and indicates I should sit up. When I do, she cleans my nose for me. The towel is warm and feels good against my throbbing face. "What's Jamef have to say about that?"

"He said I should kiss you as much as possible." I give her a wimpy look. "How was I supposed to know that you rear back when your neck gets touched?"

Her lips twitch and she continues to hold the towel to my nostrils. "For the record, if you want to wake me up with kisses, it's probably better to tackle me from the front instead of the back. Or go below the belt. No sharp equipment below the belt." She studies me for a moment. "And second, that's very sweet of you. I'm sorry I tried to get rid of you yesterday."

"What?"

"What?" she echoes, blinking innocently.

"You tried to get rid of me yesterday?" I squeak, horrified. My skin prickles with fear and I feel dangerously close to crying.

"It was half-hearted at best, fluffit. I was trying to think of what was best for you. But I talked to Jamef and he made me realize just how much I want to keep you around." She shrugs. "So...I do feel a little bad about that."

I don't know whether or not to be offended. I'm glad she decided she wants to "keep" me, but I'm still hurt that she even considered getting rid of me. I thought we were past that. "I see."

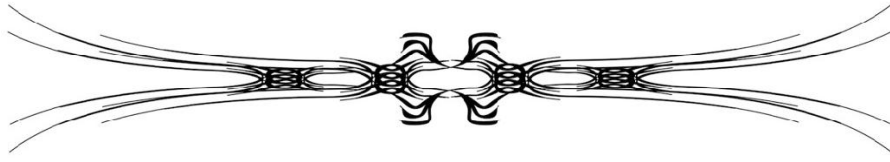
"Well, if you want to kiss me now, I won't say no," Bethiah tells me brightly.

I consider for a moment and then shake my head. "I'm not feeling very amorous at the moment. Sorry." I take the cloth from her and hop off the bed, trying to hide my hurt. "We should probably get dressed for breakfast anyhow. Hazza said she was going to make me her special egg dish."

Maybe if I get some time to process, I'll feel less wounded.



FIFTY-SIX



## BETHIAH

“**W**hat did you do to the little one?” Yaahi glares at me over her tea.

“Me? I didn’t do kef-all!” I glare back. “And I don’t appreciate the insinuation.”

“It’s no insinuation,” Yaahi declares. “Just look at her.”

I do. And I wince. Because Dora’s nose is swollen and bright red, and there’s a dark bruise under one eye, as if the swelling is somehow spreading to the rest of her delicate face. To make matters worse, her normally sunny disposition is missing this morning. She looks sad and morose, glumly toying with her breakfast. Even Hazza’s happy chatter isn’t bringing a smile to her face.

My fluffit looks miserable.

“Okay, that might be my fault, yeah.” I grimace. “She got a horn to the nose earlier and then she found out I was thinking about leaving her here. Now she’s mad at me.” I rub my mouth. Kef, humans are difficult. I’d forgotten how emotional they can be.

“Explain.”

Bossy female. I like her. So I tell her about Dora, how I’d thought about leaving her here but changed my mind, and how she’d still been wounded by the realization that we’d even been considering it. “Apparently that was the wrong tactic.”

Yaahi inclines her head in a knowing way. “She is hurt because she wishes to be invaluable to you, and you seek to foist her off upon others.”

“There’s no foisting! And even if there was, it’d be a very delicate, gentle foist. And anyhow, this was your idea. I blame you.” I shrug. “So there.”

“I assumed she sought safety.” Yaahi looks unruffled by my accusation. “There is no safer place than here with us. So I must come to the conclusion that perhaps she is with you out of more than just a need to be safe?” Her whiskers twitch. “This is a very remote possibility given your personality, but could it be that she cares for you?”

“Shut up,” I mutter. But she’s not wrong. Dora has made it clear that she actually likes me. And she adores Jamef. They’re cute as kef together...aaaand now I just feel worse. “I guess she doesn’t feel very appreciated right now.”

“I cannot imagine why.” Yaahi takes another sip of her tea. “You tried to give her to strangers as if she’s an unwanted pet. I cannot imagine how that would be hurtful. She must be an overly sensitive sort.”

I narrow my eyes at this praxiian harridan. How dare she be right. She ignores me, continuing to sip her tea with a smug look on her whiskers. “Maybe I’m not great at communicating how I feel. Maybe I have a hard time opening up and Dora’s being affected by it.”

“Why?”

“Why is she being affected?”

Yaahi shakes her head. “Why do you find it hard to open up to people? You are attractive and strong-willed. You are clever. Why are you afraid of someone as small as her? Why do you find it hard to open up to her?”

*Because the wounds that people give your heart take ten times longer to heal than anything else.*

*Because I don’t like being vulnerable. Or made to feel foolish.*

*Because I’m afraid I’m not going to be enough—or too much—for anyone.*

I wave a careless hand at Yaahi. “Let’s just say I’ve been burned in the past.”

“Mmm.” She eyes me over her cup. “If you burn your mouth upon your noodles, do you just never eat again?”

“That’s different.”

“Is it?”

“Yes, you need food to survive.”

“But not love?” Yaahi regards me with a look that might be close to pity. “I am not here to judge you, Bethiah —”

Could have fooled me.

“—but I will say that your Dora is a very emotion-driven creature. She desperately wants love and attention. What will it hurt to give her what she needs? Do you think she would ask for too much? Demand more than you can give her? Be unreasonable? She seems a sweet, easygoing creature to me.”

She is. And that’s the problem. Dora is too sweet, too kind, too forgiving. She’s nothing like Rhonda, and that means she’s far more dangerous to my heart. I chew on my lip and glance over at Dora again. She’s trying desperately to smile for Hazza, who keeps pushing more food onto her plate, but it’s clear her heart isn’t in things.

I did that to her. I hurt her feelings. I ruined her joy in this place.

“She deserves better than me,” I mutter.

“But she does not want better. She wants you.” Yaahi tilts her head. “My mate buys all kinds of noodles to please his wives. Exotic flavors. New spices. Anything he can get his hands on. Yet everyone fights over the very last package of chski noodles. They are common. Basic. No one fights over the most expensive Holaxi noodles or a new blend from Zenith II. And do you know why that is?”

“You ladies have shit taste?”

The praxiiian woman smiles. “It is because we like what is comfortable and pleasant to us. It does not matter if it is expensive or not. We like what we like. Perhaps Dora likes what she likes.”

I hate that this interfering woman makes too much sense. “I’m trying to decide if I should be offended that you’re calling me a noodle.”

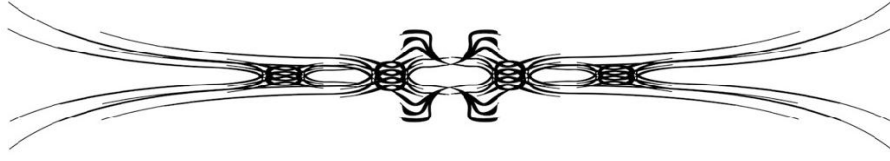
“A cheap noodle.” Yaahi smiles. “An easily replaced one, if I am being indiscreet. If she is not given what she wants, perhaps her tastes will change.”

I want to growl at her, except I know she’s right. Dora’s love is freely given right now, but if I keep hurting her, she’s going to withdraw and become hard...like me. And that would be terrible to see. “So what do you suggest, then?”

“Perhaps you try wooing her for a change?” Her furry brows go up, as if she’s challenging me. “Show her that she matters and that you care? Is that so hard?”

For me? Yes. But I should probably try it anyhow.

FIFTY-SEVEN



## BETHIAH

Ugh. I guess I have to fix this.

After breakfast, I move to Dora's side and glare at Hazza until she moves away. I lean over my fluffit, resisting the urge to stroke her pretty hair. She probably doesn't want to be petted right now. "Hey, what's your schedule look like for today?"

Dora wrinkles her brows at me. "My...schedule?"

Right. Dumb question. She doesn't have a schedule and if she did, it'd probably involve being fed treats by these women until she vomits, or changing clothes sixteen times. "Never mind. You're coming with me."

She shows no excitement for this pronouncement, which makes me feel ever-so-slightly guilty. "Where are we going?"

"First, we're going to the ship to get your nose looked at by med-bay, because you're making me look bad. And second, I thought we could train together a bit."

She toys with her eating sticks and then shakes her head. "No thank you."

What the...?

This is the first time she's never met my suggestions with complete and utter enthusiasm. I feel even more guilty, as if I've broken something inside her. I didn't realize how much I liked Dora's sweet eagerness until just now, and I feel like the biggest keffing arse in the universe for ruining it.

I study her face, trying to think of what would bring a smile back to her. "I want to teach you how to defend yourself, fluffit. So you can pull a blaster on me any time you like and I won't be worried that you'll shoot your own ear off. Doesn't that sound like fun?"

She doesn't respond, even when I give her my most winning smile.

"It'd make me feel better to know you're safe," I try again, since she's super into feelings and shit.

That makes her perk, but only a little. She eyes me, bites her lip, and then shakes her head again. "I'm not in the mood, Bethiah. Sorry. My head hurts."

Did I feel like a monster before? I keffing feel like one now. Dora never complains. I'm not sure if this is just to get rid of me, or if she genuinely hurts so much that she's admitting it. Reaching over, I cup her chin and force her to look up at me. Her big eyes are full of wounded emotion, and I hate that I've done this to her. I'm supposed to be making her mad at me so I won't get hurt, not the other way around.

Hurting Dora is the worst.

"Oh, fluffit." I sigh, stroking her cheek with my thumb. "I really am a terrible mate. I'm sorry." She leans into my touch ever so slightly, and that gives me an idea. "How about we go back to our quarters and I give your head a massage to take away the pain? And then if you want to train, since that would be a favor to me, I'll do a favor for you. Anything you like. Sound good?"

Her eyes narrow and she studies me. I've got her attention at least. "A favor?"

I nod.

She appears to consider this. "Anything I choose?"

Uh oh. "Anything within reason. If you ask me to go to the docks and space myself, I might take a pass."

Dora gives me a scrutinizing look. "I'd never ask you to hurt yourself."

Now I just feel like an even bigger arse. "But yes, if you're thinking along the lines of making me wear pink ruffles and putting a pet collar on me and walking me around the station, I'd do that for you." I pause, stroking her cheek, and then add in a tight voice, "I'd do anything for you, okay?"



I'm going to throw up. I don't like this vulnerable, nervous feeling. The feel of letting someone else know that they can pierce my shell. Hate it. Hate it lots.

But Dora graces me with a little smile and rubs her cheek against my hand. "All right. Head massage, and then training...but let's tell Jamef where we're going first."

Oh, goody. So he can see Dora's swollen nose? I manage a smile. "Sure thing, fluffit."

She gets to her feet and immediately snatches my hand, lacing my fingers through hers. With a sigh, she leans against my arm and clings to me, as if my touch makes her feel better. I pull her in for a hug, pressing a quick kiss to the top of her head, and do my best to ignore Yaahi's smug look.

We head out of the room and down one of the short, confusing halls of the moon base. I've no idea where Jamef is, but I can hear the sound of Kaatir's booming laughter somewhere in the distance, and I suspect our mate will be there.

Sure enough, three turns and two round, bubble-like rooms later, we find Jamef seated at a breakfast table with Kaatir. The older male is telling more stories, gesturing with a flat utensil as he slops jam onto a roll. Jamef is slumped in his chair, propping his head up with one hand and doing his best to not look bored out of his mind and failing utterly. Something tells me that not only does Kaatir not care if his captive audience is bored, but this is something that Jamef has endured before.

They both look over as we enter, and Jamef immediately jumps to his feet. "Dora! What happened to your face, sweetheart?"

I brace myself, waiting for accusing looks, but Dora just gives Jamef a chuckle and a rueful smile, moving forward into his arms. "Morning accident. It happens when your mates have horns and you do not. I'll be more careful in the future."

She's acting like it was her fault and not mine? Oh, fluffit. I fight the urge to squeeze the kef out of her...in a good way.

Dora lets Jamef examine her nose while I wait awkwardly in the doorway. “We’re going back to the ship,” she says. “Bethiah wants to show me some training moves.”

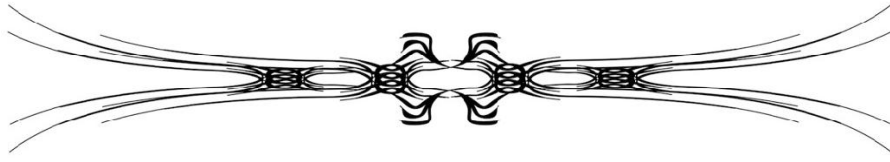
Jamef shakes his head. “Can’t. They’re working on it as we speak. It’s not going to be livable for the next few days.” He turns towards old Kaatir. “Do you have a training room my mates can use?”

“Do *I* have a training room?” Kaatir huffs. “Does a Iraxian bleed green?”

Dora blinks and looks over at me with charming confusion on her face. “Um, I don’t know the answer to that.”

Kef me, she’s cute. Ugh. I am in such danger.

FIFTY-EIGHT



## DORA

**T**oday is a rather mixed bag.

Waking up with both my mates, a plus. Trying to seduce Bethiah only to get a horn in the nose, a minus. Hearing Bethiah still doesn't consider me part of her permanent future, a big minus. Deciding that I'm going to use this "favor" Bethiah says she'll owe me against her? Big plus.

When we stopped by to see Jamef, I pulled him aside and whispered in his ear. "I'm going to seduce Bethiah."

His grin told me everything I needed to know. That he was absolutely on board with things.

So now it's my turn. Or it will be, soon. For now, Bethiah is showing me how to operate a blaster. I don't point out that it looks very similar to an Earth gun, but with a pressure point instead of a trigger. The mechanics are the same, but I pretend to be clueless so Bethiah takes her time and this feels like a big ask. We have target practice in a hold specifically sealed for such things, and Bethiah makes unhappy noises at how bad my aim is.

"You're closing your eyes when you shoot, fluffit."

"I'm really not," I tell her, and then prove myself wrong by trying to shoot the moving circle that's the "target." It reminds me of laser pointers used to torment cats back on Earth, except the computer makes a screeching sound of displeasure every time I miss. And I'm missing a lot. "Maybe my subconscious doesn't want to shoot anything."

"You'll never know, because you keep closing your keffing eyes," she tells me, making a face in my direction.

I want to stick my tongue out at her, but I decide to prove her wrong instead. I lift the blaster, track the target with the tip of the weapon, and then fire—and I closed my eyes again. "Shit. Sorry."

“This’d probably go better if it was attached to your arm —”

I turn to her, growling. “I’m not getting a gun attached to my arm!”

Bethiah puts her hands in the air. “I’m just pointing out the obvious.”

Biting back a growl, I put the blaster away. I know she’s worked hard on adjusting this one to human readings and fitting it for my smaller hand, but the practice (and how bad I suck at it) is making me nervous. What if I’m never good with a blaster and they decide to get rid of me after all? What if I can’t hack it with a couple of space pirates after all? The thought’s a sobering one, and I try shooting the target again—only to fail for the exact same reason once more.

“How much more?” I ask Bethiah, frustrated. “I hate this.”

She crosses her arms over her chest, and I wait for her to make a snarky comment about how bad I am or how I’m not learning. “You’ll get better with time, I promise. The first time I held a blaster, I accidentally shot my teacher.”

A hint of a smile tugs at my mouth. “Really?”

“Really. A blaster feels so natural in your hand that I thought I had it handled, no problem.” She saunters over to my side and steps behind me, her front pressing to my back. Bethiah covers my hand with hers, locking her other hand at my waist. Joined together, she guides my blaster through the air, my finger still on the trigger, and we follow the target. “You’ve got to factor in that little bit of time from when you shoot to when your bolt hits your target. I aim just slightly ahead.” She noses the blaster just slightly in front of the target and continues to follow it. “Like so.”

I shoot and miss again, but this time it’s closer.

“You’ll get there. It just takes practice.”

“You’re being nice to me again,” I tease her, glancing up over my shoulder into her eyes. “Careful, or I might get used to it.”

She frowns down at me as if I've said something offensive. "You don't think I'm nice?"

Uh oh. I lower the blaster, neatly stepping out of her training embrace. "You can be? A lot of the time you just... choose not to be."

That explanation doesn't make her any happier. Bethiah continues to look troubled, and this is not the vibe I wanted to have before I ask my favor. I power down my blaster and hold it out to her, handle first. "Is that enough training for today?"

She nods absently. "Thank you for humoring me."

"Can we do it again sometime?"

Bethiah perks a little at that. "Only if you want to. I...I don't want you miserable around me, all right? I know I can be hard to live with, but I'm just not good at this sort of thing. People prefer me in small doses or not at all." She takes the blaster and holsters it at her waist with her weapons. "That's what I've been trying to tell you this whole time. I'm not good at any of this."

I crook a finger in her direction, indicating she should lean down.

She does, and I slide my arm around her neck, pulling her in for a quick kiss. She jerks in surprise, as if she didn't expect me to be affectionate, and I nip at her lower lip. "We're all learning together," I tell her. "I'm going to mess up, too. Just don't get rid of me, all right?"

Bethiah nods. "I...I'm sorry, Dora. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

I want to melt into a puddle at her feet. Instead, I rub my nose against hers because I know this is hard for her and calling attention to how much she's trying is going to make her nervous again. I've forgotten that my nose is bruised, though, and a hot flash of pain crosses my face. "Ow."

"That's what you get for being cuddly," she tells me, and then leans in and kisses me again anyhow.

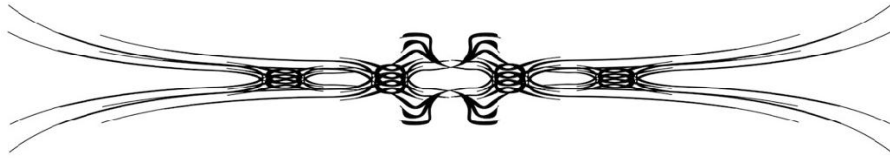
I kiss her back, because these sweet, frisky nips on the mouth are wonderful. “I know what I want for my favor.”

“Oh?”

I nod. “Shower. You and me. Together.”

Part of me expects her to say no. To come up with an excuse. Instead, she pauses and says, “You need the med-bay machine to check out your nose first. Then we shower.”

FIFTY-NINE





## DORA

Nothing like a med machine to set your dignity (and libido) back to ground zero. I do my best to ignore the poking and prodding of my nostrils and my bruised face, and I close my eyes when a needle emerges from the machine and heads toward my face.

I hold Bethiah's hand tightly when there's a sting on my nose, followed by a cool numbness. "Better?" I ask her, opening my eyes.

She studies my face, her fingers gripping my chin. "Better," she agrees. "The swelling will go down quickly with the shot and by the morning, you'll be good as new."

I release her hand and gently touch my nose. "That's the first time I've been butted in the head by a lover."

Bethiah chucks my chin. "First time so *far*."

Giggling, I push her hand away. Count on Bethiah to put things in perspective. "All right. Now where do you suppose the showers are around here?"

"I can wager a guess," she says, and takes my hand. "Come on."

We cut through three rooms and a corridor, and then we locate the showers. With so many people living here on Kaatir's moon base, I figured they'd have multiple bathrooms, but the sight of the showers themselves makes a fragmented memory flash through my head. This shower room looks military in its make, with multiple shower heads attached to the wall in the same area and a large tiled area for drainage. The shower could fit twenty people at once, and something tells me that was part of the plan when it was built. The memory teases in the back of my mind, of a female friend handing me a bar of soap over a waist-high wall, of joking around as I shampooed my hair.

It's brief but vivid, and makes me pause. "Hey, Bethiah? Do you think that the other Dora—the first one—was in the military?"

"Not with your aim," she replies immediately.

"Hey!"

"What? You want me to lie? You're amazing with a blaster, fluffit. I've never seen such skill." Her voice immediately turns buttery and unctuous. "So incredible. You \_\_\_"

"Okay, okay." I pick up a towel and flick it at her, making it snap. The skill with the towel comes easy, and I like when Bethiah jumps slightly in surprise, her tail flicking. "I know how to do this, at least."

"Lovely," Bethiah comments, scanning the room. "And you're sure this is what you want? Me washing you?"

I snap the towel at her again, enjoying the annoyed look she flicks my way. "I said a shower. I didn't say you were washing me. I'm going to wash you."

Her eyes narrow at me.

"Get undressed," I sing-song, tossing my towel over my shoulder and sauntering over to the changing area. I kick my shoes off next to the metal bench, and a wooden one rises in my memories. I push it aside, because I don't want to think about that other Dora right now. I'm not her. I'm a...starfish sort of her. A replica grown in a lab. Whoever that Dora was, she's not me.

I pause in my undressing, wondering how Yaahi and Hazza and the other women would look at me if they knew the truth. Would they still shove cookies at me and play with my hair and dress me up like a doll if they knew what I was? Or would they be repulsed?

I forget that I'm something that's not whole when I'm with Jamef and Bethiah. They make me feel...well, like a total person.

“Here I am,” drawls a voice behind me. “Try to contain your excitement.”

Bethiah leans against the wall, making a dramatic pose and expression. She’s completely naked, her tattoos on full display. They wind down her lithe body in intricate patterns that just beg to be explored with the tip of a tongue, and I shouldn’t be surprised at the sight of her bare pussy, but I am. It just seems so stark and blatant...and appealing.

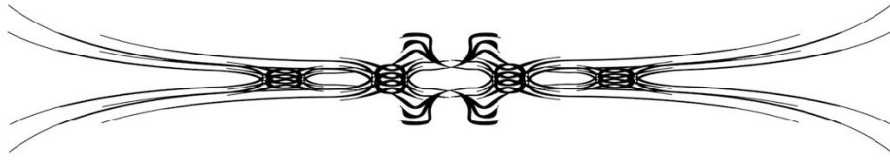
Of course she’s bare down there. Only humans have body hair in inappropriate places. Just my luck. “You beat me,” I tell her, pushing away all thoughts of stolen memories and starfish people. I have a job to do, and that job is to seduce Bethiah. I grab the dress I’m wearing—one given to me by Hazza—and haul it over my head, joining Bethiah in her nudity. “Now I’m ready, too. Prepare yourself for the best shower of your life.”

“Don’t oversell it, fluffit,” Bethiah teases, pushing herself off the wall again. “You’ll give me a complex.”

Oh, I’m not overselling. I plan on making this the best shower she’s ever had. I’m not letting her out of this room until I’ve made her come at least once. I think that’s only fair.

I hold my hand out to her and wait for her to take it, already planning my attack. Bethiah’s not going to stand a chance.

SIXTY



## DORA

I suspect Bethiah is starting to figure out that this is not going to be about showering.

Now undressed, we head into the shower area. She fiddles with the controls, pointing out the hot and cold settings since I can't read the language. Once the water starts to cascade down on us, she suddenly seems very focused on bathing. She rubs her hands over her arms, then steps under the spray and scrubs her face.

"Hey now," I joke. "This is supposed to be my moment."

"Right. Because you're a weirdo and want to wash me. I forgot." She obediently steps out of the spray, taking a few steps backward. A moment later, she flings her arms wide and closes her eyes. "Go on. Do your worst."

"Jeez. Stop with all the enthusiasm. You'll give me a swelled head." I move to what looks like a soap dispenser on the wall and hammer on the button with the three-fingered hand until the soap squirts onto my palm. "If this is going to be so miserable for you, then we don't have to do it, all right?"

Bethiah is silent for a long moment, and I turn to look at her. She has her arms crossed over her breasts, as if she's hugging herself. Her expression is pensive. "I'm not trying to ruin this for you, fluffit. I just...don't know what you want from me."

"You sure about that? Because I feel like I've been pretty obvious." I hold up my hand full of bath gel. "You. Me. Soap. Me rubbing my hands all over you in the shower. Me giving you pleasure from my touch. Is that something you don't want?"

"Didn't say that."

"Then let me take care of you." I take a step toward her, gazing up at her. She's so tall and I feel like a shrimp next to

her. Barefoot, I don't reach her shoulder, and her horns just make her seem taller. Not intimidating, though. Just lean and lovely and trying so hard not to be vulnerable. "You never let anyone take care of you, do you?"

She tilts her head. "I suppose the question one must ask is 'why would anyone want to?'"

"Because they like you. Because they want to get to know you better."

Bethiah looks openly skeptical at that. "This is me we're talking about, fluffit."

She's hinted that there was someone in her past that things didn't end well with. Most people have that sort of thing, but for some reason, Bethiah seems to think she's bad news for everyone. I won't hear of it. I love her strange, irreverent nature. "I know we're talking about you, silly. I meant every word of it. I like all of you, even when you're driving me insane or trying to get rid of me."

"Dora." Bethiah cups the sides of my face just as I begin to lather my hands, distracting me from my task. I meet her eyes and there's no laughing, teasing emotion there right now, just worry. "If it seems like I'm trying to get rid of you, I'm not. I'm just trying to do what's best for you. I don't want you to feel like you've made a mistake staying with the two of us just because we're the only ones you know. I want you to have options if you need them."

Aw. "I know I have options." Most of them involve Risda, but options have always been there. "I want to stay with you and Jamef. You're my family. And now you're my lovers."

"You really are stubborn."

"I learned it from the best," I say cheerfully, and then slide my soapy hands over her hips. "So, do you want to tell me what feels good or do I get to figure it out on my own?"

She gives an exasperated little shake of her head and then impulsively leans in and kisses me. "This feels good."

I go still, closing my eyes and leaning into the kiss. Her lips brush over mine in a feather-light motion, and it always

surprises me how soft Bethiah's kisses are given that her personality is anything but subtle. She kisses like I'm delicate. She kisses like I'm fragile, and need tenderness above all else. Like I'm breakable.

I like it, but sometimes a girl wants more. I rub my soapy hands over her hips and then squeeze her backside as her tongue dances over my lips. When she continues to give me light, playful kisses, I push her back against the tile and kiss her harder. She moans against my lips, and this time, when I tongue her, she meets me with more enthusiasm. "You can't break me," I tell her between kisses. "So touch me like you mean it."

She pulls away from me, panting, and shakes her head. "I always mean it."

"Good," I say. "And you're going to let me pleasure you, right? Make you come like you made me come? You helped me and Jamef get off and didn't take anything for yourself."

The cagey look returns to Bethiah's eyes. "I didn't want anything. I just like seeing you two enjoy —"

"Liar. I think you want more and you're afraid to ask." I reach behind her, stroking the base of her tail and skimming my fingers over the cleft of her buttocks. "Why is it that the boldest woman in the universe doesn't know how to ask someone to lick her pussy?"

She moans at my words, and I suspect it's a way of her not having to reply to me. That's all right. I know her tricks now.

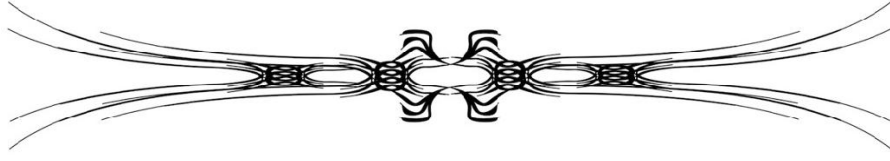
"Your safe word is still casserole," I tell her, squeezing one buttock. "And I remember rule number one."

"Rule...number...one?" she echoes blankly, distracted. Her hands have slid to my shoulders and she leans against the wall, watching me in a daze.

I nod. "Bethiah's rule number one. You take what you want."

And I drop to my knees in front of her.

SIXTY-ONE





## DORA

Judging by the way Bethiah sucks in a breath, I've shocked her. I'm a little surprised myself, to be down on my knees in front of her in the shower. I don't think of myself as this bold, cocksure woman, but when I think of Bethiah and Jamef, it's like I know what I want and I'll do anything to get it.

However, I didn't foresee a problem with heights. On my knees, I'm not going to reach anything with my mouth. The apex of her thighs is above my forehead. "I don't suppose you feel like squatting? Sexy squatting?"

She laughs, and all the weird tension I've been feeling from her disappears. "We need to get you a footstool," she says, even as she folds up her long limbs and sits down in the shower. "The perils of loving a human."

I hold my breath. "Love" is not a word Bethiah tosses around easily, so I'm afraid to call attention to it. I move closer to her, wrapping wet arms around her body. "This way I can kiss you, at least."

Boldly, I brush my lips over hers. She makes a pleased sound in her throat, her hands sliding to my back, and I take that as encouragement. Lips parted, I stroke my tongue against hers, making each kiss as wet and deep (and perfect) as I possibly can. I want to devour her mouth. I want her to be utterly lost in our kisses. I want—

I pause, because something in the showers chimes. "Water conservation," Bethiah murmurs, her gaze on my mouth. "It senses we're not standing."

"That's fine. We can wash afterwards." I cup the back of her neck and kiss her again, licking at her mouth. When she moans her approval, I slide a wet hand over her side and then up to one of her small, high breasts. Her nipple is hard, a bit tough like the plating she has over her arms and between her

cleavage. But I can't imagine our bodies are that different. Using my thumbnail, I scrape it, hard, and I'm rewarded with a hiss followed by a moan. "Too much?" I ask. "'Casserole' out if you need to, but I like touching you."

In response, she holds me closer to her, her mouth hungry on mine.

Perfection. With a happy whimper, I kiss her harder, toying with her breast and teasing her nipple with my nail. I pinch it, too, and this elicits another soft sound from her. Sensitive, just as I suspected, but she just needs a little more "oomph" in that area than I do.

"I love touching you," I confess to her, squeezing her breast. "I feel safe with you. I feel pretty with you. I feel like the luckiest person in the universe that you saved me that day at the slave market. You've given me so much."

"Like a bloody nose?" she murmurs between kisses, cupping my breast and teasing my nipple far more gently than I'm touching hers.

"Like a safe place. Like someone to laugh with. Someone to kiss and hold at night when I'm scared. You're my best friend and my lover, too," I tell her between small, nipping kisses. It's getting harder to concentrate given her fingers teasing my breast, but I'm determined for her to come first. "So quit telling me you don't understand what I see in you."

She lets out a ragged breath, her teeth scoring my lower lip. "I told Jamef I was selfish."

"Hm?"

"That I wanted to keep you."

I moan at that, because it's the sexiest thing I've ever heard. "I want you to keep me, too."

"You deserve better —"

"Fuck better," I breathe, then kiss her again. Eventually she'll figure out that we work perfectly together. Until then, I'll just keep convincing her. I pinch her nipple one more time

and tug on it in the way I'm learning that she likes, and then I slide my fingers down her belly. "Can I touch you lower?"

She nods, her lips on mine again. It's like she can't get enough of kissing, and I'm happy to oblige. I tease her tongue with mine, even as I slip my hand lower, pressing between her legs to that incredibly bare, luridly arousing cleft of hers. She's wet here, the slickness different than the water from the shower, and I let my fingers drift through the folds of her cunt, searching for her clit.

I...can't find it.

That makes me pause. "Hey, um, Bethiah?"

"Mmm?" She sounds so deliciously breathless and lost in the moment that I hate to ruin it by asking the dumbest question ever.

I stroke my fingers through her folds again, but still come up empty. Hm. I push a finger into the hot core of her, and she pants in response, her breath speeding up. I add a second finger, working them both in and out of her quickly, but I can't help but feel that I'm not pleasuring her quite right. She's going to need more than just a fingerbang. Any woman knows that.

"Well, well," comes a voice from the outside of the showers.

It's Jamef.

We break our kiss and both look over at the same time. Jamef's leaning against one of the low walls of the shower area, watching us with great interest. I imagine we look good in his eyes—two females sprawled on the floor of the showers, kissing and fingering each other. The smile he wears tells me that he doesn't mind this at all.

He gestures. "Please don't let me interrupt. I'm enjoying the show."

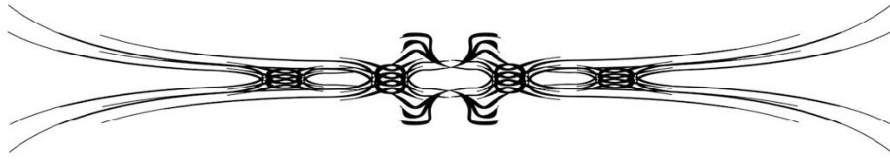
"Kef you," Bethiah mutters, spreading her thighs wider so I can keep working her with my fingers. She turns back to me, kissing me again, her tongue stroking over my upper lip in a way that makes my toes curl.

Focus, Dora. “Actually,” I manage, looking over at him.  
“You can give me a hand.”

He grins, showing a wicked smile. “Can I, now.”

“Oh, kef me,” Bethiah says.

SIXTY-TWO



## DORA

I'm relieved Jamef is here. Relieved, because the look he's giving us is not one of a man annoyed that he's been left out of the fun. He genuinely seems as if he's content to let me remain in control, his movements slow as he approaches our spot on the floor where I continue to tease Bethiah with two fingers working in and out of her slick cunt, my mouth nipping at hers in quick, fevered kisses.

"I...don't know...mesakkah anatomy," I say between kissing her. "Show me where her clit is."

Bethiah makes a soft sound at that—dare I call it a whimper—and her sprawled thighs quiver just a bit.

"I can help with that. It's not exactly the same as a human clit, but she does have a very sensitive spot deep inside." He kneels next to me, heedless of the wet tile, and grins down at Bethiah. "You look lovely, little one."

She growls in his direction, but she doesn't get up.

I bite back a chuckle, because I know Bethiah must be feeling vulnerable right now. I rub the outside of her knee, resting against her leg. "Show me how to touch her."

"If I may." He looks at Bethiah, waiting for permission.

She scowls at both of us. "*Someone* had better keffing touch me."

"Just making sure we're all on board," Jamef says, ignoring her huffy tone. He leans over her, putting a palm on the floor, and gives her a quick kiss. "I'll just be here long enough to show Dora how to make you come, and then I'll let her get back to playing with you."

"What about you?" I ask, because I don't know if he's going to feel excluded or not. I don't want him to feel as if we're ignoring him, but I hadn't planned on him being here, either.

“I am more than happy to observe and enjoy,” he tells me, moving back between Bethiah’s spread thighs. “Now, give me your hand, sweetheart.”

I do as he asks, and he wraps his bigger hand around mine, leaving only my first two fingers free. Using me, he rubs my fingers up and down the cleft of her pussy, getting them slick and teasing her. Bethiah bites her lip, her hips moving in little jerky motions as if she can’t help herself.

He guides my fingers into her and I suck in a breath, because he adds a finger to support my two. Using our joined hands and three combined fingers to pleasure her feels incredibly wicked, and the sound Bethiah makes is needy and raw. Her hands claw at the tile floor, as if she needs something to hold onto, and I can feel her thighs tremble again.

“Now, sweetheart,” Jamef murmurs, leaning over me as he presses my fingers deeper inside Bethiah. “Your hands are small, so push in as far as you can and see if you can brush against something. It’ll feel a bit like a small knot.”

I stretch my fingers, wanting desperately to hit that sweet spot for her. Just when I think I’m not going to be able to reach, I rub up against something—and I’ve found it. It’s like a bead at the top of her channel, much further back than my sensitive spots, and the moment I touch her there, Bethiah’s breath explodes from her and she gasps as if drowning.

“Perfect,” Jamef murmurs in my ear and then kisses my temple. “I’ll leave you to her.”

He slips away and gets to his feet, and I look over at Bethiah. She’s got a tight look on her face that worries me. It’s not the pleasure, I think, but the fact that we’re focused on her, and I fret that it’s going to chase away her orgasm. “Kiss her for me?” I ask, because I suspect she needs a distraction. “See if you can get her to make the same noises I did.”

If Jamef senses what I’m doing, he doesn’t say it aloud. He just grunts and moves forward toward Bethiah’s face, resting on his knees. Instead of kissing her right away, he takes her hand in his and presses a kiss to her knuckles, his other hand

stroking her wet hair back from her brow. “I love it when we all play together.”

I expect Bethiah to say something caustic, but she clings to his hand, her face scrunched as if she’s fighting an orgasm for dear life. Can’t have that. I withdraw my hand and lick my fingers, tasting her. “She’s sweeter on the tongue than you,” I comment. “I’ll have to do this often.”

And Bethiah makes another one of those choked cries when Jamef leans over and kisses her.

I get my fingers good and wet in my mouth, and then return between her legs, sliding deep inside her, so deep that the webbing between my fingers stretches against the entrance of her body. I tickle that little spot inside her, all the while pressing kisses to the inside of her thigh and murmuring about how beautiful she is—because she is—as she and Jamef kiss desperately. I can tell by the shaking in Bethiah’s legs and the way her cunt flutters around my fingers when she’s close, and I press harder, more determined to give her just what she needs.

When she sobs her release, I feel victorious. I did that. I watch her cling to Jamef as she kisses him, my fingers drifting in and out of her juicy cunt in lazy strokes, and I love this moment. I want to stay here forever, just the three of us, sharing and loving.

Bethiah finally lets out a shaky laugh as I pull my hand from her body and lick it again. “So much for your shower, fluffit.”

“Oh, I’m still going to wash you,” I point out. “That was just a warm-up for tonight.”

“Tonight, eh?” Jamef asks.

I nod. “We have a big bed, and I want all of us together tonight. I want both of you, and I want all three of us to come, together.”

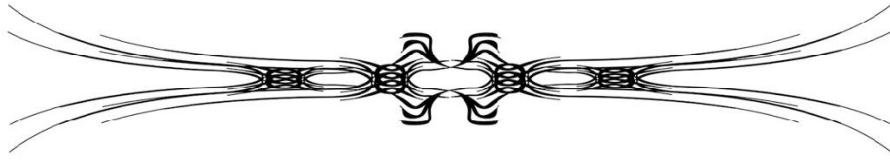
“Tall order,” Bethiah wheezes, but her legs are still shaking.



Nah. Not a tall order. Just me asserting myself with my mates. If she has to sit on his cock and I sit on his face, we'll all be happy campers. I just need all three of us touching and loving and bonding.

I wonder if Hazza has any sexy lingerie I can borrow.

SIXTY-THREE



## BETHIAH

I hate feeling vulnerable. It makes me anxious, and feeling anxious is the only thing I hate worse than feeling vulnerable.

Yet the vulnerable feeling remains all day. Dora's in a happy mood, full of kisses and hand-holding and basically clinging to my side and giving me adoring looks. After our shower (in which she washed me with far too much attention), she's insisted on remaining with me as we walk around the moon base. I think she senses that I don't want to go and spend time with the other women, which only makes me feel worse. It's like she knows what will bother me and is trying to make things as easy as possible.

It's sweet and thoughtful and that's why it's making me crazy.

Because I'm trying to find reasons to bail out on both Dora and Jamef, and they keep being too good, too perfect. I don't trust perfect, just like I don't trust Dora's fingers making me come, even as Jamef kissed me and held my hand, reassuring me that he's strong enough to take care of us both.

Maybe that's the problem. I don't want to need anyone and now I need *two* people.

Nothing good ever came out of a corsair being vulnerable. Our job depends on us being hard and bitter and the ability to see through the bullshit of others. Corsairing doesn't work if you're, say, a dark-eyed human holding the hand of another female and gazing adoringly up at her. Any enemy could take Dora down in an instant. She's not paying attention to her surroundings. Kef, *I'm* not paying attention to our surroundings. I haven't taken a job in weeks, either. If I'm not careful, I'm going to fall on the inactive list at the guild. If that happens, when I activate again, I'll have to take a pay cut. The

guild punishes those who are inconsistent, and I don't want that to be me. I'll have to talk to Jamef—

And then I growl at myself, because why the *kef* am I checking in with anyone? This triad has polluted my brain.

“Why are you growling?” Dora asks, pulling her gaze away from the ship hangar. We're inside the station, watching from a large window as several of Kaatir's wives work on expanding the *Pleasure Spot* into a roomier ship that can accommodate all three of us comfortably. She gives my hand a little shake. “Don't like the changes?”

“They're ugly,” I say automatically, hiding my true thoughts.

Dora just chuckles. “Did you not see the ship before? It wasn't winning any beauty contests. Besides, I like it. Hazza says we're going to have room for a small garden inside. Just closet-size, really, but I like the thought of being able to grow flowers or something green. It's been forever since I've seen growing things.” She tilts her head, frowning. “Or have I ever seen green growing things?”

“You did, back on Three Nebulas.” I don't like it when she references her clone memories, because I know they bother her. “Remember? We sat in the atrium and there were plants around us.”

She brightens, the stress smoothing away from her face. “Oh! That's right. Though I confess I was pretty distracted, what with you licking me.”

“Mmhmm.” I stare out at the monstrosity that's now going to be the *Pleasure Spot*. The belly of the ship will bulge as if it's pregnant and ungainly, but I've seen worse. And if Dora is excited for a closet-sized garden, well, she should have one. “This reminds me that I need to get back to work. As soon as we can take off, I have to check in with the guild.”

Dora's hand twitches in mine. “What for?”

“Bounty contracts. I need to start earning credits again. Get back on the job. I don't like all this sitting around.”

I brace myself, expecting Dora to whine and complain about me working. That she doesn't want me to take time away from her. That I'm being unfair. Isn't that how every relationship goes? It's all fun and pussy-eating games until someone has to bring in the credits, and then someone else gets mad that they're not getting enough attention.

But Dora just nods her head. "No reason to put it off. I imagine you'll want me to stay with the ship until I get better with my aim, right?"

I gaze down at her in surprise. Her easy acceptance feels... too easy. "That's not going to bother you?"

"No. Why should it? Right now I'd be a terrible bounty hunter. And someone should guard the ship if both you and Jamef have to work."

I think about her nightmares, how she doesn't like sleeping alone because it scares her, and I squeeze her hand. "I imagine we'd trade off. We wouldn't leave you alone and defenseless. Someone would be with you at all times."

"Well, then that's fine. As long as you don't try to dump me on someone at the next place we stop."

"Me?" I put a hand to my chest with mock innocence. "I would never."

"You'd better not." She turns and eyes me with amusement. "I know you're testing me to see if I'm going to want to bail, Bethiah, but you need to realize that I'm with you. Both of you. You're bounty hunters. You'll need to bounty hunt at some point. That's part of the job."

"Yes, and then you'll get bored because we spend so much time away from the ship trying to earn credits, and then it'll be our fault for you feeling lonely and afraid."

"So get me a plant." She shrugs. "As long as I know you're coming back to me—both of you—I'll manage." Her gaze goes out to the ship and she watches as a strong female lifts a section of ship into place and begins to solder the metal. "This is going to work. You wait and see." Then she pauses. "By the way, should I be on birth control?"

“Only if a tongue can make you pregnant,” I joke.

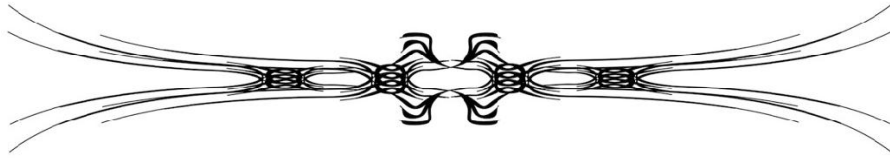
“They can’t, but you and I are going to be riding Jamef’s cock tonight so we need to think about that kind of thing.” She smiles sweetly at me and then smacks my ass. “I’ll go ask Hazza.”

Kef me. For a scared little human, she’s certainly come a long way. I clench my thighs together, replaying her words in my mind. *You and I are going to be riding Jamef’s cock tonight.*

She’s determined to make our three-way work, and while part of me is nervous about that, a larger (stupider) part of me is excited to see what tonight will bring. Maybe I need to be on birth control, too.

Kef me.

SIXTY-FOUR



## JAMEF

I eye the invoice that Kaatir sent to my data-pad with amused dismay. You'd think that listening to ten thousand war stories would at least warrant a discount, but not so much. The old male's a crafty one. While his wives are busy upgrading your ship, he keeps you busy with talk for so long that by the time he's done, you just want to get away and you'll chew off your own arm in order to accomplish it.

Not that I've got much arm left to chew. And I'm sure Kaatir enjoys our talks. But it doesn't mean there isn't an ulterior motive there. It's all part of the pitch, and how he controls who shows up to his base. You'd better be good and keffing ready to hear endless war stories if you head to Kaatir's place.

But it'll be worth it. The ship—the *Pleasure Spot*, as Bethiah calls it—will be ready for our family.

*My family.*

The thought fills me with a mixture of both terror and excitement. I've never dreamed of having a family. As an orphan on Raan, it was always understood that no one wanted you and your only value was in how hard you could work to prove yourself. The moment I was of age, I joined the military, hoping it would be the family I'd wanted it to be. But as a no-caste soldier, I ended up on the front lines and came back from the war—a war we'd lost—broken and bitter and more determined than ever to be alone.

It wasn't until Bethiah's teasing cat-and-mouse game that I finally thought someone might actually be interested in who I am as a person. No matter how many times I pushed her away or insulted her, she didn't take it personally. If anything, it seemed like a challenge to her. It allowed me to let my guard down and think maybe, maybe...



And then Dora showed up, frightened and in need of a hero.

And well...now here we are. So I eye the invoice again and think perhaps it's not too much to pay after all. I can take a few extra bounties here and there. I shut down my data-pad and decide to see if my mates are in our quarters. It's getting late—Kaatir's last story was an hours-long tribulation of how he'd managed to hold out on a moon base by himself for 123 days with nothing to eat but the vermin that crawled in the tunnels. After hearing that, I'm good on stories for a while. I just want to sleep. Maybe curl up around Dora and Bethiah and breathe in their fresh, clean scents.

I wouldn't even mind if Bethiah thumped my ear or teased me. That's how she shows she cares.

Thinking about Bethiah and Dora brings a visual of the shower scene into my mind. My cock hardens in anticipation, thinking about touching both of them again. Was any male so lucky as me? To walk into the showers and see both of my mates sprawled on the floor, kissing as one fingered the other? Kef me, what a sight. I could play it back in my bionic eye, re-watch it all over again, but my cock's already stiffening as I head for the guest quarters on Kaatir's base and the last thing I want is to run into one of his nosy, myriad wives. Maybe I'll walk in on them touching each other again.

I bite back a groan. Some males might be threatened by the two women bonding or touching each other without them, but I'm not surprised by it. I've always been an afterthought to everyone. If Bethiah and Dora decide they like each other best, as long as they want me around in some sort of capacity, even just as protector, I'll do it.

Even a half-ass triad is better than being completely alone. I'll take what I can get.

I open the door to find Dora sitting on the huge bed, Bethiah seated on the floor in front of her. Dora's hands are in Bethiah's long, still-damp hair, and she's braiding in ribbons and tiny beads in what must be the most over-decorated

hairstyle Bethiah has ever worn. “Jamef!” Dora cries happily when I enter. “You’re just in time.”

“I hope we’re beading his hair next,” Bethiah says, arms crossed over her chest. She’s wearing a slip of a yellow night-tunic, the straps so thin they’re translucent across her shoulders. It dips down to her cleavage, offering her lovely blue skin up for admiration. Dora is dressed similarly, but her yellow hair is loose and tumbling around her shoulders, and the pale purple tunic she wears is tight across her abundant cleavage.

It’s a pleasing sight, and I record this one in my bionic eye as well. Just in case this doesn’t work out, I’ll have the memories of this moment to review over and over again on colder nights. “You two look cozy.”

“I told Bethiah that as part of my shower, I get to do her hair. Doesn’t she look pretty?” Dora leans over Bethiah and presses a quick kiss on her shoulder.

“Mind the horns, fluffit,” Bethiah grumbles, reaching up behind her to pat Dora’s cheek. “Your nose is just now looking better.”

“Let me take a look?” I move to Dora’s side and sit next to her on the bed, cupping her small face. Sure enough, the swelling has gone down considerably. The tip of her nose is slightly pink, but otherwise you wouldn’t know she’s been injured. “Much improved. Thank you for taking care of her, Bethiah.”

And I curl my tail around Bethiah’s wrist, wondering if she’ll allow it.

She does, relaxing her arm at her side and toying with the furred tip of my tail in a way that makes my cock twitch in response. “I don’t want everyone thinking I abuse my mates.”

“No one thinks that.” I reach out and caress her jaw. “And you do look nice tonight.”

“Flatterer. You just want to get laid.” She gives me a sly smile.

“As we established earlier, I’m also happy to watch. Whatever you two are comfortable with.”

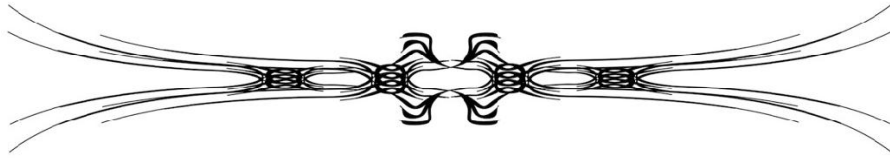
Dora ties off Bethiah’s braid. The moment she does, she flings her arms around my neck, tackling me. I grunt in surprise as she climbs over me and pushes me down to the bed. “Tell us about your day, dear.”

I suspect they’re not interested in my day at all, and when Bethiah grabs my belt as Dora tugs on my tunic, I wonder if they’ve planned this ambush. “How am I supposed to concentrate when I have two females attacking me?”

Dora leans in and licks my earlobe. “Did you want us to stop?”

Never.

SIXTY-FIVE



## BETHIAH

**B**less Dora and her enthusiasm. She's so good at smoothing the way between Jamef and myself. If it was just me and him alone, I'd think about kissing him...and then probably wrestle him down to the mattress, bite him somewhere, and then retreat. If I'd get lucky, he'd chase me.

But Dora is far more straightforward. She wants to make sure that Jamef doesn't feel left out of our earlier fun, and it was her idea to ambush him the moment he got back and just shower him with affection. After all, we're spending his credits to upgrade the ship for the three of us, and while we've been doing our own thing (in between visits with the many wives of Kaatir), Jamef has been listening to the old male talk. And talk. And talk.

If nothing else, he deserves a neck rub for putting up with all that. Dora's good with being affectionate, though. She's so effortlessly sweet and eager that my reluctance and awkwardness isn't as noticeable. I tell myself that if he seems annoyed, I'll pull her off of him and distract her with some kisses of my own so her feelings aren't hurt. Jamef likes his space, after all. He's a loner. He...

I glance up at his face and I'm struck by the look of utter yearning he wears as we strip his clothing off. As if this is everything he ever wanted but was too afraid to ask for.

Okay, so he's not a loner by choice. I've read him all wrong.

And that hurts my heart. He's a good sort. Handsome if you ignore all the metal everywhere (which I do). I know he's got a garbage family name, but I figured that didn't bother him. He's always seemed so settled and sure of himself despite my restlessness. I thought if he was alone, it was because he wanted to be, not because he didn't have a choice.

He'd make any female a good mate. Now he's going to make two females a good one, I suppose.

"How was your day?" I ask as I tug on his trou, since that seems to be a very mate-like thing to ask.

Jamef's distracted gaze swings to me and he reaches out to cup my cheek even as Dora nibbles on his ear. "Ship is mostly done. We can leave tomorrow." His breath hisses between his teeth, his eyes fluttering closed as our human mate sucks on his earlobe. Okay, mental note, Jamef's ears are sensitive. "Finish up your business in the morning."

"Business?" I ask, pulling one boot off and then the other. "Did we have business, Dora?"

"We were getting clothes so we could look pretty," she says, grinning. "Do you think we look pretty tonight, Jamef?"

"I can honestly say I've never seen anything finer than the two of you right now." His voice is hoarse as he continues to touch me. "Except maybe the two of you earlier in the showers."

"Mmm, flattery will get you everywhere." I tug his trou off his legs and his metal-studded, thick cock springs free. It seems far too obvious to touch him immediately, even if I want to. I scrape my nails up his calves, eyeing him. "So... how much did it cost?"

"Eh?" He's clearly distracted. Dora has her hand on his chin and she turns him toward her, pulling his mouth to hers for a kiss. The dazed look on Jamef's face deepens, as if he doesn't know what to do with being the center of attention. It melts my hard heart just a little more, and I decide that tonight, perhaps, is all about him. Just to blow his mind.

"The ship?" I ask, reaching for his tail and bringing the tip to my mouth. I tease it against my lips, watching him. His eyes darken with arousal at the sight of me, and then Dora kisses him again. "How much did it set you back?"

"A lot," he manages between kisses. "Worth it. Worth all of it."

I hate that answer. I figured it'd be pricey, but I don't like that he's emptying his coffers to take care of us, when I am perfectly capable of also contributing. I mean, sure, I might have spent all my credits on dancing girls previously and there was that whole "trying to buy Dora a blaster arm" thing, but I can be responsible with credits.

I can.

At least, I can try to be.

Dora slides over into his lap, kissing him passionately. I watch as her tongue teases into his mouth, fascinated by the sight, and then I force myself to focus. With a tap to Dora's adorable backside, I get her attention. "Come play with his cock, fluffit. I'm trying to get answers from him and he's far too distracted right now."

Jamef makes an unholy sound in his throat, as if my suggestion is going to make him even more distracted (and it will). Dora just giggles and slithers down him until she's kneeling next to me on the floor. She takes him in her hand and then enthusiastically begins to lick him, and I don't think I've ever seen a male filled with so much wonder.

He looks over at me, and I wink at him as I tease his tail against my lips. "Before I join her, you and I should have a conversation about jobs."

"J-jobs?"

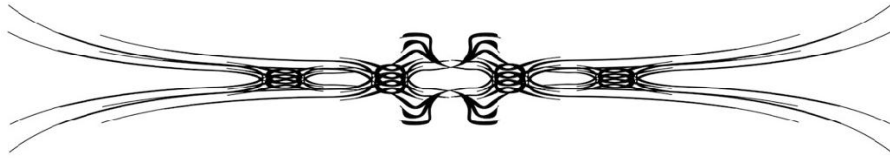
"Blow jobs," Dora adds between licks.

Jamef groans again.

"No, bounty hunting jobs." Though to be honest, blow jobs does sound good, too. As Dora holds his cock, I lean in and tongue the tip of it. Then Dora's tongue is next to mine, and we're both licking him.

His thighs shake, and I decide one of the best parts of being in a triad is that it's a kef of a lot of teasing the other two partners. And I do so love to tease.

SIXTY-SIX





## BETHIAH

**F**or *some* reason, it's impossible to get an answer out of a male when he's got two females licking his cock. Jamef just groans and makes these ragged sounds in his throat while we tease him (a bit mercilessly, I'm not gonna lie) and lick him in all kinds of lascivious ways. Even so, we do need to think about getting back to work. I feel most settled when I have a task at hand, and something tells me that figuring out how to move forward with everyday things as a triad is going to be a challenge.

The sooner we test the waters, the better.

I tap my tongue against one of his cock piercings. "So what's the plan?"

"Plan?" he rasps. Jamef sounds delightfully distracted.

"Bounty...hunting," Dora adds between licks of his cock. She pauses, her hand gripping the base of his shaft, and turns to me. "Should I stop so you two can hash it out?"

"No," Jamef groans.

"Nothing to hash. I think we're in agreement." I rub my nose against one of the ridges on his cock. Down here, he smells more earthy, musky. I like it, just as much as I like Dora's sweeter scent. "We get out of here, we pull a few bounties, make some credits, and then we celebrate."

That gets Dora's attention. She lifts her head again. "Celebrate?"

I gently press her back down onto his cock, my hand on her hair. "Maybe we'll go out to dinner at a nice restaurant on station, the three of us. We can dress you up in something pretty and everyone will think you're our spoiled little plaything."

Dora moans, her mouth closing around Jamef's cock. It's clear she likes that idea. I do, too. Maybe we're not showing

her off enough. Maybe Dora needs to be shown that she's valued in all ways. I slide a hand to her back, then squeeze her buttock, and she all but pushes herself into my grip, whimpering as she continues to suck on Jamef's cock.

"Bethiah," Jamef groans as I watch her work him with her mouth. He palms one of my horns and then makes a "come hither" motion with his hand. "You come up here."

"Up where?"

He pats his chest. "Come sit on my face. Let me taste you."

I suck in a breath, only for Dora to release his cock from her mouth and turn to me. "Wait! We should change that around."

"We should? Why?" Why is this conversation making me feel vulnerable?

Dora moves to my side, touching me. Her hands skim over my sleeping tunic and then she's pulling it over my head—or trying to. The material gets caught on my horns and I have to finish the job for her. "Because I have a sensitive spot outside but all yours are inside," she says, breathless. She reaches out and cups one of my breasts, licking her lips as she watches me. "But if you ride him while I ride his face, we can all come together."

"You've been giving this a lot of thought, fluffit."

"I have." The look she gives me is serious, even as she squeezes my breast. "I want us to work out, and if we're all getting orgasms, it makes things easier."

Well, I certainly can't argue with that. It's been a long time since I've had regular orgasms, but I already know I wouldn't mind more. Sex is like nose spices. After you try it once and it's good, you keep craving it. And even though I don't want to crave it, I do. Just Dora's suggestion that I ride Jamef's cock is making me clench deep inside.

"Shouldn't we ask Jamef what his preference is?" I tease. "It's his body we're going to be using."

“No preference,” he’s quick to reply. Finding my decorated braid, he gives it a gentle tug and makes the beads in my hair clink against one another. “Just need to touch both of you. More. Now. Someone decide something keffing fast.”

Dora bites back a little smile and eyes me. “You said we should take what we want, and he’s willing. I don’t see a problem here. And if you’d rather ride his face, we can do that, too.” She bites her lip and watches me. “And we can touch while we’re on top of him, too.”

I don’t know who groans louder at that, me or Jamef. She really *has* been thinking about this a lot. “Why is it that you’re not shy about any of this at all, fluffit? I thought we were going to go slow so you didn’t panic, and yet you’re the one that’s talking about face-sitting and who gets to ride the cock.”

She wriggles closer to me and pulls her sleep tunic off. “I like being with you two. I trust you.” Her arms go around me and she presses her breasts against mine, and she feels soft and pillowy in comparison, and it’s keffing incredible. “But if you’re not ready —”

“I didn’t say that.” I tip a finger under her chin and lean down to kiss her upturned mouth. She tastes like Jamef, and I think about the kiss earlier, in the showers, when he held my hand while Dora made me come. I cup one of her breasts and run my thumb over the nipple. “Go sit on our poor mate’s face before he feels neglected.”

Dora gives a little whimper and then crawls onto the bed, moving to Jamef’s side. Instead of immediately going to his face, she leans over and kisses him instead, her pretty, rounded backside in the air. I caress one cheek as I get to my feet, skimming my fingers up the cleft of her cunt.

She wriggles and moans, gasping as I toy with the entrance to her body.

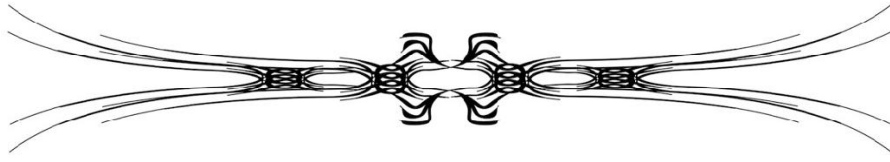
“Pretty,” I say softly. “And wet. She’s going to feel so good against your mouth, Jamef.” I glance up at them, and Dora’s eyes are closed, her lips frantically devouring his, her tongue dancing in and out of his mouth. I love the sight of it,

the visual of both of them lost in kisses, but I want my turn, too.

And when Jamef's tail curls around my wrist and tugs me forward, I know he's thinking the same thing. That I should join them.

I slide onto the bed, moving to his other side, and when they both turn towards me for a kiss, I feel as if I'm suddenly the most coveted female in the universe.

SIXTY-SEVEN



## BETHIAH

**F**or a long time, we just kiss. Jamef's lips brush over mine, while Dora nuzzles my cheek. Then she's kissing me, then Jamef again. Tongues are added, faces stroked, and it's just the softest, sweetest orgy of kissing and caressing between the three of us. I close my eyes and lose myself in the moment, loving the contrast of one gentle kiss followed by a harder one, and then the sounds of them kissing each other before coming back to me.

Moments like this, we really do feel like a triad, a threesome devoted to one another, and I love it. I love the feel of my hand on Jamef's chest as Dora sprawls over him to reach me. I love the thought that I have not one person that can tolerate my shit, but two. It seems like too great a gift.

A hand slides down my belly and between my thighs. The cool brush of metal and the size of the fingers tells me that it's Jamef. "You're beautifully wet, little one."

"Not little," I tell him between kisses. "And yes, I am." I part my thighs for him, letting his fingers stroke up and down my cunt. I turn to kiss Dora, and she whimpers against my lips, the sound turning into a gaspy moan. I'd bet that Jamef is stroking her cunt with his other hand. "Is she wet, too?"

"Indeed."

I open my eyes to see Dora's teeth digging into her lower lip, her expression tense, and I reach over to touch her cunt for myself. Sure enough, she's slippery with arousal, and I run a teasing finger around the hood of her clit. "Dora, I swear you're the most eager female I've ever touched."

"I like both of you. Sue me." She bites her lip and whimpers again, rocking against my fingers when I continue to tease her clit.

"You should make her come, Jamef," I tell him, my voice low and casual, because this feels right and good, the three of

us in bed, pleasuring each other.

“With my tongue?” he asks, and Dora sits up. I watch as two of his fingers disappear into her cunt and she gasps, her nipples tight even as she rides his hand.

*With his tongue.* I suck in a breath because that’s right. She’s supposed to ride his face and I’m supposed to take his cock. “Yes. I want to watch that.”

*Kef,* do I want to watch that.

Dora moans, reaching for me. “You first,” she pants. “I want to watch you on his cock.”

“I want to watch that, too,” Jamef admits, voice strained. His fingers tease the entrance to my body, and I bite back the hungry sound that threatens to rise out of me.

It’s been a long time since I’ve been with a male. A long time since I’ve had a cock inside me, and Jamef and I, for all our flirting, have never sealed the deal. It feels like...a commitment, and a prickle of fear rushes through me. I’m about to demand that Dora go first so I can stall while they’re occupied, when Dora puts her hands on my shoulders and pulls me in for another kiss. It’s like she’s trying to encourage me. To remind me that she’s here, too. That this is for her as much as it is for Jamef.

“You’ll be so beautiful riding him,” Dora whispers against my lips.

I bite back a groan, because *kef* me, I want her to watch. I want Jamef to have his mind blown. And more than that...I want to feel it. I want to be the center of our little universe. So with a shuddering breath, I get on my knees and slide my leg over his hips, facing Jamef. My hand goes to his stomach, and the mixture of metal and skin there is oddly comforting. It reminds me that it’s Jamef, who’s always watched me with patient admiration. Who’s wanted me even when I was an absolute disaster.

I rock against Jamef’s cock, getting used to the feel of him sliding against the folds of my cunt. I’m incredibly wet, my pulse throbbing arousal between my thighs, and Jamef feels

incredibly, pleasantly large and metal-studded. I rub against him and Dora watches me, entranced. My gaze meets Jamef's and his eyes are heavy-lidded and full of lust, and I've never felt so keffing beautiful or sexy in my life.

"Take him inside you," Dora whispers. "I want to see."

"Greedy thing," I tease her. "You just want your turn."

"That, too."

"I want my turn, too," Jamef murmurs, his hand moving to my hip and caressing me. "Though I do like the view right now."

I stroke my hand up his stomach, rocking my hips over him. "I feel like we're using you, dear Jamef. Shamelessly using you for our own devices."

His eyes flare with heat. "Use me," he growls. "Keffing use me all you like."

The breath catches in my throat, because I love the need in his voice. Kef me. It sends a pulse of heat straight inside me. Use him? It's like he knows just what to say to make me even wetter. With a needy groan, I raise my hips and take him in hand, sliding the head of his cock to the entrance of my body.

"Go slow," Dora says, her eyes hungry. "I want to enjoy the sight."

"Go slow?" I echo, meeting Jamef's gaze. He looks tortured—in a delicious way—and I think yes, perhaps I should go very, very slow to draw things out. With exquisite hesitation, I lower myself onto him, molecule by molecule (or at least it feels like) as his shaft stretches my body. My breath hitches with every piercing, every ridge that enters my body.

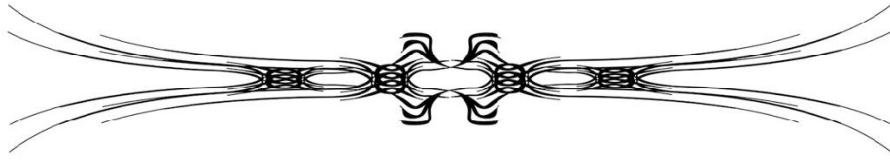
By the time I'm seated completely atop him, every nerve ending in my body is singing. I clench tight, gasping, my hands locked on his waist. I want to ride him and use him. I want to buck on top of him and drive myself to a hard, fast orgasm.

But there's three of us here. So I lift one hand and hold it out to Dora. "Come sit with me on top of our mate."



And Jamef makes a hungry sound that I love, a sound of pure agreement as he reaches for Dora, too.

SIXTY-EIGHT



## BETHIAH

**T**here's no sight quite like Dora straddling Jamef's head.

She faces me, her hands clenched in mine as she settles her weight over him. His big hands come up to rub her thighs and buttocks, and as I watch, he lifts his chin and gives her a lick before she can sit down on him.

"Greedy," I murmur, but I like the sight of it.

Dora looks uncertain for the first time, though. She shifts, adjusting her weight on her knees. "Am I too heavy? I've never done this. What if I suffocate you?"

"Then he would die happy," I joke. "And you're not too heavy."

Jamef groans and gives her another lick, which makes her jerk in my arms. "Did I mention my lungs are bionic? And that I can hold my breath for eighteen minutes?"

She whimpers, and this time when he tugs her down against his face, she settles on him. Dora clings to me, her eyes fluttering closed as a moan escapes her, and then the wet, obscene sounds of Jamef lapping at her cunt fill the room. Just hearing that makes me incredibly aroused, and I clench in response.

He jerks his hips, driving up into me, and then I'm gasping, too.

"Oh god," Dora breathes. She rocks against his face, and her fingers dig into my arms. "I knew this would be a good idea, but I didn't know this would be a *great* idea. I'm a goddamn genius." Her mouth spasms. "Oh fuck. Best idea ever. Oh fuck."

"You look beautiful," I tell her, loving that I can watch her face as he eats her out. "Is he licking your clit? Teasing it with his tongue?"

She cries out and I catch a glimpse of his tongue snaking through her folds and it tells me that yes, he is indeed teasing the kef out of her. He drives up into me again in a short movement, making me gasp once more and reminding me that I'm supposed to be partaking in the fun, too.

Right. With a subtle rocking motion, I test riding him. It's hard to get my balance to drive down on him with Dora clinging to my arms and moaning as if she's dying, but I don't want to interrupt her. She's having too good a time. I twine my tail with Jamef's and keep my movements slow, languid. Unhurried. I'm just enjoying the sensation of being filled, of the tease of his spur moving through my folds. It feels good. Nice. Full.

He drives up inside me the moment I sink down again, and it's no longer just *nice*. Hot, scorching intensity races through me, and then Dora isn't the only one moaning. I clutch her arms as tightly as she clings to mine, and drive down onto Jamef's cock again. Something has subtly shifted in our angles, and now when I rock down onto him, he's hitting the most sensitive spot deep inside me, and it feels incredible.

In my arms, Dora cries out, her hips frantically moving against Jamef's face. The wet, obscene sounds continue, but they only heighten my pleasure. Now, I'm not entirely certain that she's the only one making sloppy wet sounds. She's not the only one gasping and groaning as if she's dying. Jamef's tail tightens around mine, and then Dora crashes against me, holding onto me as an orgasm courses through her. I bite my lip, riding him harder and faster, trying to reach my own.

When it comes, it takes me entirely by surprise, and I lose myself in the moment. The air steals from my lungs and pleasure pounds through my senses, cascading over me. I'm dimly aware of Dora sliding to the side, only for Jamef to shift our positions. Then I'm on my back and he's over me, pounding deep into me, his red eye searing into my mind as he drives me up into another climax. I cry out, only to have my cry smothered by a hot kiss from him that tastes like Dora, and I cling to my mate as he ruts into me, seeking his own release.

When he comes inside me, his tail twitching feverishly against mine, I dig one ankle into his buttock and pin him in place until he finishes spending. There was no plas-film. I don't think anyone even paused to consider plas-film, or anything at all, really. I'm glad I got a shot in med-bay earlier that stops my fertility cycle.

Jamef groans and collapses on top of me, sweaty and spent. "*Kef*."

I groan, too, because he's keffing heavy. With a pat on his hip, I point this out. "You're made of metal, not air. How about you roll onto the side."

He does, flopping onto his back, his hand resting on his stomach. "Sorry."

Jamef sounds utterly drained, which amuses me. I mean, I am, too, but I've never heard him sound quite so dazed, and I have to bite back a smirk. Dora slithers in between us, wedging herself against my hip and Jamef's side, and she slides her head onto my breasts. "That was amazing."

"Eh, it was all right," I say.

Jamef just snorts.

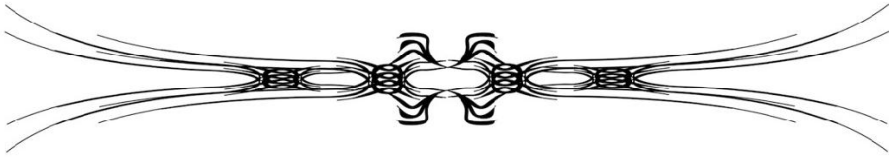
"Next time he comes inside me and you ride his face," Dora says with a yawn. "Oooh, or mine. That'll be fun."

I pat her shoulder. "Don't you have an off switch somewhere? Horny thing."

She just giggles with amusement and reaches for Jamef's hand, setting it on her hip. He turns on his side, spooning her even as she nestles against my chest, and his tail twines with mine again.

I guess it was pretty nice, all three of us together. I'm still throbbing with the aftermath of my orgasm, and I'll need to get up and clean off soon. But for right now, I like laying in a sweaty, post-coital heap with my mates. Everything else can wait.

SIXTY-NINE



## DORA

I t's not surprising to me that Bethiah's a little standoffish the next morning. She likes to retreat when she feels too much, and I'm guessing that waking up with her tail twined with Jamef's and in his arms while I spooned her backside was probably in the category of "too much." So I listen to her grumble as she complains over breakfast that someone probably didn't "set the proper focus drive" on the navigation or something, and when she insists upon going to fix it before we take off, I don't protest.

She does come and give me a kiss, though, and that makes me happy. It's a step forward.

Jamef kisses me too, though his is more lingering and thoughtful. "She needs time."

"She does," I agree. "Last night might have been too much fun for her to handle."

He grins, smoothing a strand of my hair back from my face. "You enjoyed yourself, then?"

Did I enjoy myself? I came on his tongue. I rode his face. "Um, if I don't get to enjoy myself like that every night for the rest of our lives, there will be words."

Jamef laughs, and I love hearing it. Something tells me he didn't smile or laugh much before Bethiah and I took over his life. He needs us, he really does.

He gives my shoulder an affectionate squeeze. "I'm going to settle payment with Kaatir and no doubt listen to a few more stories this morning. He loves to talk. Maybe go say goodbye to his wives and thank them since Bethiah is going to hide?"

"I can do that. I wanted to say goodbye to Hazza, anyhow. She said she had a few things for me."

Jamef nods. "I'll make sure Kaatir is compensated for whatever the women give you. They're generous, but I don't like owing a favor to anyone."

Knowing Kaatir, the favor would probably be twenty more war stories, each one hours long. "Sounds good. Come and get me in the women's quarters when you're ready?"

He gives me another kiss, this one intense enough to make my breath catch. Then, he rumples my hair and we part.

I head through the station, waving to the wives I pass by. I find Hazza in the kitchens, and she immediately squeals at the sight of me. "Hello, my human friend," she cries, grabbing my hands. "I am glad I get to see you again before you depart!"

"Me, too." After several days of seeing Hazza's bug eyes and sharp teeth—and knowing the sweet personality behind the hideous visage—she no longer frightens me. "We're leaving soon, but I wanted to say goodbye and thank you for your friendship. You've been wonderful."

She swings our hands as if we're schoolgirls. "Most newcomers do not like my face," she admits shyly. "I am glad you are different."

I am, too. My heart aches for her because I would love to stay and be her friend, but I can't. I'm in love with Jamef and Bethiah, and they need me more. "Maybe we'll come back soon and we can visit again!"

Hazza brightens. "I would like that. Can I play with your pretty hair one more time before you go?"

"Of course!" She loves my hair, probably because she has none of her own.

We head off to the women's quarters, Hazza telling me about her next project. She's collecting herbs from several different planets to flavor food, and recently got a batch from Homeworld. I admire the little seed pods in their cubes of dirt, even though I'm not entirely sure what I'm looking at. I just like her enthusiasm.

She picks one up and cradles it in her hands, holding it out to me. "I want you to take one with you. When it grows into a



mature plant, you can use the leaves to flavor your noodles. Every time you use it, think of me and our friendship.”

“Oh.” Tears prick my eyes. “Thank you, Hazza. I wish I had something to give you back.”

“No need! I am very content with my husband and all of his wives. We have a good life here.” She beams. “And I want you to know you can always come back. It can be a visit, or it can be forever. We are all good at sharing.”

I hug her tightly. “Thank you, my friend. This is the best gift ever.”

“The best gift for now,” she says, and then covers her mouth with one hand, giggling. “Wait until you see the others I have for you.”

“More gifts? I’m overwhelmed.”

“Good gifts,” she says slyly. “Gifts that women give other women for when their husbands are occupied.”

“I...okay?” Do I even want to know?

Hazza grabs my hand and tugs me after her, giggling. I laugh at her happy mood, letting her pull me along, the little pod with its seed tucked carefully into my hand. “Come, come,” she says. “We will get you all set up to please both of your mates before you leave. A male is happy easily but females are sometimes more work. So I know just the thing.”

She pulls me into the women’s quarters and races over to her bunk. Hazza’s particular half of the room that she shares with another woman is cluttered and messy, and I get the impression that Hazza always has a lot of projects to keep her busy. There’s all kinds of crafting supplies, along with a pile of mechanical-looking junk and an artificial light over a row of even more seed pods. Maybe she’s giving me some sort of craft stuff? I don’t know if I’m particularly creative. I’m not sure I have memories of anything along those lines.

Hazza pulls an item out triumphantly. “Here you go! Never been used! I have a favorite already and this one is too small for Hazza’s thick hips.” She chuckles and holds it out to me. “Perfect for my small human friend.”

Oh.

Oh my goodness.

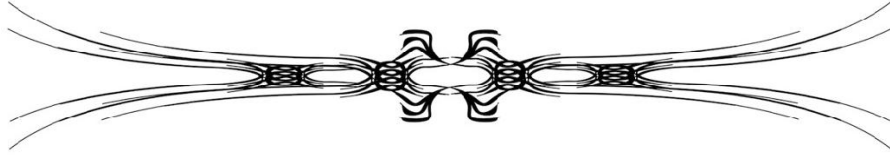
Hazza holds a belt and what looks like a hip rig of some kind out to me. It isn't until my gaze falls on the big blue synthetic penis dangling on one end that I realize what the heck this is.

She's giving me a strap-on.

I stare...and then I giggle wickedly too. Now this is quite the gift. "Amazing. You are an excellent friend, Hazza."

"Oh, I know." She laughs with delight.

SEVENTY



## JAMEF

“Good morning, little one,” I say to Bethiah as I cross her on board the *Pleasure Spot*. Somehow, I’m not surprised to find her hiding up, elbow-deep in the control room wiring instead of saying her goodbyes to the others on base.

She turns and snarls at me, her expression downright surly. “Is it a good morning? Because they changed out all the flash-transistors and there was one that needs a lower frequency than the others, and I have to figure out which one it is all over again.”

“It’s fine,” I tell her. “Kaatir’s wives know what they’re doing.”

“So you say. Where will Kaatir’s wives be when we’re stranded in an asteroid belt? Hm?”

I ignore her grumpy mood. I’m starting to expect it now. She wakes up, feels vulnerable, attacks and hisses for a short time just to remind us that yes, we really should dislike her, and then settles in. I slide my tail next to hers as I lean on the counter, giving it a light brush. “Did you not sleep well? Should I tell Dora she has to sleep in the middle now?”

Bethiah gives me another scathing look, but she doesn’t bat my tail away. After a moment, she twines hers with mine while she pulls out another flash-transistor and holds it up to the light. “I just don’t trust anyone but my cousin Jerrok to work on things, I guess. If we get stranded, someone’s going to think we’re easy pickings, and I don’t want to put Dora in danger. She’s vulnerable, you know.”

“I know.” I slide to her side and put a hand on her hip. “She has two of us to protect her, though.”

“Mmm. Even though we’re bounty hunters and our jobs mean we have to be in danger?”

“What, did you want to retire and go farm somewhere? Maybe run a little repair shop on a station? I can fix things and you can handle the counter at the front and run everyone off. Dora will be our go-between. What do you think?”

“Sounds awful.”

I grin, because I figured it did. Bethiah isn't the type to stay in one place for long. “So quit worrying over our jobs. We'll just be more careful with the types of bounties we snag, if you're truly worried.”

“I...just don't want to disappoint her. Or you.” She doesn't look me in the eye, focusing intently on the wiring. “I don't know if you've noticed, but I'm not good with relationships.”

I squeeze her hip. “You think I am? You think Dora is? We're all figuring this out together.”

“Mm, that does explain how keffing bad you both are at giving me space.” She glances over her shoulder at me, smirking to take the sting out of her words. She pauses for a moment, and then studies my face. “Which station are we going to next?”

For a female that wants space, I notice she isn't pulling away from me. If anything, she's leaning closer. “I have credits I need to collect from the guild on Haal Ui. I thought that was as good a place as any. Do you have a preference?”

“Someplace with a nice cantina.” When I give her an enquiring look, Bethiah's grin grows wider. “Dora would probably love it if we all went out to dinner somewhere and showed her off. I keep saying the wrong thing around her, making her think we don't want her. So I thought if we put a collar on her and a pretty dress, showed her off in public like a pampered pet, she'd realize that we do want her.”

“You think she'd want to wear a collar?”

She waves a few wires at me idly. “She knows it doesn't mean anything. It's just for show and to keep her safe. We can prance her around, let her sit in our laps at dinner, play with her tits, she'll love it.”

“You don’t think that’s too much? Too soon?” I have no idea if Dora has an exhibitionist streak or not, but the thought of showing her off—showing both of them off as my mates—arouses a dark hunger inside me.

Bethiah blinks at me. “Have you *met* our Dora?”

That makes me chuckle. “She is rather...adventurous. More than I thought. Here I was insisting we’d go slow, and she wants to put her lips on both of us, everywhere.” I nudge her. “Don’t think I didn’t notice you calling her ‘our’ Dora.”

“Yeah. I guess we’re stuck with her,” she grumbles, but then glances over at me. “Thanks.”

“For?”

“For talking me out of my shitty mood.” Bethiah stares down at the wiring in her hands. “I just get in my head and panicky sometimes. I know I’m probably difficult to live with. But you’re the dumbass that decided to chase after me, right? So I should blame your poor choice in females, except you like Dora, too. So it’s poor taste in mesakkah females.”

Me? Chase after her? She’s neglecting to mention all the times she stole my ship so I’d have no choice but to hunt her down. Or the times she came after me and not the other way around. “You’re trying to make it sound as if you’re not just as eager as her in bed.” I lean in and press a kiss to her clothed shoulder. “Or me. Let’s face it. We’re all hopelessly lost in each other.”

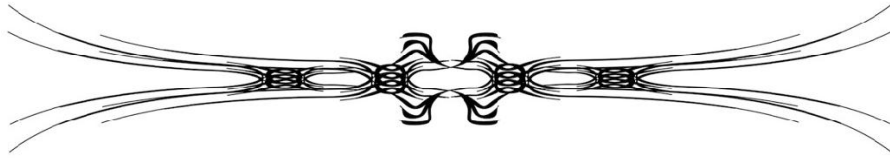
She grunts, but her tail rubs against mine, and she doesn’t try to backhand me for kissing her shoulder. That’s pretty good, for Bethiah.

“Don’t think you’re going to get out of dressing up for a dinner, either,” I point out. “If we’re showing off Dora, I want to show you off, too.” I rub her shoulder, just because I like touching her. She’s different than Dora in my arms, but no less appealing.

“You really *are* a male that likes to live dangerously, aren’t you?”

I really am.

SEVENTY-ONE



## BETHIAH

I don't trust good things.

Then again, I don't trust bad things either. In my line of work, you learn to laugh at betrayal, because it's always cropping up. Still, when you get a string of nice days in a row, it feels suspicious. Like you're being set up for a trap.

That's kind of how I feel right now, as the *Pleasure Spot* continues its leisurely path towards Haal Ui Station. We're testing out various speeds to make sure the new quarters added to the ship perform, and it gives us an excuse to spend the time together as a triad.

I hate to admit it, but it's...pretty nice. It's nice to wake up in a jumble of limbs, Dora sleeping against my front, Jamef at my back. It's nice to eat meals together, and talk about old bounties I've captured. I might enhance my stories a bit just to see the bright gleam of awe in Dora's gaze, but Jamef's quiet amusement keeps me from embellishing my tales too much. Jamef's stories are simpler, so I take the liberty of "improving" them a bit for him.

Dora especially loves the stories of how I've stolen Jamef's ship from him, over and over again, so I make sure to tell those often.

Jamef pretty much takes over the controls of the ship, monopolizing the bridge. I'm not sure if he expects me to fight him over it, but he can have that job. Sit in a chair and constantly re-jigger flight paths? Yawn. I'd much rather do maintenance on the ship, like my cousin Jerrok. It runs in the family that we like to take things apart.

We're probably not great at putting them back together, but I manage. Dora assists me from time to time, because she says she wants to learn how the ship works. Of course, then we both get touchy-feely and someone might get their pussy



licked in the maintenance closet, but it's just a perk of the job, I figure.

We're still figuring things out as a triad. The rule about no kissing without the others present has been relaxed while on the ship, and it's nice to step into the shower and wonder if Jamef or Dora (or both) are going to join me. Dora and I have had blaster training sessions that turned into her riding my hand and then me riding hers. I've had naughty lunches with Jamef in which I'd sit on his cock and we'd see which of us got too distracted to eat. I've caught Jamef with Dora on his lap, his fingers in her cunt as she squirmed in his grasp.

Every night, the three of us have been all over each other in bed, too. Sometimes I'm the centerpiece, with Dora and Jamef doing everything they can to pleasure me. Sometimes Jamef's the focal point. A lot of the time it's Dora, just because she's just so fun to tease for the both of us.

Like I said, it's been really nice. Which might be why I'm highly suspicious. This is all a trap laid out by the universe, to get my guard down and remind me that I'm not going to be happy, especially with a human and a male (both!) involved. That humans are fickle and I can't provide for them in the way they insist upon. That Jamef's going to get sick of me and my quirks and then I'll be alone, just like Jerrok was for so long.

Except Jerrok's got Softie now, and they're happy. Stupidly happy. It's revolting.

Thinking about how happy Jerrok is with his little human makes me wonder what mine is up to. I wipe my hands clean of grease, putting away the last of the components I was working on, and stride down the hall. A quick peek into the garden nook shows that Dora's not there. She's fascinated with the plants and checks them constantly, waiting for something to grow. I've heard all about it at dinner for the last few days. It's cute.

She's not in the lavatory or in the bedroom either, so I poke my head in on the bridge. Jamef's in his chair, facing the massive panels that act as windows out to the stars. There's

nothing on screen but a distant nebula, so we're not close to Haal Ui yet. "You seen Dora?"

He makes a gasping sound, his tail flicking hard against the side of his captain's chair.

Aha.

I take a few steps forward, and sure enough, our eager little human mate is between his legs, her mouth on his cock. She's working him with her mouth, making greedy little slurps as she licks each piercing and then sucks on the head.

"I can't take you two anywhere, can I?" I joke, leaning against the control panel and watching the show.

Dora looks up at me, her hand working his wet cock as she pauses. "He looked too serious. I wanted to make him smile."

"Well, that expression on his face isn't a smile." I nudge him with one boot, because his strained expression is funny, but it's definitely not a smile. "What's bothering you?"

"Nothing." Jamef flicks an irritated glare my way. "Just like I told her, nothing's bothering me."

Oho. I nod at Dora, and her head bobs down on him again, sucking. "Work him over, fluffit. I'll get answers out of him." I stride over to Jamef's side and put a finger under his chin, tipping his head up. "You never get upset about anything, so do I need to guess what it is? Credits? You're suddenly realizing you can't afford two mates?"

His hands clench on the arms of the chair, and either he's about to nut, or I've guessed correctly. I watch Dora's hands tease his sac as her pink tongue works circles around the head, and I suspect it's the latter. "Are we that broke, then?"

Jamef's hard mouth flattens again, and Dora makes a humming sound. He jerks his head down and I force him to look up at me again.

"Don't avoid the question, bucket of bolts. Just tell me."

"Modifications were a bit more than I anticipated." His voice is raspy and distracted, and he leans into my touch,

desperate. He's close to coming, then. "We'll have to take on a few extra jobs to restock the ship."

"Is that all?" I run my thumb along his lower lip. "Here I thought it was something bad. Credits are easy come, easy go. Kinda like ships."

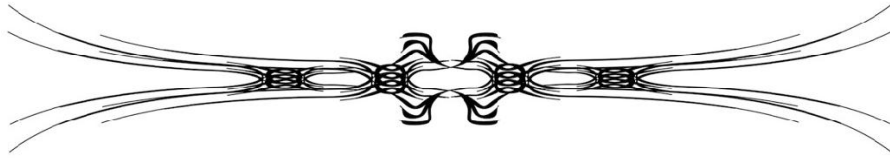
Jamef bites my thumb.

I grin. "So we take on a few extra jobs. Doesn't matter. We make our credits back, we celebrate with a nice dinner on station, we call it a day."

"I wanted to take on easier jobs so we could make sure Dora wasn't in danger or left alone —"

His breath hisses out and his back arches, and I bite back a laugh as Dora makes our mate blow his load into her hungry mouth. "I think Dora can take care of herself."

SEVENTY-TWO



## JAMEF

**A** bounty is just a job. It's a task to earn credits, and it doesn't matter how unsavory it might be or how far it might take me. It's work, and I remind myself that I'm not connected to whatever vileness the people I'm hunting might have partaken in.

I just hate that we're exposing Dora to that element of the universe so quickly after rescuing her. She deserves to feel safe and unafraid, and I worry that if we dive in to our jobs, we're going to be introducing some of those awful elements of the universe onto our ship. There's a reason we have a prisoner hold.

Bethiah might be relaxed about it but I'm not.

The thought hangs over my head for the rest of the day and into the night. We mate, all three of us, with Dora sandwiched between us. I drive into Dora from behind as she straddles Bethiah upside down and uses her fingers and mouth on her, and Bethiah teases her cunt. By the time we clean up and collapse into bed together, Dora is asleep in Bethiah's arms. I debate if I should sleep on Dora's side or Bethiah's, and then move to Bethiah's side and press up against her instead.

She wriggles against my larger body, shooting me a look. "You're taking all my space."

"Then lean back against me," I murmur, nipping at her ear. "We need to talk anyhow."

"Uh oh. Someone's overthinking."

"I'm not. I just thought we should come to an agreement before we land on the station tomorrow."

Bethiah turns her head toward me, her horns bumping mine. "Agreement? What about?"

"That we don't take the most dangerous bounties. No killers. No escaped convicts. We look for quick and easy and

safe jobs.”

“You mean the baby shit,” she whispers derisively. “Kef that. Those don’t pay anything. If you want to replenish your credits quickly, you look for the biggest ticket item and you go for that.”

“And endanger Dora? She’s in enough danger as it is, being an unmarked clone and a human to boot. The last thing we need is to put her at risk. I know you don’t value your own neck, but try to value hers, just a little.”

Bethiah casts me a fierce scowl, and her tail smacks against my leg.

“I can hear everything the two of you are saying,” Dora mumbles sleepily. “You’re terrible whisperers.”

“Go back to sleep, fluffit,” Bethiah tells her. “We’re just discussing bounty hunter business.”

“I’m not an idiot, you know,” Dora continues, her eyes closed. She looks incredibly sleepy but content, nestled against Bethiah’s breasts. Her hand searches behind Bethiah, looking for me, and I brush her skin. She laces her fingers with mine. “I’m going to let you do your jobs, and I’m going to stay out of the way. I know you deal with dangerous elements, but I promise I’m not going to go anywhere near them, all right? So you don’t need to worry.”

As she yawns, I ignore Bethiah’s triumphant look. “It’s not you I’m worried about, sweetheart. Generally whoever we’re taking in doesn’t want to go. They could cause problems.”

“So carry a blaster at all times when someone’s on board and shoot first. Got it. Can we go back to sleep now?” She gives my hand a squeeze. “I knew you both were bounty hunters when I signed up for this. I still want to be with both of you.”

I grunt. “Go to sleep.”

Bethiah’s expression grows thoughtful. I rest my hand—still joined with Dora’s—on Bethiah’s hip. “We’ll be careful.”

“My version of careful?”

“Very funny.”

“I thought I should specify.” I press my mouth to her shoulder, holding her tightly. This is what I’ve always wanted. Bethiah in my bed. Dora, too. The three of us, cozy and peaceful and safe. And yet I didn’t stop to think what it would mean if I went back to bounty hunting. That things might no longer be so safe for Dora, who’s vulnerable and helpless. She can’t read our language. She can’t operate our machines. She’s completely dependent upon us.

All it takes is the wrong person getting onto our ship...

Bethiah covers my hand with hers. “We’ll be careful. I’m sure we can find some reasonable jobs until you’re more comfortable with taking on bigger ones. We’ll let you lead.”

I sit up, staring down at her. “Did...did you just compromise with me?”

“Don’t let it get to your head,” she retorts.

“Will you two both be quiet?” Dora protests. She sits up, too, propping up on one elbow and giving both of us a sleepy glare. “Do we need to establish a new rule? No intense conversations after an orgasm?”

“Just one orgasm?” Bethiah teases, reaching up and cupping Dora’s full breast. “How you must suffer.”

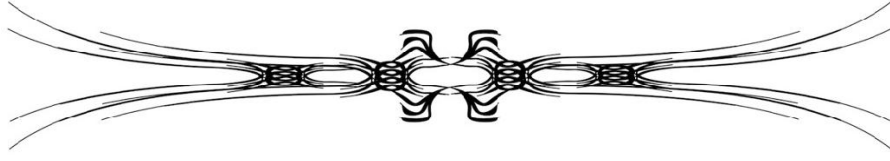
“We truly are neglectful mates,” I agree, getting in on the teasing. I’m fascinated by the sight of Bethiah’s thumb teasing the human’s nipple. “Shall we make it up to you?”

Dora pretends to consider this and then slides back down next to Bethiah. “Well, I’m awake *now* and ready for my second orgasm, if you’re offering.”

And she reaches for me.

Kef, satisfying two females can be exhausting...and yet I’ve never been happier. With a grin, I slide lower on the bed so I can play with two sets of thighs, and what’s between them.

SEVENTY-THREE





## DORA

“We shouldn’t leave her on the ship,” Bethiah tells Jamef, her arms crossed. “What if someone steals it?”

“You’re the only one that ever steals the keffing ship,” he growls back. There’s a fierce glare on his hard face, his red eye menacing this morning.

I bite back a sigh at their bickering. Here we were getting along so well. The moment we came in sight of the station, though, Jamef and Bethiah have been fighting. They’ve fought the entire way in and fought when the ship was docking, too. Now we’re getting ready to enter the station and yup, still fighting.

In this particular case, I agree with Bethiah. I don’t want to be left behind on the ship. Not because I feel like it’s dangerous...I just don’t want them leaving me alone while they explore the station. I don’t want them deciding anything in relation to their jobs without me there. I sure don’t want both of them deciding that they need to leave me behind for my own good while they collect bounties.

That seems like something that could happen all too easily, so I raise a hand and speak up. “Um, guys, I want to go with you.”

Jamef turns toward me, his hands on his hips, and shakes his head. “Haal Ui isn’t one of the nicer stations. I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

There are nicer stations? Every one I’ve seen so far (granted, I haven’t seen many) are absolute armpits of the universe. I look over at Bethiah. “I’ll wear a collar. I’ll pretend to be a slave. Whatever you need. I just want to go with you. I need to learn more about the universe if I’m going to be safe in it. How can I learn to be street smart if you guys completely shelter me?”

She tilts her head, considering me. Then she looks over at Jamef. “Nope, I changed my mind. You’re right. She needs to stay here.”

“Wait,” I protest. “No!”

Jamef looks taken aback. “You’re actually agreeing with me?”

Bethiah nods. “I just recalled the last time I was here and how everyone treated the human slaves. Plus, the last time I took her on a station, she was stolen.”

“Yes, by him,” I point out, flapping a hand at Jamef. “That doesn’t count.”

“It counts,” Bethiah says.

“It absolutely counts,” Jamef agrees.

I grit my teeth. “This doesn’t seem very fair. You’re just going to keep me hidden on this ship forever?”

“Not forever. You’re just not coming out on this station.” Jamef’s expression is determined, as is his posture. I’m not going to get anywhere with him, I can tell already.

I turn to Bethiah, but she’s watching him, her expression thoughtful. “I like the idea of the three of us having a cantina date, but I’m thinking of the places here at Haal Ui and you’re right. They’re not great.”

“The last time I was here, I got robbed,” Jamef says.

Bethiah smirks at him. “That was me.”

“I know. And the time before that I was hit over the head and kidnapped,” he continues.

“That was also me.”

I throw my hands up in frustration. “So wait, I’m being hidden away because the common denominator in all this danger is Bethiah?”

“There are other bad sorts, too,” Jamef says, unrelenting. “I’m sorry, sweetheart, but it’s been decided.”

“You both suck,” I announce. “I’m an adult. I should be able to go where I want.”

Bethiah advances toward me, her eyes narrowed. She captures my chin between her fingers and forces me to look up at her as if I’m a naughty child instead of a grown-ass woman. “Please tell me you’re not going to do anything stupid like escape the ship and go exploring the station on your own, fluffit.”

I smack her hand away. “I’m annoyed, not a moron. Give me some credit, please? If I leave this ship, I’m risking my life. I know that. There’s a million goons out there that would love to snatch me up to sell to the highest bidder.”

“Exactly. Which is why it’s best if you stay here on this ship.” She boops my nose, as if it’s all settled. “We’ll find a less unpleasant station and take you out to a cantina for an evening out, hmm? Just not this one.”

Jamef moves to Bethiah’s side, and their tails twine briefly in a move that normally makes my heart squeeze with affection. Right now, it just cements the realization that they’re both against me. It’s two versus one. “I’m sorry, sweetheart, but Bethiah is right. We’ll check in with the guild, pick up a few bounties, and be on our way again. I promise we won’t leave you alone here for long.”

“Fine,” I grumble. “Give me a kiss—both of you—and then get out of here.”

Bethiah obliges quickly and Jamef hesitates before pressing a light kiss on my lips. It’s like he knows I’m really annoyed but he’s not going to change his mind. I watch them as they move around the ship, filling their weapon belts with blasters and knives, and then, tails twining briefly again, they head out of the ship and down the ramp, onto the Haal Ui docks. I move to the monitor on the bridge to watch them go, and notice that they share a laugh and amused glances before disappearing out of sight.

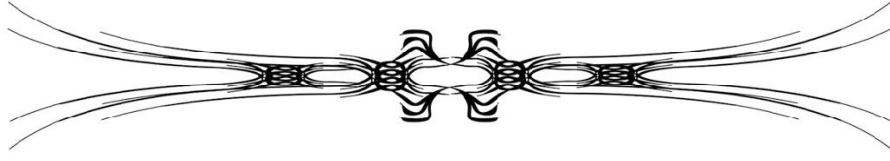
They look cute together. Like a team. It irks me. Not that they’re together or that I’ve been left behind.

It irks me that I'm completely and utterly useless. I'm *not* part of that team. I'm a third wheel in all senses. Is this what I have to look forward to for the rest of my life? Being treated like dead weight in our relationship? If so, I hate it.

But how do I fix that? How do I change who and what I am? A human is a liability. An illegally cloned one, doubly so.

Am I supposed to just hide for the rest of my life?

SEVENTY-FOUR



## JAMEF

“She’s mad.”

“I know. She doesn’t like that I changed my mind.” Bethiah shrugs. “She’ll get over it.”

I’m still surprised Bethiah agreed with me. That she capitulated on her stance and decided that I was right. It’s a good feeling, even if I don’t entirely trust it. She could have an ulterior motive, some sort of plan she worked out with Dora to keep me in the dark and snub me when I let my guard down. Maybe they’re planning even now to oust me from our triad...

That part wouldn’t surprise me. I don’t bring anything to the table. I have no good family name. I’m not handsome or clever. All I’ve got is some bionic lungs, but that doesn’t mean it’s enough to keep two gorgeous females with me.

For now though, I think they like me? I think. With Bethiah, it’s sometimes hard to tell, but Dora is easier to read. Although now that Dora’s going to be mad at us... “Perhaps we should bring her back something from the station to assuage any hurt feelings she might have.”

Bethiah gives me an irritated look. “She’s not a child. She needs to keffing understand when it’s dangerous and when it’s not. We can’t coddle her.”

“There’s a difference between coddling and acknowledging the other person’s feelings.”

She shakes her head. “We told her this was the situation. She said she was fine with it. Now she needs to show us she’s fine with it. Come on. I don’t want to spend all day in this station. It stinks.”

Haal Ui definitely has its own...aroma. In that, she’s right. Still, it wouldn’t hurt to let Dora know that even though she was left behind, we still thought about her. I eye the vendor

booths clustered along the walls, hoping something will catch my eye.

Out of habit, we head toward the food stalls. The guild is accredited through Homeworld, and bounty hunting is considered a valid (if dangerous) employment. Sometimes things get unsettled, though. A politician gets something up his ass, or an escaped convict decides he wants revenge. Every guild has an underground method to casually let its hunters know if it's safe to be on the space station or if they need to clear out immediately.

We head to the fried leaf vendor at the far end of the long row of booths, the greasy smells adding to the general stink of the station's recycled air. It's crowded down here, but Bethiah manages to elbow her way in with the best of them. I don't need to—one look at me and my red eye and people skitter out of my way like roaches.

Bethiah holds up two fingers to the vendor. "You got extra salty?"

"Always," he says, and dumps a basket of thick, glossy leaves into a bowl of spices, tossing them in the coating before moving them to the fryer.

"Yum," she says, twining her tail with mine as she leans over the counter to watch the food being prepared. It's that little touch that does me in every time. That caress that tells me that Bethiah might just care for me after all. It arouses me when she rubs her tail against mine, but more than that, it makes me feel wanted.

Best keffing feeling in the universe.

"How's business?" Bethiah asks casually, the code phrase for the guild check in.

"Business as usual," the leaf vendor says cheerfully. He gives the frying leaves a shake, then dumps them into two disposable plas containers and holds them out to us. "Enjoy."

"You know we will." Bethiah nods at me. "Pay the male, bucket of bolts."

I toss a few credits down and pick up my basket of fried leaves. They're disgustingly greasy and immediately turn my stomach, so I pour my share into Bethiah's container. "Not hungry."

"You ate too much before we got here." Her mouth curls with amusement and she tilts her head, regarding me. "Too much pussy can ruin your appetite."

"Never." I gesture at the station elevator across the way. "Shall we go up?"

"After you." She slides closer to me, her tail remaining twined with mine, and snarls at anyone that tries to get too close to us. In between bites of her food, of course.

The elevator is empty when we get on, and I hit the button for the 342nd floor, and then hold my wrist up to the panel to let the guild chip I have implanted override the instructions. We zoom up through the station, and Bethiah polishes off her leaves, tossing the container onto the floor.

With an annoyed look, I pick it up. "Don't be a child."

"What, am I ruining the beauty of the place?" She spreads her arms wide, gesturing at the ugly, oppressive station around us.

She's not wrong—Haal Ui is run-down even for station standards. It's one of the older artificial environments built, and in a central location, which means it's easy to get to and therefore crowded. It also hosts a fair number of pirates and escaped criminals from the nearby Haven II prison colony, which is another reason why I wanted Dora to stay behind. Even so...it costs nothing to be tidy.

I hold the trash out to Bethiah. "Be thoughtful in your actions. That's all I'm asking."

"Now you sound like Dora," she tells me, her tail untwining with mine the moment the doors open. "Next you'll be telling me that I'm mean and I hurt your feelings."

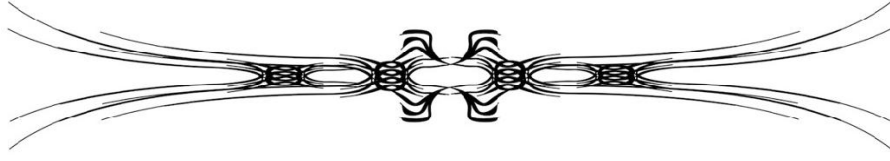
"You are mean," I point out as we step off the elevator and into the guild headquarters. "But I've always known that. Doesn't mean I don't like it." I drop the trash in her hand when



she doesn't reach for it. "And it also doesn't mean you get to be a slob. Just because this isn't your home doesn't mean it's not someone else's."

"Bossy," is all Bethiah says, but she's grinning.

SEVENTY-FIVE



## BETHIAH

I t's been a few months since I've been back at the Haal Ui headquarters, but it truly feels like a lifetime ago. Maybe that's why it feels so strange to walk in and no one glances up. No heads turn when Jamef and I arrive together. Meanwhile, I feel as if I've been remade from the ground up, and everyone should notice that Bethiah, the universe's quirkiest bounty hunter, has settled down with a mate. Two, even.

But that's the thing with bounty hunters. They don't give a kef about your personal life. They just want to do their jobs and collect their credits.

Jamef brushes a hand over my back, his tail detangling from my (admittedly) possessive one. He crosses the room, heading for one of the credit kiosks to enter in his credentials and get his payment. He's all business, that one, and I suspect it's because he doesn't want to leave Dora alone for any longer than we have to. I don't want to either, but it might be good for her to sweat over us a little. She needs to be a little fiercer, a little more independent.

A szzt male bustles past me with an ooli in a shock collar, his hands cuffed behind his back. He gives me a cross look for standing in his way, heading on towards the holding cells. Right. I'm gawking like it's my first bounty. The sooner I get over myself, the sooner I can get down to work.

I approach the desk instead of heading for one of the multiple database kiosks established around the room. I could log in and check my open bounties, do a little searching myself, but I'm in a chatty sort of mood. I beam at the older mesakkah female behind the counter, who gives me a wary look, her hand going to her blaster. She eyes me with suspicion. "There a problem here, Bethiah?"

“No problems,” I say cheerfully. “Just got on station after a long break and wondering how business is going.”

She grunts as I lean on the counter, relaxing. “Business is business. You looking for something specific?”

Am I? I think about Dora, and Jamef, and drum my fingers on the counter. “I guess...I’m looking for an easy score. Nothing dangerous or life-threatening.”

“Something for infants. Got it.” She pulls up her data-pad and skims through the listings.

I grit my teeth at the humiliation. This is just temporary, I remind myself. We don’t have to do the easy jobs forever. It’s just until we get used to working as a team. I think of Dora, and her big dark eyes, and how upset she’d be if someone got shot or stabbed on our first outing. “Just something low on the danger scale and pays preferably well. Even if it takes a long time.” Some more relaxing jobs are passed over for trickier, quicker work. I know I’d rather spend one day hunting down an escaped convict than seventeen standing guard over an abandoned ship, especially if they pay the same.

“Hmm,” the female says. “What about a missing person retrieval? No foul play suspected, just a mate that hasn’t returned home. Pay is at the top of the scale.”

Well now I’m interested. “If someone’s missing, why not go to the authorities?”

“The person that opened the bounty is a human,” she says.

Ah. That’ll do it. “I’ve got a soft spot for humans,” I drawl. “Give me the ticket info.”

“You’re lucky that you get this one,” she grumbles. “The human just filed it yesterday. She’s still on station, too. You can get all the information directly from her if you like. See if you can squeeze a bit more out of her.”

I guess it’s good that we expanded the *Pleasure Spot*. Something tells me this human isn’t going to want to sit around on Haal Ui waiting while we hunt down her erstwhile mate. Dora might like another of her kind to chat with, too. I picture the excitement on her face and my enthusiasm for this

particular bounty grows. “Sounds good. Give me the contact info and I’ll go look her up.”

The clerk shakes her head, tapping a few more things into her data-pad. “Let me just log it into the system that you’re taking the bounty.”

I drum my fingers on the counter while I wait, glancing behind me to look for Jamef. He’s sitting at a kiosk, no doubt scrolling through bounties himself, looking for something to take on. His expression is grave, and I admire him from afar. Not bad, not bad at all. For some reason, I really love the intense look of concentration on his face. It reminds me of the expression he wears in bed, when he’s determined to get me—or Dora—off.

I clench my thighs together pleurably, smiling to myself. Kef, I’m in such a good mood. It’s disgusting.

“Here you go,” the clerk says, and slides a plas-card across the desk to me. “Her quarters. You can’t contact her via the comm system. She doesn’t know how to work it.”

Typical human. “Reminds me of one I used to know. She didn’t want to learn it and refused. Said our alphabet was too hard.”

“It might be for an inferior race like hers.” The clerk shrugs. “Don’t know, don’t care. Just make sure she pays you in good, unmarked credits.”

I give the clerk a jaunty salute and pick up the plas-card, glancing down at the name on there and the room number.

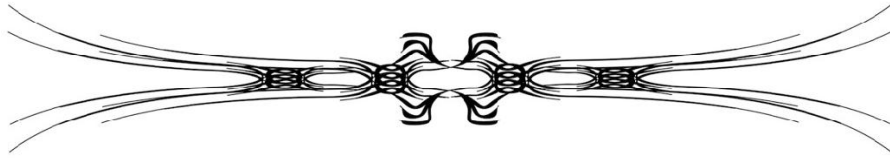
My heart stops in my chest. I recognize that name.

Rhonda.

The human that broke my heart is now the one that’s hiring me. I freeze in place, my insides turning to ice. I can’t do this. I can’t. It doesn’t matter that it’s been ten years since I last saw her. Rhonda made me fall in love with her and then threw me away.

For the first time in my life, I’m speechless.

SEVENTY-SIX



## JAMEF

There's a few promising bounties in the system, but I don't claim any for myself. Not yet. Now that I'm mated, I need to run them past Bethiah before I make any decisions. I feel a little guilty that I can't include Dora in that particular aspect of our lives, but maybe eventually she'll be familiar with the job enough that she can offer advice. So I tag them in the system as potentials and then look around the headquarters for my mate.

I find Bethiah by the counter, where a guild assistant helps those that can't read or have questions. She's staring down at a plas-card in front of her, expression stricken. That's not a good sign. Concerned, I jump to my feet and head to her side. "What's wrong?"

"I have our next bounty," Bethiah says in a distant voice. She holds a card out to me. "We're taking this one."

There's a name and a room number on the card, but no details about the bounty. I glance over at Bethiah's face but she's staring off at nothing. "What kind of job is it?"

"Retrieval. Missing person. Doesn't matter. We're taking it."

I give her a curious look. Here I thought we'd talk things over, but if she's made her mind up, I suppose we can take this particular bounty. "Is the pay right?"

She nods and jumps to her feet, plucking the plas-card out of my grip. "It's safe, too. Come on. We've got to go meet her before someone else grabs this bounty."

"You didn't put your name on it?"

She shakes her head vehemently. "No. She can't see my name. This has to be anonymous."

That's...not how things work. I eye the assistant behind the desk. "Put my name on it, then. We want to make sure it's

our bounty and it's not claimed by someone remotely.”

“Good idea,” Bethiah says, but she still sounds distracted. She heads past me, making a line for the elevator, and I follow after her, trying to decipher her strange mood change. We get in and she pushes the button, and several other people file onto the elevator with us, nixing any chance of a conversation between the two of us.

Or so I think.

Bethiah leans over to me as the elevator stops for what feels like the dozenth time. She's twitching impatiently, watching with annoyance as more people get on. “I know her.”

I eye the ooli woman that just got on the elevator. I drop my voice, keeping it low. “Her?”

“No.” Bethiah pushes the card in front of my nose. “Her. The human. Rhonda.”

“All right...? Did you two part on difficult terms?”

Bethiah laughs, the sound humorless and cold. “You could say that. I asked her to be my mate and she told me no. That was the last time I saw her.”

I stare at her in surprise. She's hinted that she's had past relations with humans, but I didn't realize that it was a human that destroyed her trust in relationships. Several things suddenly click into place. Her reluctance to get involved with Dora. Her overprotective nature with her. The way Bethiah gets skittish any time someone wants to get close. I touch my tail to hers in the crowded elevator, leaning in. “If you want to turn it down, I'm fine with that.”

She shakes her head, swallowing hard. “She's a human alone. You know how hard that is. She's risking a lot just by being on the station. Someone else might set her up or rob her. She's probably scared. Even if it's weird, we have to be the ones to help her.”

That's noble of her.

That's also very unlike Bethiah. Nobility isn't her strong suit. “And do you still have feelings for this human?”



“Pfft. No.” She shoots me an ugly look. “Of course not. This is purely business.”

Something tells me that it’s not, but what other choice do we have? She’s not wrong in that a human alone asking for bounty hunter assistance is just as likely to get robbed as she is to get help. Taking on the bounty would be doing Bethiah’s old friend a favor.

Maybe this is something Bethiah needs to get closure. I just can’t help but feel like Dora would be unhappy about this. Kef, I’m not all that happy about it, either. But if she needs this, I can’t deny it to her.

When the busy elevator finally stops on the correct floor, Bethiah pushes to the front and shoves her way out. I follow behind her, watching her back as people grumble at her rudeness, my hand on my blaster as a silent message to anyone that might be annoyed enough to follow us. Luckily, we’re the only ones that get off on this floor and I trail after my mate.

Bethiah dips into a hotel and skims right past the front desk, heading towards another elevator. We go up another two floors, and then get out. Bethiah races ahead of me, her gaze locked on the doors themselves. When she pauses in front of one, her tail twitches with nervousness. Before I can say anything, she knocks on the door.

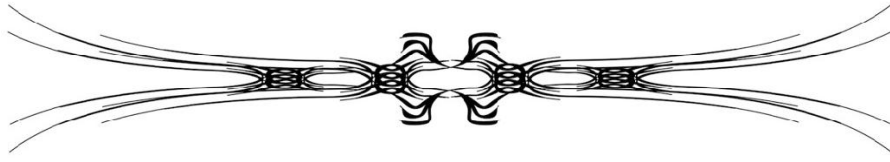
A female human answers, opening the door and staring in surprise at Bethiah. The human’s pretty, though that shouldn’t be surprising. She’s dressed richly in a flowing silvery gown made of expensive silk, her shoulders bare. Her neck is adorned with jewelry, a slim collar on her throat, and her wrists are loaded with jewels. Her hair is a vibrant reddish orange, her eyes bright green, and her skin is paler than any human I’ve ever seen. There’s a few small lines at the corners of her eyes, but other than that, she could be ageless.

It’s clear she’s some male’s pampered prize.

Her lips part and she bursts into elegant tears, flinging herself forward into Bethiah’s arms. “It’s you! Oh, Bethy. I can’t believe it’s you!”

Bethy?

SEVENTY-SEVEN



## BETHIAH

I hate the name Bethy. I remember that just as Rhonda launches herself into my arms, weeping. It's a weird thing to focus on when you're meeting the once-love-of-your-life for the first time in ten years, but there it is. I hate the name Bethy, and it always annoyed me that Rhonda called me that. Funny how I'm just remembering it now.

"I can't believe you're here," she weeps against my chest, her arms encircling my waist. "It's been so long since I've seen a friendly face. I've been so alone."

My sense of guilt rises, and I feel bad I was focused on anything as petty as a nickname. "Rhonda, what are you doing here on station alone? It's not safe."

"I know it's not." She weeps harder. "But I didn't have any choice." She tries to nestle closer to my breasts but her ornate hair decorations get in the way. They snag against the front of my tunic and catch on the fabric, and I have to pry one dangerous looking bit off of my front. As I do, she turns and notices Jamef for the first time—and shrieks, clinging to me in terror.

Oh come *on*. He doesn't look that scary. I fight back a surge of impatience.

"Who—who is that? What does he want?" She quivers like a, well, like a fluffit. I'm a little disgusted to realize that Dora's nickname fits Rhonda's terrified manner more than it's ever fit Dora.

Jamef's face is unreadable. He watches Rhonda with an inscrutable gaze, his red eye gleaming in the low light of Haal Ui's halls. His stance is casual, though, his hands near his weapon belt. "This is Jamef sa Raan," I say. "He's one of my mates."

She sniffs prettily and looks up at me. "Like...your crew?"

“Like he eats my pussy every night. That kind of mate.”

Jamef snorts with amusement, inclining his chin towards Rhonda. “Pleased to meet you. I’ve heard you and Bethiah are already acquainted?”

“We were once mates,” Rhonda says with another delicate sniff, wiping her fingertips under her eyes with precision so as not to smudge the cosmetics she wears. “I didn’t realize you liked men.”

“Actually,” I say, lifting a finger. “I feel obligated to point out that not only do I like men, we were also never mates. I asked you to be my mate and you declined because you said I couldn’t take care of you.”

“I don’t remember it like that.” Rhonda’s pink lower lip quivers.

I do. I remember every keffing word of our last conversation. But it’s clear there’s no sense in fighting over it. I can argue until my face turns purple and I know from experience that it won’t get anywhere with Rhonda. She’s always the victim and it’s the universe that has done her wrong. It’s never the other way around. “We took on your bounty. You want to tell us about it or should we just head out without any information at all?”

“My bounty?” She straightens her ornamented hair, giving me a look of wonder. “Truly?”

“Truly.”

Rhonda bites her lip, then gestures for us to enter. “Come inside. It’s safer to talk in here.”

We enter the small apartment, and immediately it feels like ten years ago. I can tell right away that Rhonda hasn’t changed. Despite the size of the place, it’s lushly draped with colorful fabrics of all kinds (Rhonda likes beauty) and fresh flowers. It’s obvious she’s been here a while—there’s a few decorations that look rather costly and not the usual “hotel” sort, including a crystalline vase that probably costs more than the *Pleasure Spot*. A variety of boxed purchases are stacked up in the small kitchen, and a tray of edible delights with colorful

wrappings sits atop a table. I can smell the old tang of carcinogels in the air, a habit she's always found impossible to give up. The floor is covered in colorful pillows, and she immediately heads for them, settling amidst them and reclining in a way that best shows off her body. "Please, make yourselves at home."

Jamef eyes the place and then moves to wait by the door, blasters at the ready. When I give him a curious look, he murmurs, "She's traveling with a lot of wealth. Someone else is bound to have noticed."

I nod, brushing my tail against his and then heading inside after Rhonda. I pause by the edible delights, unwrapping one and popping it into my mouth, then discarding the wrapper on the floor. She did say to treat it like home. The bite is sweet, with a bean paste of some kind and a caramelized crunch inside. Yum. I turn back to Jamef. "These are really good. We should get Dora some."

He just grunts, tilting his head toward Rhonda as if trying to tell me to stick to business. And I plan to. I'm just wrapping my head around things. I eye Rhonda as she reclines and adjusts the drape of her silky gown. She looks the same as when I last saw her, really. Her eyes are a little harder, and the lines around her mouth a bit more pronounced, but truly, it feels as if I just walked out of our quarters yesterday, never to see her again.

Or so I'd thought. I pluck another treat from the tray, discarding the wrapper, and eat it as I sit down across from her. "You've done well for yourself."

She bites her lip with small, perfect white teeth. "Have I? I've been abandoned, Bethy. I wouldn't say that's 'doing well for myself.'"

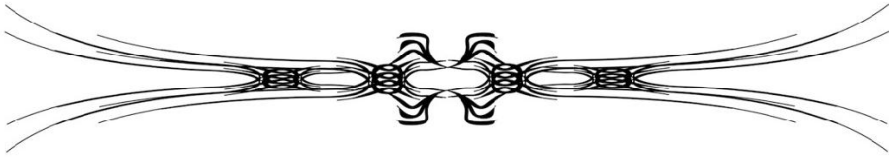
I gesture at the apartment. "Abandoned with a bunch of expensive stuff, though. You could probably sell all this and make a nice pile of credits."

"But then what?" She delicately wipes the corners of her eyes again. "A pile of credits is nothing if you don't have love."

The sweet lump I'm eating sticks to the roof of my mouth.

Rhonda sits up, her eyes shimmering with tears. "Remember when we parted all those years ago and I told you that I had to choose safety? I've chosen wrong, Bethy. I should have chosen love instead. I should have chosen you."

SEVENTY-EIGHT





## BETHIAH

I should be moved by Rhonda's tears. I should be upset that she's crying and desperate. Rhonda hates to cry. I know she does. She's always said it makes her face blotchy and ruins her makeup, and there's nothing she hates more in the world, so I know the tears aren't faked.

They just don't move me, though. Because I watch her cry, and all I can think about is when *I* cried, and Rhonda was unmoved. When I begged her to love me enough to stay, and she kindly but firmly told me no.

So *kef* her, and *kef* her tears.

I get to my feet and move towards the door and where Jamef stands guard. My mind is racing, tumbling with a million different ideas. How do I handle this while retaining my sense of pride? How do I manage this situation without being an absolute sucker? "New plan," I tell Jamef as I lick my fingers clean of the sweets. "We get Dora some of those goodies. Oh, and we find whoever it is Rhonda is looking for, collect the bounty, and then ransom him back to her for double." I beam at him, pleased at this adjustment to the original plan. "She's got no leverage, so it's easy credits."

Jamef gives me an uneasy look. "Little one, I'm not sure we should take this bounty at all. You're clearly upset."

Am I? I don't think I am. I mean, sure, I might want to put my fist through a wall or rip all the feathers off of the nearest avian, but I think I'm handling things rather well. "How can you tell?"

He blinks at me, unruffled. "Your tail is lashing."

Right. I mentally still my tail (which is harder than it should be) and head back to the tray of sweets. Eating my feelings sounds like a good idea. I devour another two sweets while I compose myself. Glancing over at Rhonda, I notice

she's still on the pillows, her expression woebegone and miserable.

Ugh. Jamef is right. We shouldn't take this bounty...but we're going to anyhow because Rhonda will absolutely get taken for a ride if we don't. I'm just interested in abusing her wallet, but others might not be so kind. I know of situations where a human has gone to the authorities for help and found themselves collared and sold within the blink of an eye. So even though I hate this and being around Rhonda is making my feelings a mess, we have to help her.

Jamef would *want* to help her if I wasn't involved. It's not Rhonda's fault that it took me years to get over her.

I move back to Jamef. "We'll take the bounty, because I don't trust anyone else to be fair to her. I promise that if I get upset, we'll talk it out. Okay?"

"We'll talk it out regardless," he tells me. "In fact, when we get back to the ship, you're going to need to tell both me and Dora what's going on."

Nodding absently, I rub his arm, and I don't know if I'm reassuring him or myself. I glance back at Rhonda. She looks very small and alone, despite the finery she's surrounded herself with.

That could be me—well, minus the finery—if I didn't have Dora and Jamef.

With a twinge of pity, I approach her. "Tell us who we're hunting for on this bounty, then. Who is it that's gone missing? Another human? A friend?"

Rhonda wipes more tears from her eyes and shakes her head. "My master. Lord Nerit il'Aiven is gone. I haven't seen him in weeks."

I should have known that Rhonda would be attached to someone else. When we parted, she made it quite clear that I couldn't keep her in the lifestyle she needed. That I wasn't rich enough to suit her, and she was going to find herself someone that was. I wait for the old bitterness to hit, the self-loathing

that always comes with thoughts of Rhonda and how I wasn't enough for her. How I'm not enough for anyone.

But somehow, I'm not as bothered as I was in the past. A little cynical, perhaps, but not bothered. Of course she found herself a new master, one with a distinctly noble name. "Homeworlder?" When she nods, I eye our surroundings again. "Rich?"

She sniffs, nodding again. "He's a very good man and has been really kind to me. He loves me. I just worry that something awful has happened to him. That's why I left my home and came to this station. I need help and I can't look for him on my own." Rhonda gives me a pleading look, avoiding looking over at Jamef. "Please. I'll pay anything. Just bring him back."

Yikes. "This is probably going to bite me in the tail later, Rhonda, but a good rule for working with bounty hunters is that you don't offer to pay them 'anything.' Someone's going to take advantage of you."

"But I mean it." Her eyes water again, her shoulders slumping. "I lose everything if I don't have him."

"Don't be so dramatic. We're taking the case. We're going to need records of his regular haunts, a financial profile, and anything else you can give us. If he's using his accounts, he'll be easy to find. If not, well, we'll take it from there."

Rhonda gives me a tiny smile. "Thank you, Bethy. You're just as kind as I remember."

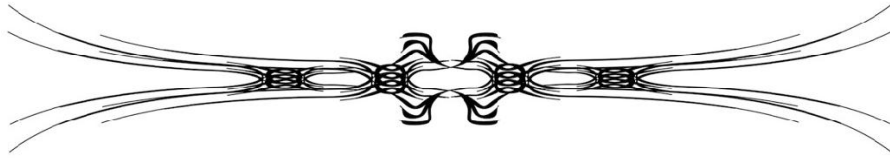
Jamef clears his throat by the door, and I'm not sure if he's trying to hide a laugh or what. "Yeah, yeah," I mutter. "Pack up your shit, though. You can't stay here on station."

"I can't? Why not?"

"Because you're coming with us on our ship. That's safest for all parties and to ensure you don't get robbed and can't pay us." I give her a tight smile. "Don't worry. We've got another human on board. I'm sure you two will be great friends."

Jamef coughs again, the sound choked.

SEVENTY-NINE



## DORA

I can only stare at the camera feeds for so long before I get bored out of my mind. Jamef and Bethiah probably aren't coming back for a while, so I make myself busy on the ship. Or at least, I try to. It's damned boring when it's just me, though. I clean up the mess hall, and check in on the laundry bots. I remove the brush from the mopping bot and scrub the bases of the walls, hunting for imaginary smudges. I dust. I organize our food supplies. I wipe down the monitors in every single room, remembering how Bethiah licked them.

And when the ship is squeaky clean and I'm still alone, I take a shower and then crawl into bed for a nap. Even the nap isn't any good, though. Our new bed is huge and sleeping on it alone is no fun. It just reminds me there should be two other bodies in here, pressed up against me. Boo.

Being left behind sucks.

After a restless nap, I make myself noodles in the mess hall, trying not to think too hard about Jamef and Bethiah enjoying a nice dinner on station. Are they having a date night? Do they miss me? Are they thinking about me, even a little?

Before I can sit down with my noodles, I hear one of the outer doors open, and a chime from the computer indicating someone has returned. With a sigh of relief, I jump up, abandoning my noodles, and race down the hall to greet my mates.

Bethiah is the first one through the doors. She winks at me, smiling, and then saunters down the hall. Oh. I guess I don't get a hug? Or a kiss?

Jamef comes in next, and he's got a package in his arms. He stops, kissing my brow, and pulls me close. "I'll explain everything later," he murmurs. "I promise."

Huh? I have no idea what he's talking about at first. Then, he steps aside and a third person comes into the ship after him.

A woman.

A *human* woman.

An *absolutely gorgeous* human woman.

What. The. Fuck.

I shoot an incredulous look at Jamef, but he closes his eyes and shakes his head, as if this wasn't his idea, either. Okay. He said he would explain everything later. I won't freak out just yet.

But I really want to.

It doesn't help that the stranger is incredibly beautiful and elegant. She's taller than me, with a perfect hourglass figure and cleavage that would put a goddess to shame. If I had to guess, she's about fifteen years older than me, but she wears it well. Her skin is milky white and flawless, as if she's never seen the sun, and her eyes are a vivid green. Her hair is an intense shade of red, cascading down her shoulders and back, and adorned with looping chains that are studded with jewels. Her gown is equally flowing, equally priceless-looking, and trails behind her as she steps on board, like she's a princess come to greet her subjects.

So I give the woman a half-hearted greeting. "Hi there. I'm Dora. It's nice to see another human."

"Is it?" She arches a perfect red brow in my direction. "We should be commiserating on our bad luck at being stolen, dear. Not being happy about it. The fewer humans I see, the happier it makes me because it means that our people are safe."

I...don't know how to answer that. Something tells me that I shouldn't point out that I'm a clone, and that I wouldn't be back on Earth anyhow. That I wouldn't exist if Dora-the-original hadn't been chopped up into itty bitty pieces to be cloned out of. I'm selfishly glad she was, because it means I live. But...yeah. I'm not telling this stranger any of that. Not with that judgy look on her face.

She peels a delicate glove off of one hand, and then the other, and they shimmer with color as she does. Pretty. Everything about her is pretty, actually. I can't see a single pore, or a stray eyebrow hair. Her mane is smooth and glossy, her lips perfect. It's downright intimidating.

"Welcome on board," I say, gesturing at the ship I just spent hours cleaning. It's never been so tidy, but she's looking at it with the same expression of distaste I use when I find Bethiah's crumbs all over the countertops. "Are you just visiting, or..."

"She's staying with us until our bounty is completed," Jamef says, his tone even and reassuring.

Oh. An *employer*. That makes things so much better. Relieved, I beam a smile at her. "Well, I'm delighted to meet you. We just had some guest quarters added on so you get to be the first one to break them in."

"Lucky me," the woman murmurs, staring around her with chagrin. Her gaze settles on me again and she gives me a polite smile. "Which one do you belong to? Or do you service everyone that comes on board the ship?"

"You mean, am I a maid?"

She gives me a little condescending smile. "Sure. A maid."

Why am I getting so angry? She's just an employer, and a snotty one. I've been treated worse by aliens, and I shouldn't expect much from a human that clearly lives among them. "I live here. With Bethiah and Jamef. We're together."

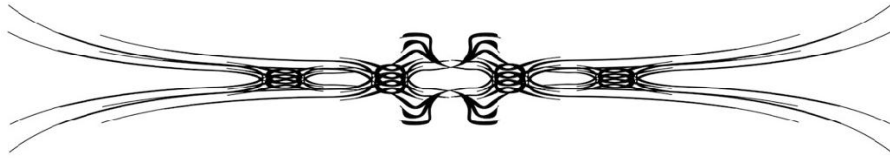
"A human on a pirate crew? How charming and very Bethy." She chuckles.

*Bethy?*

The fuck???

Oh, we are having some serious conversations the moment I get the two of my mates alone.

EIGHTY





## DORA

I clear my throat. “Bethy?” I ask, wanting to know. “Bethy” sounds like someone that’s sweet and cheery. Someone that is wide-eyed and innocent. A pet name. A cutesy name. It does not sound like the Bethiah I know. And I don’t like it one bit. “Did I hear that right?”

The woman giggles, the sound tinkling and perfect, and she sweeps forward in a bevy of silks. “Does she not go by that anymore, then? What do you call her?”

“Bethiah,” I say. “Sometimes ‘jerkface.’”

She titters, raising a perfect hand to her perfect mouth. “Bethiah it is, then. It’s been a long time since we’ve crossed paths. She must have dropped the diminutive.”

I manage a weak smile. “You knew each other?”

“Oh, a long time ago,” Rhonda says, leaning toward me with a conspiratorial look. “Long before I got so wrinkled.”

Please. If she’s wrinkled, she must not have any mirrors. “You’re perfect. Don’t be silly.”

“I like you,” she says, beaming. “My name is Rhonda, by the way.”

“I’m Dora.”

She turns to look behind her, frowning down at the pile of luggage at the end of the dock. The hover-cart is waiting there, idling, and she looks back at me again. “Do they have you on ship loading duty?”

Do they? No one said anything like that to me. “I hope not. I was told not to go on the docks. It’s not safe for humans.”

“Oh, yes, but you’re not the same as me,” she says sweetly. “You wouldn’t stand out in a crowd, sweetie. Maybe no one would notice you. And my things are very expensive, so

someone needs to get them before some thieves run off with them.”

She gives me an expectant look.

I stare back. “I’m pretty sure I’m not to leave the ship, but I can check with Jamef.”

“Check with me about what?” Jamef strolls down the hall back toward where I stand with the woman. He moves immediately to my side and puts his hands on my shoulders, leaning down towards my ear. “Bethiah’s in a mood,” he murmurs. “She needs her space for a bit.”

Oh. What exactly happened down there? I furrow my brows, worried for her. She was in a good mood this morning. I’ll have to go talk to her—and cuddle her—when she emerges. I nod.

“Don’t frown, sweetie,” Rhonda says in a chiding tone. “It causes wrinkles. No one wants a wrinkled human.”

I’m about to reach up and touch my forehead, but Jamef’s hands tighten on my shoulders and I feel him looming over me. He all but growls at her. “I. Do.”

Rhonda blinks up at him—either that, or she’s fluttering her lashes. It’s hard to tell. Just that there’s a lot of lash movement going on. “I see. My apologies, Captain.”

“Jamef. Just Jamef.”

“sa Raan, wasn’t it?” She puts a hand to her shiny hair, smoothing it back. “Isn’t there a station named Raan? Are you by chance related to the governing family?”

He snorts. “No. I have no family. If you’re done with business on the station, we’d like to get going. Docking here for too long costs credits.”

She gestures at the ramp. “I just need my baggage brought on board. Your ship girl, Dora, was going to help me.”

I could swear Jamef growls again. “She’s not a ship girl. Nor is she a slave. She’s part of this crew.”

“Yes,” Rhonda says carefully. “But not part of the crew that assists with baggage? I’m truly not trying to be dense, Captain Jamef. I’m just trying to understand who can help me.” She gives him an apologetic smile. “In the circles I run in, most humans are enslaved. Please forgive me for any misinterpretations.”

I feel a little bad for her. It’s hard when everyone expects you to just understand what’s going on and you have no clue. I smile in Rhonda’s direction. “Totally okay. I can see how you’d make that mistake. Can I show you around the ship at least?”

“I should love that,” Rhonda says, a tiny smile on her face. Then she gestures at the ramp. “But...my things?”

“I’ll get them,” Jamef says, his voice low and with an unpleasant edge. He squeezes my shoulders again and then reaches up to caress my cheek. “You’re staying on board, sweetheart?”

“Absolutely. I’d be crazy to leave.” I tilt my head into his touch, and I’m rewarded with a quick kiss on the temple before he strides down the ramp, heading after Rhonda’s luggage. I watch as he leaves, his tail twitching in an extremely annoyed way. Hm. Both him and Bethiah don’t seem very happy with Rhonda on board. Something tells me to be cautious around her.

I turn back toward our guest, only to find that she’s watching me with a scrutinizing gaze. “Your captain is a very interesting male.”

“I wouldn’t call him captain around Bethiah. She won’t like that much.”

“But he’s in charge, is he not?”

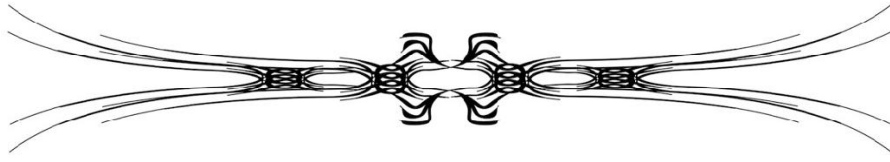
Is he? Jamef does spend a lot of time on the bridge, and Bethiah seems happy to let him, but I don’t know. “The ship *is* his, I suppose.”

“I see.” She appears to absorb this information and then smiles at me. “Mesakkah can be so complicated sometimes, can’t they?”

I chuckle. She's not wrong. Sometimes I don't know whether I'm coming or going when Bethiah is involved. "I let them lead and I follow. It's easiest that way."

"It is *their* universe," Rhonda muses. "They've made that quite clear to us humans. Well, then. Show me around?"

EIGHTY-ONE



## DORA

“These are the guest quarters?” Rhonda takes one look around the new room and gives me a look of horror. “Where’s the en suite?”

“You mean the lavatory?” I gesture behind me. “Down the hall.”

Her eyes widen. “I see. I guess I have no choice but to rough it until my beloved is found. But this explains why your skin is so chapped, at least.”

I’m chapped? I touch my cheek, concerned.

Rhonda gives me an apologetic look, moving to my side. She takes my hand in hers, and then grimaces. “Calluses too? My dear, no one’s looking out for you. Our only value as humans is in our appearances and our eager personalities.” She bites her lip, shaking her head. “You must take care of yourself. I’m not saying this to be cruel. I’m saying this because you’re just like me, and I had to learn the hard way. A beautiful human is a *safe* human.”

Oh. I give her a timid smile, still feeling awkward and ugly and disheveled in her perfect presence. “Most of the humans I’ve met are new to this end of space. No one’s given me advice before.”

She smiles at me, and it manages to somehow be tired and understanding at the same time. Rhonda smooths a piece of my hair back from my face. “I’ve been out here far too long, I think. I’ve learned how to be safe, but it’s still a difficult existence at times. Now...you’re with the cyborg? The fearsome one? He should make you wear a collar so his ownership is clearly established and no one gets the wrong idea.”

“Oh, I’m with both Jamef and Bethiah.”

Rhonda blinks, clearly surprised. She recovers quickly and beams at me, squeezing my hands once more. “That’s extremely clever. Hedging your bets in case one of them runs off or grows tired of you. I should have thought of the same.” She winks at me. “I might steal that from your playbook. Now...help me unpack?”

Playbook? I don’t have a playbook, but maybe it’s something I should know. Maybe it’s a piece of my memories missing due to being cloned. I keep quiet, just in case.

Rhonda moves to a small bag and pulls out an enameled square container. She pops it open and sticks a long, slender tube between her lips. The end flares blue with an electronic light, and then she blows out a puff of smoke and holds it between her fingers. “So tell me more about this place. About your owners. Did they buy you at a station? Together?” She gestures at one of the many bags on her bed. “Unpack that one, please, but mind the silks with those rough hands.”

Well, I did offer to show her around. I suppose I could help her unpack. I pull a few of her pretty dresses out, far more ornate and glorious than anything I acquired at Kaatir’s moon base. Each dress flows like water, rippling over my hands, and tiny crystals flash, embedded in the collars and sleeves. These are gorgeous, and I inwardly shrivel when my rougher hands catch on a bit of the fabric. “I’ve never seen anything so beautiful.”

“Insurance,” Rhonda says, taking another drag from her carcinogel. “Like I said, our best route to safety is a lovely appearance. So...they bought you on station? Were they looking for a plaything?”

“Oh, no. It was my idea for the three of us to get together,” I say, carefully hanging the dresses. I tell her all about how we got together, how Bethiah and Jamef had been playing cat and mouse games and how I was attracted to both of them, and how I’d suggested the triad. As I talk, Rhonda smokes. She pulls out a second carcinogel and puffs on it when the first one goes dry, and all the while I put away one mouth-watering dress after another.

I avoid mentioning that I'm a clone, though.

“Smart,” is all Rhonda says when I finish my story. “Just don't become too pushy. They don't like it when we have minds and opinions of our own. They want pretty little cock remoras, eager to latch onto an alien dick at the slightest provocation.”

I don't know what a remora is, but I chuckle at her words, because Jamef does always like it when I instigate a blow job. “Bethiah likes it when you latch on, too. To pussy, that is.”

Her eyes flash, and she smiles again. “Yes, I bet she does.” She looks around the room as I move to another of her bags, wondering what treasures this one has. “Do they ever discuss credits in front of you?”

“Me? I'm not sure. If they have, I don't pay attention. Why?”

“They must have some funds pooled together,” Rhonda comments, looking around the room. “I imagine both of them are good at their jobs and for all that this ship looks like an absolute disaster, I would think they're just fond of saving instead of spending. Do you have an idea of how much is in their accounts?”

I shake my head slowly, frowning.

“Oh, Dora.” Rhonda looks disappointed in me. “You need to ask. If they're poor, how can they take care of you? How can they keep you safe? Everyone in space is looking to make a few quick credits, and what are they going to do if some trumped-up port jockey decides that he's going to confiscate you? What if they have no credits? Are they just going to pass you around to make up the fee? These are things you need to ask.”

Pass me around?

I swallow hard, thinking of Jamef and Bethiah's recent conversations. Of how Jamef is tapped out, monetarily, and that Bethiah never has any credits saved. We're broke. What if...what if they decide I need to earn my way like Rhonda thinks?

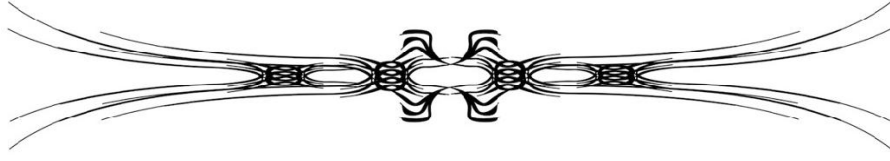


Surely they wouldn't...

Would they?

She's right. I need to ask.

EIGHTY-TWO



## BETHIAH

I'm in an absolute shit mood when we get back to the ship. I can tell Jamef isn't happy with me, and I don't blame him. I'm not exactly happy with me, either. I should have turned Rhonda away. Should have just told her "best of luck" and let someone else handle the bounty. If she got attacked or abused or enslaved again, that's her problem, not mine.

It's just...I can't. Once upon a time, I loved her. I can't turn my back on a person in need, even if it's one that broke me ten years ago.

So here we are, and I'm in a keffing royally bad mood.

I head for the maintenance room on ship, hoping something is broken and I can put my fist through it. And if it's not broken, I'll break it just to give myself something to do.

A few hours later, I feel more like myself after I've ripped out an entire stretch of cabling in a pissy fit and then replaced it. My back aches from bending over the components, but I've fixed everything that I damaged, and I'm feeling far more reasonable. I eye the grime under my fingernails, grimacing. I need to clean that up before dinner, because if Rhonda can pick apart something about your appearance, she will, and I don't want to hear it.

Ugh. I'm just now realizing that I kinda hate living with Rhonda again. I should have left her on the station.

"Hey, Bethiah?" There's a knock at the door to the control room. "Can we talk?"

It's Dora. She probably wants to yell at me over the whole situation, and I probably deserve it...but I also don't want to hear it. "Now's not a good time," I call out, rustling some of the cables to make it sound like I'm busy. "Can we talk after dinner?"

“Oh. Okay. Sure.”

She sounds so hollow and defeated that for a moment, I think that can't be *my* Dora. Something's wrong.

Is she crying? Is that because of me?

I open the door a crack despite myself and eye the woman on the other side. Sure enough, her eyes are red and she looks so sad it hurts my heart. It instantly makes me feel protective. “Did Jamef make you cry?”

“No.” She swipes away at another tear as it rolls down her cheek.

“Are you mad you had to stay on the ship? Because it really wasn't safe, fluffit.” I wipe my hands with a cloth and the open the door wider. “Trust me on that.”

She shakes her head again, and then stares at her palms. “Do...do you think my hands are rough?”

That's a weird, random sort of thing to ask. “I mean, you're definitely strong for a human if that's what you're asking.”

Her face crumples and she cries harder, a sob escaping her.

Oh kef. I can't shake the feeling that I'm somehow responsible. More than that, I just need her to stop crying. It makes me hurt all over on her behalf. “Hey, hey,” I say softly, putting a hand on the back of her neck and pulling her in against my greasy tunic. “You can't cry.”

“Because it'll make my face bloated?” She weeps even harder.

“No, because it makes me sad and when I get sad, I punch things. So please don't be sad, Dora.” I rub her back when she leans into me. “Come on. Let's go talk and you can tell me what's bothering you and how big of a jerk Jamef is.”

She lets out a watery laugh, but goes with me when I steer her down the hall towards our bedroom. “Jamef isn't a jerk. He's always good to me.”

Well now, that implies that one of us isn't always good to her, and I'm afraid that leaves me. I grimace. "Whatever I did, I'm sorry."

She shakes her head as I lead her into our room and slide the door shut behind us. "I just...I don't know what to do. I guess I'm worried and feeling uncertain about my place." Dora sniffs again. "Like the fact that I can't earn any credits for us."

What? "Why would you need to earn credits?" I tug her toward the bed and sit her down, then sit next to her. I even curl my tail around her leg, because Jamef does that to me and it feels good, and I want to do the same for her. "Dora, I told you I'd take care of you when we first met, remember? Nothing's changed."

"Yes, but now we don't have any credits." She swipes at her eyes again, distressed. "In fact, Jamef spent all of his and I was selfish enough to get some dresses. What if he gets mad that I spent all his money? What if you do? I don't want you guys to think I'm a burden."

A burden? "Dora, you're the only thing that keeps us from falling apart." I reach over and gently brush my thumb over her cheek, wiping away her tears. "Don't cry, fluffit. It makes the tip of your nose red."

My joke fails. Her expression turns miserable and she weeps fresh tears. "That's bad, isn't it? Now I'm an ugly human."

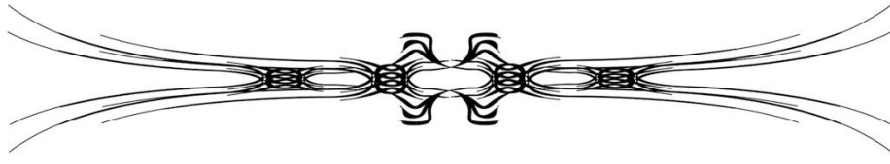
Where the kef is all of this coming from? Dora's been so self-assured, it's like she got all the confident, crafty parts of her original donor. I love that about her. To hear her crying over things like her appearance or how many credits we've spent, it isn't like her. It's like—

Ah, *kef* me.

I tip Dora's face up, my finger under her chin. "Let me guess. You've been talking to our new guest, Rhonda."

She nods, and I could smack myself.

EIGHTY-THREE



## BETHIAH

“**S**oooo,” I begin. “You need to know a few things about Rhonda, fluffit.”

Dora gives me a sad-eyed look that makes me feel keffing awful. “She’s really beautiful.”

“I know. She’s got the best face her master can buy. She’s always been obsessed with her appearance and with credits. Just because she talks about that kind of shit doesn’t mean that there’s something wrong with you.” I stroke her soft cheek, wishing I had the words for how appealing I find Dora. I love her big, dark eyes and her bouncy breasts. More than that, though, I love her happy smile. I love the way she looks at me and Jamef. I love the way she’s so enthusiastic and forthright about everything. I love how she wants to take care of us and remembers that I like my night tea plain. She’s thoughtful and kind.

Rhonda is nothing like her.

She stares down at her hands, eyeing her short nails. “I don’t think Rhonda’s wrong, though. No one wants an ugly slave.”

“I’m going to stop you right there, fluffit. Two things are wrong with that statement. First of all, you’re not a slave. And second, you think an appearance is all that matters? You think I’m with Jamef because he’s the most handsome male in the galaxy?” When she gives me a reluctant smile, I give her chin a little shake. “I’m with him because he’s exciting and stubborn and his personality interests me. I like him so much that if I could peel him and wear him as a skinsuit, I would. I’d do the same for you.”

Dora’s brows draw together. “That’s a disturbing way to describe affection.”

“It’s how I feel.” I can’t stop touching her. Not just because I like touching her, but because I think she needs it.

Pushing a lock of hair behind her ear, I lean in. “I can’t wait to get away from most people. But you two...I want you two around. Always.”

“I just worry that I’m going to be a burden. My place in this universe is precarious.” Doubt shadows her eyes. “I can’t bounty hunt. I can’t even go on station. I don’t belong on this end of the galaxy.”

“You belong with me. With Jamef.” I kiss her lips lightly, letting mine play over hers. “You’re the filling in our sweet-bun.”

“Another disturbing analogy,” she whispers against my lips. “But I’ll allow it.”

I kiss her again, letting my tongue tease hers. I hate that my sour mood filled Dora with such doubts. That we left her alone with Rhonda and Rhonda’s jaded sourness infected her. She needs to realize just how much Jamef and I need her, or our relationship doesn’t work. So I keep kissing her, even as I slide a hand under her skirt and rest it on her thigh. “Can I touch you, fluffit? Can I make you come?”

She moans, heat in her gaze, and nods. “I missed you today. Both of you.”

My stupid heart gives another unhappy little squeeze. I didn’t think about how lonely it must be for Dora to be on the ship by herself. I need to take up her lessons again, show her how to operate the controls. More than that, I need to talk to Jamef. Dora needs to feel important and valued, an equal part of our team.

But for now I want to make her come. With a grin, I slide my hand higher under her skirt, stroking the tuft of hair between her thighs. She whimpers against my lips, clinging to me as I lower her onto the bed and stroke my fingers through her folds. She’s not very wet at first, so I tease a finger in and out of the entrance to her core as I tongue her mouth, and before long, she’s riding my hand, arching against me and making the sweet, needy noises that only Dora can make. I keep one finger sunk inside her and move my thumb to her clit, and work her until she comes, hard and fast. She clings to



me, breathing my name, and I keep toying with her pussy as she comes down.

Her face is flushed and pretty, and I can't stop kissing her pink mouth. So sweet, our fluffit. "I missed you today, too. We're leaving the station, though. And we'll figure something out before we go to the next one, hmm? I don't want to leave you alone again."

Especially not with keffing Rhonda.

She gives me a little smile, wriggling against the hand I'm still teasing her pussy with. "Thank you for this, Bethiah." She slides her arms around my neck. "Thank you for showing me you care."

"Don't let it get to your head," I grump. "I have a reputation to uphold."

She pauses, studying me as a new thought occurs to her. "Or...should I have called you Bethy?"

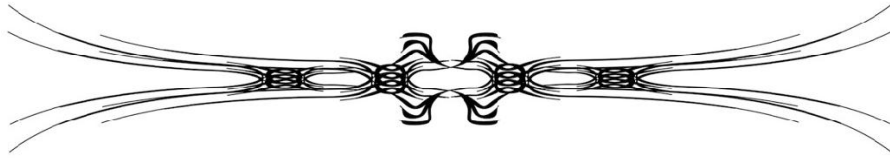
"Kef, no. That's a terrible keffing name." I make a face, sticking my tongue out.

"That's what I thought. Why would she call you that, though?"

I shrug. "When Rhonda's in a relationship, she likes to give people pet names. I guess that was hers for me."

Dora's thighs clamp tight around my hand and she jerks upright so fast our noses crack into one another. "*What?*"

EIGHTY-FOUR



## BETHIAH

I reel backward as our noses collide, not because it hurts me, but because I'm afraid of hurting the much softer Dora. Her nose just got repaired, after all.

“*What?*”

I pull my hand free from the clamp of her thighs as she glares at me. “Careful, fluffit. Someone’s going to think I’m being mean to you if you show up with a busted nose again.” And Jamef is going to be extremely, extremely mad, and I wouldn’t blame him.

“What’s this about Rhonda being in a *relationship* with you?” She stares at me in a mixture of horrified anger and resentment.

“Didn’t I mention that?” An uneasy feeling starts in the pit of my stomach. “I told you I had a human lover before. It was Rhonda. We were together for about a year before she decided I couldn’t keep her in the lifestyle she wanted and so we broke up.”

She stares at me, dumbfounded. “You brought your old lover on board and you didn’t tell me? You let her tell me that I’m callused and gross all day and I had no *idea*?”

Well, when she puts it that way, it does sound bad. “I could have sworn you knew —”

“NO!” The indignant outrage on her face makes me grimace.

Oh yeah, I keffed this one up bad. “Oh. Well. Okay, yeah. We’re doing a retrieval job for Rhonda, who used to be my lover.”

“Do...do you still have feelings for her?”

“Ugh, kef no.” I shake my head. “Just being in the same room with her irritates me.”

“And yet you brought her on the ship?” Dora gives me a suspicious look. “I don’t believe you. I’m not sure I believe any of this.”

She has an excellent point. “I can see that it looks...not great. It’s just that once upon a time I loved Rhonda.” Dora flinches, and I feel even worse. “I don’t anymore,” I say quickly. “But I did once, and I feel I owe it to her to help her out. She’s no longer interested and I’m not, either, okay? She’s looking for her master. Once we find him, we dump her into his lap, collect our pay, and go on our way. Easy, right? Do you feel better now?”

Dora’s face scrunches. “Do I feel better? No! Of course I don’t! You just brought your old lover on board our home and didn’t tell me! I was *nice* to her!” She kicks at me with one foot. “I let you make me come and right now I want to claw your face off!”

“So...you’re still mad.” The look she shoots me is downright mutinous. “Just checking. Look, fluffit, it’s not ideal. I know it isn’t. And maybe I should have said something when she first came on board the ship. That’s on me.”

“Damn right it is,” Dora gives me another indignant glare. “You know what your problem is? You’re always thinking about yourself and not anyone else. You didn’t stop to think how I’d feel, or how Jamef feels. Instead, you decided to drag her on the ship and shove her under our noses.”

I hate that she’s so upset and I can’t really argue with any of it. It makes me feel defensive, and I dislike that feeling. How is me being nice suddenly getting me in trouble with one of my mates? “What was I supposed to do? She needed help. You think I want to be her employee? But I know if we don’t take on this bounty, someone else will. Someone else is going to rob her or enslave her or possibly kill her. She’s a human in need, and I’m going to help her out...just like I helped you out.”

It’s the wrong thing to say. Dora’s jaw firms and her mouth flattens as she sits upright and shoves her skirts back down over her legs. “Unless you’re planning on fitting her with an

arm cannon too, it's not the same fucking situation at all, so don't even try it." She jerks to her feet, straightening her clothing, and throws her shoulders back as she glares down at me. "You really hurt me today, you know. You can sleep somewhere else tonight."

"It's my keffing bed, too."

"Then I'll sleep somewhere else tonight. All I know is I don't want to see your face for a while." She marches out of the room, her back stiff.

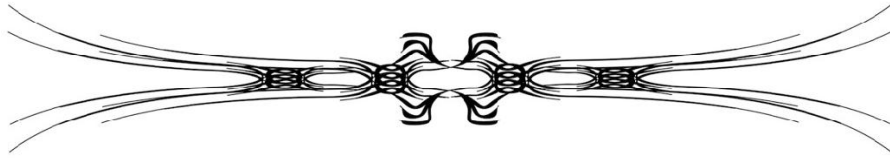
"Good!" I call back. "Fine! Keffing fine! I don't want to see you for a while anyhow! I don't need to be lectured just for trying to be a decent person!" Hmph. I straighten my hair, and the scent of Dora, still on my fingers, wafts over me.

Maybe what I did was a little thoughtless. I probably should have checked with her first. But even so, there's no need for her to overreact like that. She's being unreasonable.

Typical human. They love to just stomp all over your feelings with their tiny little five-toed feet.

Disgruntled, I stand and make the bed, and then because everything still smells like Dora and sex, I head for the shower. She's not the only one that needs to cool off. I'll give her some time and let her realize that I'm doing the right thing and there's no need to be so fussy over it.

EIGHTY-FIVE



## JAMEF

“Can we talk, Jamef?”

Dora slaps the button on the doors to the bridge, letting them slide shut behind her. Well, that’s not a good sign. Her cheeks are flushed and her hair disheveled, but she looks more angry than well-pleasured. Or both, which is strange.

“You know I always have time for my mates.” I move to her side and bend down to give her a kiss. She absently plants her mouth on mine and then all but storms across the bridge to the constantly empty nav chair.

I’m a little stung by her quick dismissal but I suspect it has something to do with the presence of our employer on ship. “Let me guess. Rhonda?”

She grips the arms of the seat tightly, and her eyes blaze with anger. “Why didn’t anyone tell me she was Bethiah’s ex-girlfriend? Why am I the last one to know?”

“I told you we needed to talk.”

“We should have talked the moment that woman stepped on board!” She leans forward with anger and then slumps back in the chair, pressing her fingers to the center of her forehead. “I’m sorry. I’m not mad at you. I’m mad at Bethiah, and I’m mad at myself, and I’m venting at you because you’ll actually listen when I say I’m upset.”

“Ah.” I move to her side and crouch down next to her chair, ignoring the creak of my prosthetics as I do. “You wanna talk about it?”

She rubs the heel of her palm in one eye and wipes away a few stray tears as she tells me about Rhonda’s words, and then her confrontation with Bethiah. I let her vent without interrupting, listening and stroking her arm.

“She made me think I’m gross, Jamef. That I haven’t been taking care of myself and no one’s going to want a human with

yucky hands and terrible hair. And the worst part about it is that I'm a fucking clone! This is what I've got to work with!" Dora gestures at her hair with a look of despair. "I feel like an idiot because I'm sure some of it is ex-girlfriend bitchiness, but now I'm doubting myself and I'm doubting Bethiah."

"Have we ever made you feel ugly? Unkempt? Unpleasant looking?"

"No." Her lower lip trembles and she gives me a heartbreakingly tiny smile. "You always make me feel beautiful."

"Then why did you listen to her?"

"Because what she said sounded right. And she knows about surviving here as a human. I don't. Sometimes it worries me how much I don't know." She grabs my hand and holds it tightly. "I can't tell what's truth and what's a lie because I don't have it in my memories. So when she tells me that no one wants a human with dry skin, how do I know if that's true or not?"

"You come to your mates," I say, voice firm. "We won't lie to you."

"No, Bethiah will just carefully *omit* things." She makes a face. "Why is she so goddamn impossible? Why do we even like her?"

I stroke her smaller hand with my thumb. "Because we both know that she's been hurt in the past and she doesn't like to be vulnerable. Because we know that when she opens up, she's vibrant and exciting and loving."

She gazes down at our joined hands. "Are you saying I shouldn't be mad?"

"No." I chuckle. "Be keffing mad. I'm furious at her on your behalf. I'm just trying to understand her reasoning. If it makes you feel any better, I don't think she omitted it to hurt you. She's been very quiet ever since she found out Rhonda was on-board that station, alone." I lean in until Dora meets my gaze. "And when we were on station, all Bethiah could



think about was getting you a present of some kind. She never stopped thinking about you.”

She sighs heavily. “Fuck. I hate this. I hate Rhonda and I’m mad at Bethiah and I’m mad that I’m dead weight in our group. Clueless dead weight.”

The admission startles me. “You’re not. You’re the glue that keeps our triad together.”

Dora shakes her head, releasing my hand, and I want to grab her and recapture it again, just so she won’t pull away from me. “You say that, but I’m a liability. I can’t fire a blaster. I can’t run the ship. I’m costing you credits, and now apparently people can lie to my face and I just soak it all in. At what point am I being anything but useless?”

I don’t have an answer for her. She’s not wrong, and yet at the same time, it feels as if she’s completely discounting how much her sweet cheerfulness and her loving affection means to someone like me. To someone like Bethiah. “Don’t talk about yourself like that.”

“But it’s true. I’m not beautiful like Rhonda. If I’m not functional, what purpose do I serve? Sitting around and waiting to suck a dick or lick a pussy? Doesn’t that just make me a whore?”

“You know it doesn’t. She really did a number on your head, didn’t she?”

Dora shrugs, her expression full of self-pity. “She’s a human who knows how to handle herself on this end of the universe and I don’t. How can I not take what she says to heart?”

I try not to hate anyone, but I’m starting to hate Rhonda, if only for what her presence is doing to my mates. “Do you want us to dump Rhonda back on the station? If she bothers you, we will.”

She sits up immediately. “Seriously? Keffing *yes*.”

With a grunt of acknowledgment, I get to my feet and cross the bridge, heading for the controls. I tap into the navigation system and pull up our current course.

“Wait,” Dora says behind me. “What are you doing?”

“Turning back to the station.”

She sighs, and then comes up behind me. Her arms lock around my waist and she burrows against my back. “Don’t bother. We need the credits. It’s enough for me that you would.”

“Of course I would. You’re my mate. You and Bethiah are everything to me.”

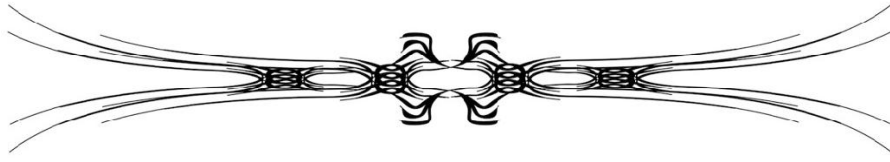
Dora gives another little sigh and squeezes me tighter. “If Bethiah gives even a whiff of feelings for Rhonda, you can replace me in our triad, because I’m out at that point.”

“I feel exactly the same. It’s either us three or it’s nothing.”

She shakes against my back, and I hear a soft snuffle that twists something inside me. “I don’t want to lose you guys.”

“Me either, sweetheart.” I rub the arm around my waist, wishing I was better at comforting. “Me either.”

EIGHTY-SIX



## BETHIAH

**W**hen I get out of the shower and enter my bedroom, Rhonda is there.

She sits on the bed, her hands folded in her lap, and watches as I stride out, naked, using the towel to wring out the last of the water from my hair. “You lost?” I ask. “Because this isn’t your room.”

“I wanted to talk to you,” she says, and regards me with a long, slow look. “You haven’t changed, you know.”

“Neither have you.”

“Still as beautiful as ever.” Rhonda smiles. “And a few more tattoos.”

This sounds suspiciously like sucking up. I stride past her and push a button on the wall so my clothes closet opens up. The moment it does, a filmy yellow garment flutters, and I feel my face grow hot. It’s my sleep tunic. The one that matches Dora’s pink one. I shove it to the back and pull out my most severe gray tunic. “Did you come here to ogle my ass or was there a point to this visit?”

“I see you’ve moved on,” Rhonda says in a delicate voice. “With two people no less.”

Yup, there was a point to this visit.

“I’m thrilled for you,” she continues. “I always wanted your happiness, you know. Though I admit I’m surprised that you’d get together with another human after what we shared. It seems...well, never mind.”

I grit my teeth and yank my tunic over my head, keeping my back to her. Count on Rhonda to lay little barbs in between her compliments. “Let me guess. You think I’m using Dora as a replacement for you. How very arrogant.”

As I pull on my trou, I hear Rhonda get to her feet. Her skirts swish as she crosses the room toward me. “It’s just unexpected. I seem to recall a lot of crying and insisting that you’d never love another if I turned my back on you, and now it seems that you’re loving two. One would almost think you’re doing it to hurt me.”

I manage to keep from rolling my eyes, but barely. “Oh yeah, I was really thinking of you when I was nose-deep in Dora’s pussy and getting railed by Jamef. Totally thinking, ‘Gee, if only Rhonda was here to judge me in this moment.’”

“Judge you?” She sounds hurt, and in the next moment, she comes around my side and enters my line of sight. “Is that what you think I’m doing?”

“Honestly, Rhonda, I have no idea what you’re doing right now.” I yank a belt from its spot and sling it around my waist.

“I’m trying to apologize.” Her voice is quiet. Soft. “It’s clear you’re angry with me and I always hated it when you were angry with me.” She bites her lip delicately, her gaze downcast. “I know you think me heartless, but it wasn’t about feelings back then. It was about survival.”

“Uh huh.” Like I haven’t heard this before. I tap the auto-fastener on my belt and let it slither around my waist, then dig around in the closet for my boots. They’re not in here. That’s weird. Dora always puts them back for me. With a little frown, I glance around the room. Where did I leave them?

“Just because I chose badly doesn’t mean I didn’t have feelings for you back then. That I didn’t cry into my pillow every night and wish that things could be different.”

An ache starts low in my chest. I don’t have feelings for her any longer, but seeing her brings up all the old emotions and pain, and it’s hard to ignore how I’d felt once upon a time. How my world had felt like it was ending because of her decision to choose the stability of finding a rich patron instead of going adventuring with me.

“I had a lot of feelings back then,” Rhonda whispers. “And I still have them now.”

Oh no. The hairs prickle on the back of my neck. “Don’t —”

A hand touches my arm. “Bethy —”

Instinctively, I react to a threat. I whirl around and grab Rhonda by the throat, forcing her backward against the wall. Her eyes go wide and she lets out a terrified squeak of distress.

I lean in close. “You don’t get to touch me. You lost that privilege years ago. Understand?”

Tears spill from her eyes. “Bethy —”

“No. You and I are done. I know how you work. I know that you’re going to look out for number one, which is yourself. I know you’re going to try and fill my Dora with doubts and insert yourself into our lives. I know you’re going to try and make yourself invaluable because that means safety to you.” I give her a menacing smile. “But I’m not the same person you left behind, and I’m going to suggest you think real, real hard about touching me ever again.”

I release her and she clutches her throat, sobbing.

“You’re here on this ship because I felt sorry for you, all right? Not because I have feelings for you beyond that. You’re only here because I’m not a heartless sack of shit. But if you try to wedge yourself between me and Dora, I will space you and keep all your shit and dress Dora in all your finery instead. Got me?”

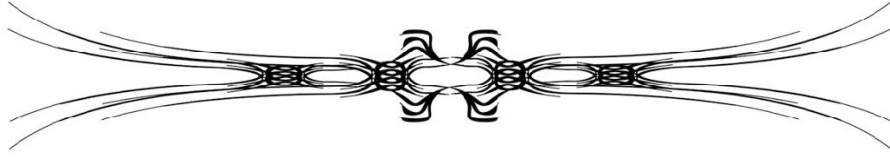
She lets out a choked sound, giving me a look of pure betrayal. “You’ve turned into a monster.”

“Maybe so. Doesn’t matter. You know the rules of being on this ship now. Stick to them.” I point at the floor. “And you’re not to come into my private quarters unless you’re invited, understand? And I don’t plan on inviting you.”

“I don’t know you anymore,” she says, weeping, and I realize her tears don’t affect me like Dora’s. Huh. That’s interesting.

I guess I really have gotten over her. Hooray for that.

EIGHTY-SEVEN



## JAMEF

I'm not good with emotional shit. I don't know how to handle a ship full of upset females. Dora hangs out with me on the bridge, as if she's hiding, and curls up into the comms chair, hugging her legs, and takes a nap. I haven't seen Bethiah and our guest, and I rather feel like hiding on the bridge myself, but I know that's not a good idea.

Already I can tell that bringing Rhonda onto the ship was a mistake, but I'm hopeful that we can get her bounty completed quickly and send her back to her master safe and sound. Until then, I suppose I have to make sure that she's settled, even if I want to fling her out the airlock. I've done bounties for worse people in the past. I can manage this one.

I kiss Dora's brow and she rouses, looking up at me sleepily. "Stay here and watch the bridge for me," I murmur. "I'll bring you back a cup of noodles."

Her expression turns to one of frustration as she sits up. "I don't know how to read the screens, Jamef."

"I know. But it'll make an irritating sound if there's a problem. If you hear anything, come get me."

She brightens, nodding, and I wonder why we didn't do this before. Every system has tonal alerts to wake up a pilot that's drowsing in his chair. Dora can listen for those. It might make her feel like she's doing her share if she takes a shift on the bridge. I touch her cheek, pleased at this temporary solution, and head out into the hall.

I head to the new guest quarters first, bracing myself. I'm just being polite. I don't want this female starving to death because she doesn't know how to use the particular model of food dispenser I have on board. It's just politeness, even if I want to toss her into the escape pod and call it a day.

So I knock, my jaw clenched with dislike.



The female—Rhonda—answers the door, wearing a thin, iridescent gown that leaves her shoulders bare and cinches below her breasts. The material leaves nothing to the imagination, and once I realize this, I deliberately keep my gaze locked on her face. “I wanted to see if you required anything. We’re establishing a route and we might be traveling for several days. Do you know how to use the machines in the mess hall to feed yourself?”

“Yes, Captain. Thank you for your kindness. You’re a good man.” She gives me a sweet smile that I don’t buy.

“Jamef,” I correct. “Call me Jamef.”

“Jamef,” Rhonda coos. “I’ll remember.”

I nod and turn away.

“I hope my presence on board isn’t too troubling, Jamef.”

I grit my teeth and turn around to look at her again, since she seems determined to continue the conversation. “It’s fine. It’ll be convenient when we find your master and reunite the two of you.”

“Of course.” Her hand plays with one of her earrings. “I just hope we find him alive. I don’t know what I’ll do if... well...” She dabs at the corner of one eye delicately.

I’m not going to be baited. “My bounty is simply to find his location, or evidence of his death. Once that’s completed, I’m done.” I give her a nod to indicate that the conversation is done and walk away.

“Oh, Captain!” she calls out again after me. “I mean, Jamef—”

“No,” I say flatly, not turning around.

“You don’t even know what I was going to ask!”

“And I don’t care. You’ve caused enough trouble so far and we’re close enough to Haal Ui that I’m perfectly willing to turn around and scrap the bounty. So unless you want to return to the station, think real hard about what you want to ask and if it’s worth it.” And I pause, waiting.

Rhonda is silent.

Thought so. I continue down the hall and towards the private quarters I share with my mates. I open the door and I'm not entirely surprised to see Bethiah on the bed, staring up at the ceiling with her arms supporting her horns. She glances over at me but doesn't get up. "Are you coming to yell at me, too?"

"No. I thought I'd see if you want some noodles. I'm getting Dora some, too."

She sits up, a worried look on her face. "How is she?"

"Hurt. Angry. Doesn't want to see you anytime soon." I lean against the wall across from her. "You want to tell me your side of it?"

Bethiah grimaces. "Honestly, Dora's side is probably the right of it. I keffed things up. I'm not good at this whole 'relationship' thing. I'm sure you can ask Rhonda about that, too."

"I'm asking you."

She rubs her brow, giving her head a small shake. "It's funny, because for ages, I imagined running into Rhonda again. How it would go. How she'd see that I had my own ship and I didn't need her, and it'd make her want to be with me again. That I'd be so well off she'd realize I could take care of her and she'd reconsider and all those years we were apart would fall away like nothing."

I tense. "How is that funny?"

She glances up at me, her smile crooked and wry. "It's funny because she's doing her best to show me that I'm her back-up plan and once upon a time, I'd have been giddy. But now I just kind of want to scream obscenities at her and shove her perfectly made-up face into a bowl of rancid noodles."

"Specific."

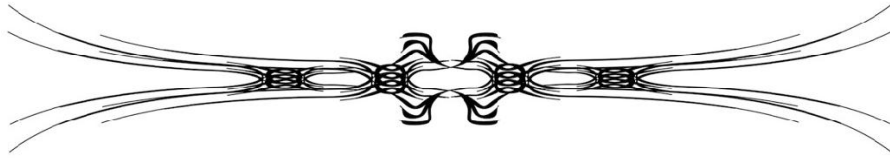
Bethiah nods. "Rancid noodles are a special kind of hell." Her expression turns sad. "She's only been here for a day and already the ship feels toxic and I hurt Dora and I hate myself

for it and I just...” Her mouth trembles and for a moment, she looks more vulnerable than I’ve ever seen her. “I would just really like a hug and Dora would probably rather knife me.”

I move to her side and sit down. I think of a dozen clever things to say, and discard them all.

I simply hug her instead.

EIGHTY-EIGHT



## BETHIAH

Well, at least Jamef doesn't hate me. His hug is awkward, but it's perfect at the same time, because he's trying. I lean against him, feeling like the universe's most selfish mate. Of course I should have said something to Dora about Rhonda coming on board. Someone that was thoughtful would have warned her, but she's stuck with me.

And I don't know how to make it better.

"This is stupid," I grumble. "Dora's being unreasonable to get mad at me over this. It's not like I'm encouraging Rhonda."

Jamef rubs my arm. "She might be unreasonable, but look at it from Dora's perspective. She doesn't know what memories she has or that she lacks. She's probably missing experience that you and I both have to think about this rationally. Remember that her memories are piecemeal at best. Of course she's going to be unreasonable. She feels threatened." He leans against me, nudging me. "What's your excuse?"

"That I'm a jerk."

He laughs, pulling me closer. I'm a little surprised that Jamef is so touchy-feely, but I kind of like it. Maybe it's Dora's influence on him. I let him pull me into his arms and lean against him, enjoying the scent of his skin and the contrast of his metal prosthetics with his warmth. "If you're done feeling sorry for yourself, you can come help me work on the bridge. I've found out some interesting things about Rhonda's master but I want a second opinion."

"Ugh. Fine. I guess I have to do everything," I mock grumble. I still feel like a jerk, though. I didn't think about Dora and her memories—or lack thereof. Of course she's

anxious. She's been anxious since she joined me, worried about finding her place. This sure isn't helping.

Jamef gets to his feet, running his fingers through my ponytail, and then gestures that I should follow him. I put on fresh clothes first, but when I don't find my shoes, I skip them instead of hunting for them. Let everyone be grossed out by my bare feet. I don't care. I follow him into the mess hall and watch, grumpy, as he puts one bowl under the dispenser, then a second. When he fills the third, I give him a weird look. He must be hungry. And then I feel guilty all over again. Is something going on with Jamef and I'm so wrapped up with Dora that I haven't even noticed?

Kef, I really suck at this "being someone's mate" thing.

I watch him carefully as I take one of the bowls and we head to the bridge. Is he limping? There's a hitch in his gait to make up for the weight of his prosthetics, but I don't notice anything different. Skipping meals? Something else?

When the doors open to the bridge and I see a blonde form curled up in his chair, I realize that I am indeed stupid. Of course he got Dora noodles. He's taking care of her, just like he takes care of me.

She sits up, stiffening at the sight of me, but takes the noodles from him. I sit down in the nav seat, and Jamef leans against one of the other stations, toying with his food and deliberately not looking at either of us. I feel a bit like a naughty child that's supposed to apologize.

And I don't want to. My mouth presses flat and I scowl at Jamef, then look over at Dora again...and immediately feel like an ass. She's not wearing the defiant look I am. Instead, her shoulders are hunched and she looks sad and miserable and alone. Kef.

I poke my noodles, my appetite dwindling. "I suppose you hate me now."

Dora looks up and over at me, her eyes dark. "I don't hate you."

“Good, then that makes one of us.” I stab my eating sticks into the noodles, shoving them around the bowl. “I’m not a people person on a good day, and when Rhonda’s around, they’re all bad days. I’d love nothing more than to space her, but she’s a human alone and I feel like someone should help her, even if it has to be me. So...I’m sorry that I didn’t say anything right away. I should have.”

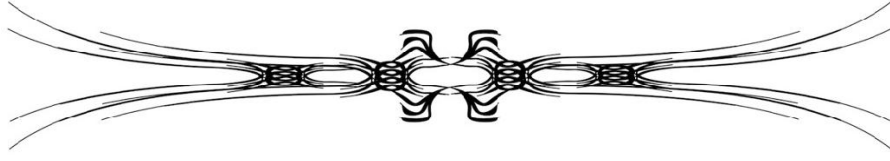
She’s quiet for a long moment. When she speaks, her voice quavers. “I just want a warning if you’re going to replace me with her.”

Replace her? “Fluffit, even if she held a blaster to my head, I wouldn’t want to touch her. That was ten years ago. I wasn’t good enough for her then, and I’m positive she hasn’t changed her mind on that.” I eye her thoughtfully. “But I’ve changed a lot in ten years. I know a manipulator when I see one, now. And I like people that are honest about who they are. That’s why I like Jamef...and that’s why I like you.” I swallow hard, because it sucks to be honest and vulnerable and I’m not good at it. “And why I hope you don’t hate me.”

Dora stares into her noodles, her mouth soft with hurt. She’s silent for a long moment, and then shakes her head, looking over at me. “I don’t hate you. But I’m not sure I can trust you right now, either.”

Ouch.

EIGHTY-NINE





## JAMEF

I'm not sure if this is progress or not. Dora and Bethiah are in the same room together and no one is screaming or crying, but there's a wariness between the two of them that feels troubling.

There's nothing to be done about it at this moment, though. They're going to have to figure each other out. I hope. Until then, all I can do is keep moving things forward. "Can we talk about business for a while?"

"Kef yes we can," Bethiah says, and she sounds relieved, as if I've just saved her from execution. "What's the situation?"

I clear my throat, glancing between the two females. "I figured while we were getting settled, I'd do a few cursory traces."

"What'd you find?" Bethiah asks.

"That's just it...I found everything." I take a bite of my noodles to let that statement digest for a moment. "If he's hiding his trail, he's doing a piss-poor job of it. There are credit profiles being used all over the place."

"Credit profiles?" Dora asks. She sets her bowl down and draws her knees up in the chair. She hasn't touched her food and the protective side of me wants to ensure that she eats, but one thing at a time.

I nod. "Most nobility use Homeworld-certified credit accounts instead of actual physical chits like the rest of us. The chits aren't trackable, but nobility don't tend to move around quietly anyhow. I've found his accounts being used all over this end of the galaxy. Some at a high-end station, some at a fancy cantina, some at a gambling house." I shrug. "I thought I'd have to dig harder, that's all."

“The trails could be leading to his wife or children, though,” Bethiah points out. “Those credit accounts are used by the entire family.”

Dora’s eyes widen and she glances at Bethiah, then me. “What? He’s married? Does Rhonda know?”

“Better question is, does Rhonda care?” Bethiah replies. “My guess is no.”

“That’s awful,” Dora says. “No wonder she’s so obsessed with her position.”

“You can’t seriously be taking her side, can you?” Bethiah gives Dora a puzzled look.

“She’s a human. If he’s her only means of safety, of course she’s going to take what she can from him, even if it’s scraps. She’s just doing the best with the hand that’s been given to her.” Dora shrugs. “I feel sorry for her.”

“Don’t say that out loud or she’ll use it against you,” Bethiah says. She slurps her noodles down and kicks her feet up on the control panel. “So should we contact the family? Let them know the head honcho has a bounty on his head and we’re being paid to hunt someone that might or might not be missing?”

“That has the potential of getting messy,” I point out.

“So many things involving Rhonda do,” Bethiah agrees. “But yeah, if they don’t know there’s a human mistress, I don’t want to be the one to tell them. If they don’t know he’s missing, I *certainly* don’t want to be the one to tell them.”

“So then we look for him?” Dora asks. “Take her money even though he might not be missing?”

I glance over at Bethiah, but she has a slightly sour look on her face, as if she doesn’t really care for the idea. I decide to settle the debate. “We were hired to find him. If he’s easy to find, it’s not unethical of us to charge for our services. And if we find him quickly, it costs her that much less.”

“That, and we won’t betray her,” Dora adds, her expression thoughtful. “Maybe that’s another thing to consider.”

Maybe she knows he's not really hiding but she just doesn't have the resources to get him herself. Like you said, a human alone is vulnerable."

Bethiah takes another noisy slurp of noodles. "Which reminds me," she continues. "We need to work on your shooting, fluffit. And your reading lessons. You've been falling behind on them."

Dora sputters. "Falling behind? There hasn't been any time to work on either!"

"You make time," Bethiah says confidently.

"How? Everyone's been busy!"

"You come up to us and demand our attention," Bethiah replies. "I mean, if you came up to me and told me you wanted your pussy licked, I wouldn't ignore that. Getting your lessons in is just as important as getting your cunt eaten out, and we've certainly had time for that."

I eye Bethiah as she licks the broth off her eating sticks.

"Don't look so sour, Jamef. It's the truth." Bethiah gives me a wicked grin. "We *always* make time for pussy eating."

I just shake my head at her, watching Dora out of the corner of my eye. She doesn't seem annoyed, and they're both talking, so I suppose the worst of the storm has passed.

"You'll help me with my lessons in shooting, then?" Dora asks Bethiah.

"Tsk, fluffit, there you go again. You're asking. What's rule number one?"

"We take what we want," Dora recites. She gets to her feet and moves to Bethiah's side, gazing down at her. Bethiah tilts her head back and gives Dora a lazy look, but I can tell by the flicking of her tail that she's tense. I want to move to her side and twine my tail with hers, but they need to figure this out. Dora studies Bethiah for a moment and then takes the bowl from her hands. "I'm taking your noodles."

"Take 'em," Bethiah says cheerfully.

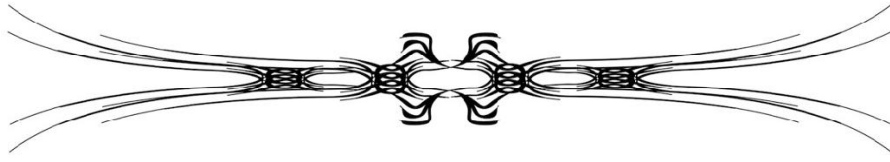
“Now kiss me,” Dora demands, leaning in. “And tell me you’re fucking sorry. And that you’re not going to even think of replacing me with that other human.”

Bethiah blinks, her expression suddenly solemn. “Never. Never, fluffit.”

“Good.” She kisses Bethiah and then turns to me. “You kiss me, too.”

I have to admit, I do like Dora’s demanding side.

NINETY



## JAMEF

Everyone seems to be on speaking terms for the moment, so it feels safe to abandon the bridge for a few hours and run a diagnostic on my leg in med-bay. I don't want to say anything to the others, but it's starting to respond slowly, making my steps hitch every now and then. Once is a glitch, but when it happens regularly, there's a problem. It could be the wiring or a bad circuit...or it could be wearing out entirely.

I don't have the credits for a new limb, nor do I have the time to get one replaced. Hopefully a diagnostic will allow me to pinpoint the problem and fix it without alerting either one of my mates. They've got enough to think about at the moment.

No sooner do I head down the hall towards med-bay than I see Rhonda, of course. It's like she can scent vulnerability. Her hair is pulled up in a tousled pile atop her head, showing off her neck, and she's changed into a deep blue gown that seems cut all the way to the navel, with only jeweled straps over each shoulder to keep it from being indecent. "Oh, Captain. I'm so glad to see you."

"Just Jamef." I give her a polite nod and try to walk past, but she moves to my side. Kef. Kef twice.

"Jamef," she says in a sweet voice. "Of course. How silly of me to forget. I'm just used to males in positions of power." She hovers at my side, looking anxious. "Do you have a moment to talk?"

"To *talk*, yes." Since it seems I can't shake her anyhow. I stop in my tracks so she doesn't see me heading towards med-bay and wait for her to speak.

"I just wanted you to know I appreciate how much you're doing for me." She smiles sweetly. "I trust you'll be able to find my love soon? I'm so very worried about him. Nerit isn't a hard man. He's not an alpha like you."

"Alpha?"

“You know. The kind that takes charge and handles the situation. Makes everything safe for his women. A leader amongst men.”

She thinks I’m a leader among men? It takes everything I have not to laugh in her face. “If you say so.”

“I do. Like I said, I know the type.” She takes a step toward me.

I side-step, grateful that my keffing knee responds. “Speaking of Lord Nerit, we’ve found a credit trail that we’re going to pursue. Is there anything in particular you want to tell us? Anyone else that would be using his house’s credit?”

Rhonda blinks. “Why, no. His wife is from another house and she has her own credits. They have no children.”

“And you’re certain he’s in danger?”

“He hasn’t returned to me. Something must have happened. Nerit always comes home.” Her expression of distress is very convincing. “I realize I might seem a bit unorthodox in comparison to your sweet human, Jamef, but I’m just a survivor trying to keep her head above water. If I seem a little pushy, it’s because the only tool I have is my mouth.”

I decide that I don’t like hearing my name on her tongue. Nor do I like that she’s referencing her mouth. “We’ll reunite you with him soon.”

“Thank you,” she says in a soft voice. “That’s all I want.”

I suspect that’s not all she wants, but sure, we’ll go with that. “Can I help you with anything else?”

“I just wanted to tell you again that I’m grateful for your help. You and Bethiah. I was on that station for two weeks, alone, waiting for Nerit to return. It was terrifying.” She blinks again, and this time her tears look real. “I know I’m probably imposing on your cozy little triad, but I did want you to know that I understand how difficult my past with Bethiah can be and that I hope it’s not a problem. I promise I’ll stay out of her way.”

Somehow I doubt that. “Probably for the best.”

Rhonda bites her full lower lip. “If I have any needs, I’d rather just come to you, if that’s all right.”

My skin prickles with alarm at her wording. “You can approach any of the three of us on this ship if you require assistance,” I say carefully. “You are the client for all three of us.”

“Even your little human?” She looks surprised. “She has no legal standing, though. It’s a sweet sentiment, of course. What a kind master you are. I had no idea you were such a soft-hearted one, Jamef.” She bats at my arm, a coy smile on her face. “Dora truly is a lucky one.”

“Indeed. Do you require anything else? If not, I need to check the security feeds.” It’s a lie that comes easily to my tongue. “Ensure that we’re not being followed.”

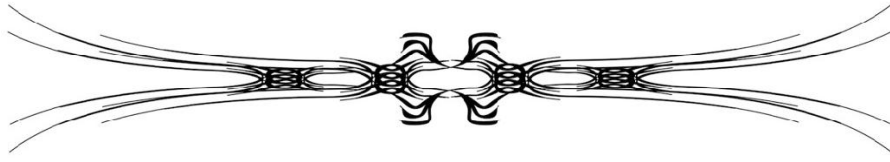
“I won’t keep you any longer. You must be tired after working on the bridge all day. I’ve excellent hands, you know.” She wiggles her fingers. “Happy to use my talents at massage if needed.”

“It is not needed,” I say, giving her a crisp nod and turning away again. And this time, my keffing leg doesn’t respond like it should, and I stagger. Because of course I do. Gritting my teeth, I don’t turn around to acknowledge my misstep and head down the hall, hoping she didn’t notice.

I suspect she did, though. Someone like Rhonda survives on observing others and looking for cracks in the armor.



NINETY-ONE



## DORA

I t's been an absolutely exhausting day.

Bethiah and Jamef talk on the bridge for a bit longer, discussing common routes and Homeworld lords they've run into in the past, but I'm too tired to pay attention. The stress of everything has wiped me out, and I just want to curl up in bed with my mates and sleep. No sex, just the warm press of bodies together, reminding me that we're a team and we're in this together. So I gather our empty noodle bowls while they discuss fuel cells and deposit them in the mess hall to clean up in the morning.

I return to the bridge and grab Bethiah's hand, tugging it until she stands up. "Bedtime."

"I'm surprised you want me in bed after all," Bethiah jokes. "Here I thought I'd be sleeping on the bridge tonight."

"Nope. We're good." I'm not going to hold a grudge. She's trying, so I'm going to try and see it from her point of view and not freak out. I turn and hold a hand out to Jamef. "You too. Come on. We all need some sleep."

His mouth curves into a little smile. "You two go ahead. I'll do another scan of our route to make sure nothing's changed, and then I'll join you."

"Okay." I release Bethiah's hand, move to his side and pull him down to kissing level, and plant one on him. "Don't stay too long."

"Never."

With a pat to his chest, I move back to Bethiah's side and we head down the hall and towards our quarters. She's surprisingly quiet, and it takes me several minutes to realize this. It's not until I'm crawling into bed in my sleep tunic that I realize Bethiah hasn't said a word since we left the bridge.

I sit up in bed, hugging the blankets to my chest as I watch her. She's in the lavatory, brushing her teeth and pretty much futzing around as if she's not sure she wants to come to bed. I wait for her to finish with the tooth-brushing, but then she pulls her hair out of the loose braid she just put it in and begins to plait it again.

She's totally stalling.

"You okay?" I ask. "You seem antsy."

Bethiah finishes rebraiding her hair and then turns to me, an inscrutable expression on her face. "We should talk."

"Oh no."

She shakes her head, moving across the room to my side. She's wearing her yellow sleep tunic, the one that matches my pink one. The sight of it makes me flush with pleasure, knowing that she's picking it to match me. It looks better on her, I think, the long lines of it emphasizing her muscular torso and arms. She's so pretty. "Nothing bad, fluffit. At least I hope not." She grimaces to herself and then moves to my side, sitting on the edge of the bed. "We need to talk about you and me."

"Okay..." I gesture at the door. "But if we're talking relationship stuff, shouldn't we bring in Jamef? He's just as much a part of this."

She shakes her head. "I don't have any hang-ups about being with Jamef. You and I both know he's a fantastic mate. It's you and I that have the problems, and it's you and I that need to talk things out."

"Oh." I fight the surge of hurt that threatens to rise up. She's talking, and there's no sense in getting hurt feelings until she actually explains. It's hard not to, though, especially when she says I'm a *problem*. "Go on, then."

"You and me, it's hard." She begins to pace across the room. "I've been hurt by a woman in the past before, and she just happened to be human."

"And happened to be named Rhonda," I mutter.

Bethiah sighs, rubbing her face. “You and me,” she begins again. “If I’m being honest about you and me, we’re probably going to argue and butt heads. We’re really different people, you and me.”

This isn’t making me feel better. “Because I’m a needy clone?”

“No, because I’m not good at reading emotion. Because I know the easiest way to get what I want is to shove my way toward it and never take ‘no’ for an answer.” She pauses to face me. “I know this might be hard to believe, but I’m not a great listener.”

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling. “You don’t say.”

“I’m basically like an asteroid belt. Get too close to me and I’ll pulverize you incessantly until you can’t wait to be free. That’s why I’m best alone. That’s why I don’t work well in a relationship.” Her voice lowers. “So...yeah.”

I shake my head. “I don’t think you’re like that at all. I like that you’re bold and smart and fearless. I wish I was more like you.”

“I’m glad you’re not, or we’d really be driving poor Jamef crazy.” She manages a crooked grin, then impulsively crosses the room and sits next to me on the bed. “What I’m trying to say, fluffit, is that I’m not good at knowing when I hurt your feelings, and I’m not trying to do it on purpose. I need you to get in my face and tell me when I do. I need you to tell me what you want. Because the last thing I want is to hurt you in any way, understand?”

I clasp her hands in mine. “I appreciate you saying this, Bethiah, but Jamef —”

“Isn’t in this conversation, remember? This is about me and you. I love him. Adore him. He’s keffing perfect.” She grins, her expression wry. “But he deserves better than just being our referee. You’re emotional, and I’m as dense as a black hole, so we’re going to clash from time to time. We need to figure ourselves out.”

“If it’s just you and me in this conversation, then I agree.” I think about Jamef, his patient, steadfast expression, and she’s right. He does deserve better than to have two females shrieking at him constantly.

“If it’s just you and me, you come and tell me when I’m being stubborn, okay? Maybe we have a word that we use to make the other stop in their tracks and re-evaluate.” Bethiah gives my hands a squeeze. “If it’s just you and me, you’re the first person I’ve cared for in a long, long time.”

My lip wobbles despite my best efforts, and I nod. “I’m sorry I overreacted earlier.”

“I’m sorry I made you overreact.” She squeezes my hands again. “So...what’s our word? Let’s make it something that wouldn’t come up in regular conversation, so when we hear it we know to drop everything and re-consider.”

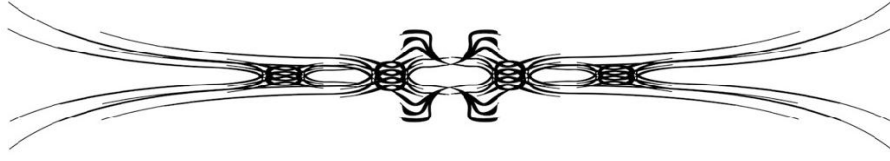
I think for a moment. What would be appropriate? “Clone?”

Her expression immediately hardens. “No. We never use that word. Not even around each other. It’ll keep you safest.”

Oh. “How about arm cannon? Because when you suggested it, I wanted to punch you.”

Bethiah snorts. “Yeah, that works.”

NINETY-TWO



## JAMEF

“**I** f it's just you and me, you're the first person I've cared for in a long, long time.”

I hear the fragment of their conversation as I stride down the hall towards our quarters, and it makes me stop short.

It's like a knife in my gut.

Haven't I suspected all along that they're with me out of convenience? That the real attraction is between Dora and Bethiah? I should have known. Shouldn't have let myself hope that things would be different. That not one, but two people would care for me and want to be with me. Their voices lower, murmuring, and I move away from the door, not wanting them to hear me.

I don't want them to know that I know.

As I retreat to the end of the hall, my leg jerks, the response-time flashing red in my eye-sensors. I grab the rail on the wall and hold onto it, waiting for it to return to normal. With a few frustrated kicks at the air, it surges with power again in an almost painful way, and then settles in once more.

I bite back a sigh of frustration. Not right now. There's enough going on.

Turning, I walk back towards our quarters again, deliberately making more noise as I head down the hall so they hear me approaching. Pausing before I enter the room, I step in and give them a weary smile. “All good.”

Both my mates are seated on the edge of the bed, holding hands. They look over at me as I enter, and Dora beams in my direction. “You're just in time.”

“Oh?”

She nods, giving Bethiah's hands a squeeze before climbing over to the far side of the bed. “Yes. I'm exhausted. I

hope you guys don't mind if we cuddle and just go straight to sleep?"

"Why would we mind?" Bethiah asks.

"Because I'm going to be selfish and demand cuddling," Dora announces. "From both of you."

"You absolute monster," Bethiah replies dryly, giving me an amused look. "I'm fine with it if you are."

I nod, not trusting my voice. Part of me wants to demand that they be honest with me, that they tell me that I'm the unnecessary portion of this triad. That they don't need me and I should go back to my lonely apartment on Three Nebulas, where I listen to life moving around the universe but never participate in it. I didn't mind that once, but I suspect it would just feel like a tomb now.

In a way, they've ruined me. Now I know what love and affection feels like—even just the scraps of it—and I want more.

I'm quiet as I undress, and by the time I get into bed, Bethiah and Dora are already there, pressed against each other. The moment I sink into the bed, Dora pulls my arm around her waist, cuddling me against her. She sighs with contentment and I lower my head to her hair, breathing in her soft scent.

Enjoy now, I remind myself. Take what you can get.





## DORA

It's been three days since the fight. Three days of peace and quiet, three days of love and affection from my mates, and me loving them right back. It's also been three days since I've seen Rhonda, since I'm deliberately avoiding her. I don't want to look at the beautiful, ethereal creature that Bethiah was once in love with. I just don't.

I've been spending my time on lessons with Bethiah, which have been going surprisingly well. She's a good instructor for all of her impatience and her jokes, and I've been getting better every day with my blaster. She also takes time to sit with me in the afternoons and go over the primer on Homeworld's written language, and it's starting to look less like indecipherable garbage and more like a language. The thought of learning it excites me, because then all the doors will open up. I'll be able to read communications that come in. I'll be able to work the controls on the ship and know what I'm reaching for. No one will be able to keep secrets from me any longer.

I like that part the best.

Today, I'm reading on my own, though. Bethiah and Jamef are both on the bridge, as we're nearing our destination. Well, I'm not *exactly* reading. I'm slowly sounding out words in the primer and letting the translator fill in for me what I'm actually saying. It's an extra little hitch that makes my brain hiccup—chair is chair in English, but writing chair in Homeworld-ese means writing something like *toh fash eh* and my brain is still struggling with that leap. OG Dora—Starfish Dora—probably wasn't very good with languages, either. There's a word I've run into that I can't make out no matter how many times I read the scatter of symbols aloud, and so I'm taking the book to the bridge with me.

Normally I read in our bedroom to avoid Rhonda, and of course I immediately run into her when I leave our quarters.

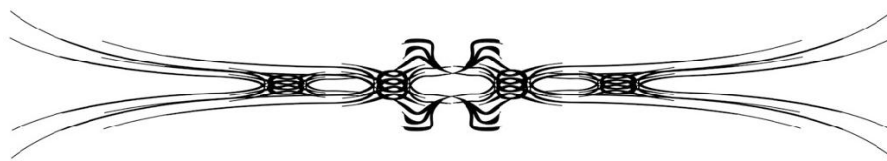
Because of course I do. She's in the main hall that cuts through the ship, leaning against one of the walls just outside a storage closet, her head down.

I jerk to a halt at the sight of her, wincing inwardly. She doesn't notice me, though, and remains where she is, her head bent.

“Hello?” I call out.

Rhonda immediately turns in place, pressing her back to the wall, her hands behind her, and a sweet expression on her face. “Oh, hello there, dear. Am I in your way?”

NINETY-THREE



## DORA

I try not to frown at Rhonda. It's not her fault that I ran into her in the hall, and it's sure not her fault that I kinda hate her guts. She's our client, I remind myself over and over again. The sooner we get her lover found again, the sooner we never have to see her again. She's just a paycheck, and I remind myself of that over and over again.

And if we find her lover on this "vacation moon" that we're approaching, then we're almost done with her.

So I try to give her a friendly smile. "Are you okay?"

She continues to lean against the wall, her back and hands pressed against it. "Oh, yes. I just had a moment of dizziness. It happens every time the ships change from hyper-speed to a cruising speed. We're approaching a planet, aren't we?" Rhonda puts a hand to her temple, rubbing her skin. I can't help but notice her ornate outfit today. It's beautiful. She's dressed entirely in silver, and a thin layer of gauzy fabric covers her from neck to wrist to ankle. Underneath the diaphanous over-dress, she wears a tight bandeau over her breasts and a tiny skirt, and the arms are covered with metallic sculpted vines that curve up to her elbow, a fitted belt of the same make at her waist. It all looks very rich and lovely and I feel even more like a castoff clone in my simple green dress with a square neckline and ankle-length skirt. A week ago I was so excited to get this dress. I felt so feminine and pretty in it.

Now I just feel like a clod of dirt next to Rhonda.

"A vacation planet," I tell her. "Jamef and Bethiah say we should be docking there later tonight. That there's a credit trace from a few weeks ago with your mate's name on it."

She puts her fingers to her mouth and titters. "My mate. Aren't you sweet." Rhonda tilts her head, beaming at me. "But I'm glad we ran into each other again. I wanted to talk to you."

She gives the wall one last pat and then moves toward me. “I’ve been looking for you, you know.”

She has? I blink. “Is something wrong?”

“Other than me being wildly bored because everyone’s avoiding me? Not at all.” She eyes the electronic primer in my hands. “You don’t need to learn their language, dear. I know it’s practically required to survive back home, but you’d be much better off lotioning that face of yours and cultivating some tight pores.” Before I can reply, she puts a hand on my back and gently steers me towards her quarters and away from the spot she was occupying. “But that’s not why I was looking for you. I wanted to see if you could give something back to Bethiah on my behalf.”

“You want me to tell her you’re looking for her?”

“Oh, no. It’s quite all right.” Rhonda chuckles. “She’s feeling a little prickly at the moment when it comes to me, I think. She pretends she’s all bluster but she really does have a soft heart.” She runs her hand over the lock to her door and it opens, revealing the crowded quarters within, now covered with heaps of dresses and scattered shoes. She picks up the only pair that aren’t dainty little strap-covered heels and holds them up. “Here we go. Bethiah left her shoes with me.”

The fuck she did. I narrow my eyes at Rhonda. Bethiah has made it very clear in the last few days that she doesn’t want to be alone with Rhonda. She’s either been with me, or with Jamef at all times. The few mentions she’s made of Rhonda are of annoyance mixed with duty, like a visiting relative that irritates you but you feel obligated to spend time with anyhow. I know Rhonda’s the one that hurt Bethiah in the past. I know Bethiah still carries emotional wounds from it, which tells me that once upon a time, she loved Rhonda deeply.

But that was then and this is now.

I all but snatch the boots from her. “Are you trying to start something?”

Her eyes widen and she looks genuinely surprised. “I’m truly not. I understand that you feel threatened by my

presence, Dora. I totally get that. This sort of lifestyle that we're forced to lead isn't conducive to being friends, but I want you to know that I'm not here to try and steal your mates."

I relax a little at that. "Good."

She chuckles. "Even though there's plenty of room for two humans on this ship, that isn't my goal, darling. I'm just trying to secure my future. Right now, my sweet Lord Nerit is my future, and I want nothing more than to have him back. Your triad is safe."

I still can't shake the feeling that she's trying to weasel her way into something. Rhonda's beautiful and appealing, but I don't trust her. Maybe I *am* suspicious for no reason. Maybe I'm being a jerk right now and she's just trying to be friendly to another human. It would be nice to have another human to talk to, one that understands our unique and powerless position in the scheme of things. Ruthann is off with her "sisters" on the other ship and I probably won't see her again for a long time. A friend would be nice. I offer Rhonda a wary smile. "You don't want to be in our triad. It's messy enough as it is."

She giggles, the sound light and tinkling and delicate. "Any time you have two women sharing one man, it gets messy. It's to be expected. Though I suppose you're sharing Bethy too, hmm?"

I wince. "Don't call her that. She hates it."

I do, too.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Rhonda wrinkles her nose charmingly. "I keep forgetting. This is why I'm glad I've ran into you today, Dora. I really want us to be friends. And more than that, I freely admit that I'm trying to ensure my safety and my position. The best way to do that is to get back with Lord Nerit. The best way to get to Nerit once more? Grease the wheel and make certain that both Bethiah and your fierce Jamef want to help me out. Which is why I need your guidance."

My...guidance? "I don't understand."

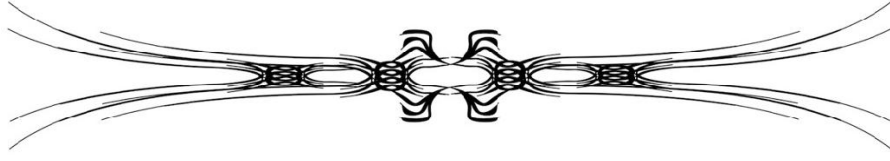
“It’s clear you’re *so* important to them, dear.”

Clutching Bethiah’s boots to my chest, I feel a bloom of pleasure in my chest. “You think so?”

“I do.” She smiles. “Help me get on their good sides again?”

I suppose it can’t hurt. “I mean, what do you want to know?”

NINETY-FOUR





## JAMEF

**M**y leg is throbbing as we pull in to the Qavandaar Falls port. I can feel one of the circuits snapping, sending shocks up through my flesh, but there's no time to examine it or head to med-bay. Bethiah is on the bridge with me, glaring down at the gorgeous planet spread out before us as if it personally offends her.

“Qavandaar Falls. Could he be any less imaginative if he tried?” she grumbles.

“At least it makes it easy to find his trail,” I point out. His credit records have all but pointed an arrow here. Either it's a very clumsy trap, or this Lord Nerit il'Aiven wants to be found. “I'm not even sure we can collect a bounty on this. It feels far too easy.”

“Oh, we're collecting a keffing bounty,” Bethiah says, her tail flicking. “I'm not putting up with Rhonda's shit for free.” She points at the lush foliage that surrounds the port. “With luck, we can dump her ass here and maybe take a day off. Buy some drinks at the bar, get Dora a little dressed up and head to the cantina. What do you say?”

I grunt. “I don't think we make enough credits to buy a membership here.” Qavandaar Falls is famous for its beauty, and for the fact that it's a very popular vacation spot for Homeworlders. Not a very imaginative one, but popular. It's a tropical paradise with enormous, multi-level trees, a bevy of flowering plants, and dozens of glimmering waterfalls. If it's a little overly landscaped and some of the waterfalls are artificial, no one seems to care. Sprawling resorts flash enticing lights amidst the trees and a few air-sleds race through the blue skies, enjoying the delightful, warm weather.

It does look nice.

Too bad we probably can't stay. I get to my feet, pausing and pretending to stretch as I test my bad leg out again. “I

don't think they're going to allow a bounty hunter on those resorts," I point out to my mate. "So what's our angle? Shipping? Job hunting? Air-sled valets?"

She crosses her arms, gazing at the tropical paradise that surrounds the busy port. "Hmm. Job hunting, I suppose." She turns to me, her eyes narrowed. "You sure you're okay?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

Bethiah purses her lips. "You seem distracted."

"Don't tell me you didn't notice Rhonda cozying up with Dora earlier today. I can't help but wonder what that's all about."

"Ugh, don't remind me. Dora's too trusting."

"I think she recognizes Rhonda for who she is. Give her some credit. She says they're not friends. That she's just being polite." I might be a little suspicious of them being together, but I'll take harmony over everyone at each other's throats. "Nothing wrong with that."

"You don't know Rhonda like I do. There's a motive to everything that comes out of her mouth. Either she's sabotaging us to Dora, or she's pumping her for information. She doesn't know how to be anything but self-serving." Bethiah makes a face. "And the longer she's here, the more I regret being nice."

I snort with amusement. "I don't think anyone would make the mistake of calling you nice."

"Not to my face," she agrees and straightens. "All right. Time to get down to business. Don't suppose you have any contacts here?"

"None. You?"

"Not any that would spit on me if I were dying of thirst on a desert planet," Bethiah says cheerfully. "So I guess we strap on our blasters, pretend we're jobseekers and get some day passes. You said we're looking for a credit signature at one of the resorts?"

I nod. “And his personal cruiser docked here three weeks ago and, according to my records, is still here.”

“Ooo. An abandoned vehicle. Now things are getting juicy.” Bethiah rubs her hands together. “Part of me kinda hopes he’s dead so we can take that to a scrapyard.”

“But then we’re stuck with Rhonda.”

Her eager expression falls. “You’re right. Forget I said anything.” She strides over to me, twining her tail with mine, and the pleasure of it is even greater than the quick kiss she brushes over my cheek. “All right, handsome. Should we split up down below or go adventuring together?”

As much as I want to stay at her side, I can’t help but be practical. “The sooner we get done, the sooner we get paid. It makes sense to split up.”

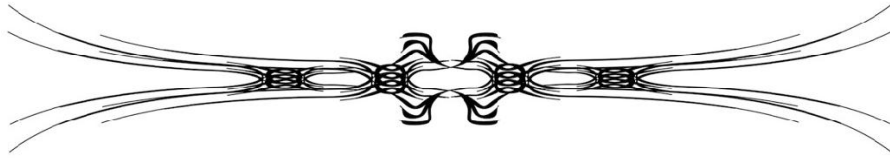
“Spoil sport.” She reaches around and grabs my ass. “I hope we tie things up quickly. A hunt always makes me feel frisky and I’m in the mood right now.”

“Save it for later. Job first.”

Bethiah gives my ass another squeeze, her eyes gleaming with a feral light. “Let’s hope for an enticing hunt, then. Maybe we’ll get lucky and he’ll run from us.”

If he does, he’s a bigger fool than I thought.

NINETY-FIVE



## BETHIAH

“So,” I say as we cut through the employee entrance to one of the largest resorts. “What do you think the odds are that we’ll return to the ship and find Rhonda in pieces?”

Jamef doesn’t respond to my joke, scanning the hall around us.

I frown at his back. He’s been distracted all day. I’m sure he’s nervous about leaving Dora behind, but I’ve been working with her all week on blasters, and she’s getting a lot better with them. Plus, she’s scrappy. She can handle herself, and we showed her the lockdown sequence on the ship if anyone tries to board her. So I’m not entirely sure why Jamef is being so distant, but I’m not a fan of it. I need him to be paying attention, especially if we’re going to do something dangerous.

And considering he’s with me? The odds are good on dangerous.

“So I’m thinking we split up,” I drawl as we head down a long, grimy-looking hall. It’s dimly lit, the flaked-paint metal walls a sharp contrast from the vibrant and lush resort above. Guess they don’t spend the credits on the staff here. When I still don’t get a response from Jamef, I continue. “We split up, you do all the grunt work, and I go find a bar and drink fruity concoctions until you come and pick me up. Deal?”

Jamef pauses, then squints, his red eye flaring as he gazes down the hall ahead of us, and then looks behind us once more. “According to the schematic I just downloaded, the long-term port dock for guest ships is just ahead.”

“That’s great,” I say dryly. “You’re not listening to me at all.”

He blinks at me and focuses on my face. “What were you saying?”

“That I’m going to find the security office and suck the dicks of everyone I see until someone gives me vid footage of the dock. You’re good with that, right?”

Jamef has the decency to look appalled, and at least I know he’s finally paying attention. “*What?*”

“I’ve been talking your ear off and you’re not listening. What’s going on?”

The guy frowns, glancing around the empty staff tunnel. “Just focusing on the mission. We need to find where the spare uniforms are kept if we want to really sell this whole valet thing.”

“I’m not really concerned with selling it,” I confess. “If we can’t bribe our way to the information we need, we can always take a hostage. I only suggested the uniforms because I thought you might look cute in one.” With a dramatic sigh, I continue, “But since I’ll be busy sucking random dicks, I guess cuteness doesn’t matter —”

“You’re not sucking dick. Quit saying that.” He’s all but growling now. It’s adorable.

“Then keffing pay attention. What’s with you?” I smack his tail with mine even as I bump his hip. To my surprise, he staggers, and I bite back a grin at catching him so off-guard. “Ha! You’re a mess today.”

“I am,” he agrees, giving me a clearly annoyed look. “I’m worried about Dora. I’m concerned that we left her with that manipulator alone on our ship. And I’m growing even more concerned that someone’s going to catch us in this hall without clearance passes and then we’re going to spend overnight in a resort jail, and that will make Dora even more panicky.” He rubs his hip. “And you’re not taking this seriously.”

“You truly are no fun.”

“Never have been.” He glares at me. “You know that.”

Well...that’s true. But I like him anyhow. “I’m taking this seriously,” I say, heading further down the tunnel. “I really don’t think we’ll be here long enough to get into trouble. And even if we are, I’m confident we can talk our way out of it. As

for Dora, she has to be left alone at some point. We can't stay on the ship holding her hand forever."

"Yes, but leaving her alone on an empty ship is a very different situation than leaving her with Rhonda."

Okay, that's an excellent point. "If it makes you feel any better, Rhonda won't steal the ship. She doesn't know how to read anything but her native language and she's not particularly compelled to try. If she tried to rob us, she can't take the ship anywhere there's a port or else she'd find herself arrested, confiscated, and on the auction block."

"She might have changed in ten years."

I think of the Rhonda on the ship and compare her to the one in my memories. "Trust me, she hasn't."

Jamef pauses, gazing up at the ceiling. "There's a security feed. Give me a moment to set up a vid loop so they won't see us down here."

"Well aren't you handy," I tease, leaning up against the wall as his cybernetic eye flashes and a beam of light focuses on the metal wall next to me. Code flashes through the beam, scrolling past so fast I can't read it, and I watch Jamef's face as he works. Is it just me, or does he look tired? Maybe we shouldn't have kept him up so late last night, but after he'd made me come, Dora insisted on her turn, and well, one round of sex turned into three. He didn't complain. I didn't, either. I'm no idiot and sex with both of them is amazing.

Maybe Jamef's just getting old.

I smirk to myself at the thought, watching him as his eye flashes more code and his look of concentration intensifies. I can't wait to tease him about being too old and decrepit to keep up with two sex-hungry females and watch him sputter. It's always so cute when he gets outraged.

Behind him, a side door opens and two uniformed males step out. I straighten with a wince. So much for this being a breeze. "Hey, Jamef? You can give up on the loop now."

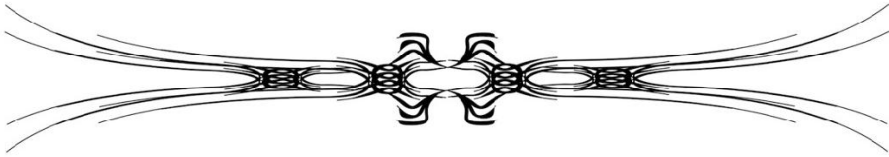
He doesn't respond, his concentration locked on the code scrolling through his eye and probably chugging along into his

brain.

Time for me to take care of business, then. I pull open the front of my tunic, practically exposing my tits, and pull my hair loose from my sensible ponytail. “Oh, good,” I cry, taking a page from Rhonda’s book and launching myself at the men. “Please help me. I’m so lost!”



NINETY-SIX



## JAMEF

The moment I pull up the security feed, I know it's a mistake. I access the files I've downloaded and prepped for situations like this, only for my leg to completely overload. It freezes up, error messages flashing across my vision even as the information from the security feed pours into my mind.

I have to concentrate or else I'm going to overload myself and end up flat on the ground. Hot pain lances through my head and my leg as I focus in on the security feed, creating a loop of vid images from the empty hallway and then working to override the existing security protocols of the resort. When I can finally brute-force my way in, I implant the feed of the empty hallway and set it to loop repeatedly so no one will see us entering or eventually leaving.

Then, the flood of error messages from my leg takes over, and I change my focus to it. Dimly, I hear Bethiah having a conversation with someone, but I can't let myself be distracted. This mission is ruined if I can't work my keffing leg. We'll get arrested for breaking into the resort and then Dora and Rhonda—and the ship—will all get impounded. This moment is crucial and I can't be the one responsible for it all keffing up.

So I work on the alerts, parsing through them one at a time as a scuffle breaks out behind me. I want to help but I can't. I'm frozen in place, my leg sending shocks of pain up my spine and into my brain as I try one override after another.

When the last message disappears, there's a heavy ache in my prosthetic leg, and my toes aren't working correctly. I try to flex them in my boot, only to get no response. My head throbs, too, and I sag against the wall.

"No, it's cool," Bethiah says behind me, panting. "I got it. Don't rush on my behalf."

Biting back a groan, I get to my feet again and focus on my mate. There are two male szzt collapsed at her feet and she's pulling the uniform off of the larger of them. A trickle of blood slides from her nose and she wipes it away.

"You...all right?" I manage.

"Other than having to do everything myself? Yeah. You?" One of the guards stirs and she slams a boot back down on his head again and returns to tugging off his sleeve. "You were making some odd noises for a moment there."

"Tricky system to hack into. I'm better now."

"Good." She activates the auto-fastener on one of the fallen men's belts. "Help me undress them and then we need to find a safe spot to stash them until they wake up."

"Sure." I heave off the wall, and if I stagger a little, Bethiah doesn't notice. I'll have to run a new diagnostic when we get back to the ship, but I can manage until then.

A short time later, we're dressed in the ill-fitting uniforms of the resort's security, the two guards stashed in a maintenance closet. Once they're discovered missing, our problems will multiply, but my hope is that we're gone by then. We continue down the long, winding tunnel and hop on the moving walkway when the tunnel branches, heading toward the long-term port docking instead of the maintenance department.

As we approach, Bethiah turns to me and musses my hair, pulling it over my red cybernetic eye. "Keep your head down and let me do all the talking. They won't remember just another mesakkah woman but they'll definitely remember someone with a red eye."

I nod, ducking my head. I should have brought a mask or employed a masking program in my system. Didn't think about it, but I normally don't bother with subterfuge, either. It's another thing that'll change now that I'm with Dora and Bethiah, I suppose.

Of course, then I wonder if I should bother, as I doubt I'll be kept in our triad for long.

The moving walkway comes to an end in front of a large set of doors, and Bethiah swipes her stolen badge. The doors roll open and she snorts. “Security sure is lax around here. They’re letting all kinds of trash in.”

And then she gives me a wicked smile.

“Just focus so we can get back to the ship,” I hiss, keeping my head ducked. “We don’t need to get caught.”

“We won’t,” she reassures me. “I’ve got it all under control.”

Now that’s a terrifying statement.

I follow behind her as she strides into the hangar. It’s enormous here, the ceiling so high above us that it fades into darkness. This hangar is protected from the outside elements, with several large and expensive-looking pleasure cruisers docked in rows as far as the eye can see. It’s quiet, too, with an employee sitting at a control panel at the front and several others moving between ships in the distance.

The employee looks up at us as we approach.

“Hey there,” Bethiah says in a flirty voice. “Busy day today?”

The employee relaxes, not getting up from his desk. “Is it ever down here?”

She laughs and leans over his control panel. “You’re telling me. It’s a fool’s errand to have anyone down here while all these rich lordlings play around up above. At least it’s an easy day’s credits, right?” She makes a big show of pulling out her data-pad and pretends to flick through the screen. “Speaking of fool’s errands, I have a request I have to fill out. Do you know where Lord Nerit il’Aiven’s cruiser is?”

The employee frowns at us, his gaze flicking over to me. “You mean the skater?”

A skater? Now that’s interesting. That means he didn’t come here with any crew. He drove his skater himself, or brought one other person with him. Most skaters are one- or

two-seaters and designed for racing (and showing off) instead of longer distance travel.

“My notes don’t say which one it is,” Bethiah continues, a sly look on her face. “A skater sounds about right, though. Our friend must be compensating for something.”

He laughs. “Aren’t they all?”

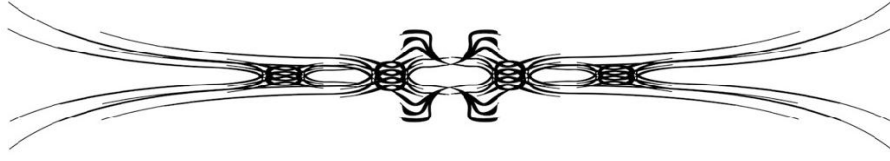
“Indeed. So which dock is it in?”

The male employee pauses. “I have to ask why you need to see it.”

Bethiah gives him a languid smile. “I need to check it over for DNA traces. His mate apparently is making a fuss.”

The employee freezes. “DNA traces? She thinks he was *murdered*?”

NINETY-SEVEN



## JAMEF

**B**ethiah laughs at the employee's shock. "You are watching far too many crime feeds, my friend. Not *murdered*. It's a jealous mate looking for evidence of a mistress, silly. You know how us mesakkah females can get."

"*Oh.*" He chuckles. "Of course. Dock sixteen."

The tension in my shoulders eases.

"We won't be too long." She taps the top of his console with a satisfied smack and then turns to me. "Come on, trainee. The sooner we get this request completed, the sooner we get our lunch break."

"Coming," I say, stepping in line behind her.

I have to give Bethiah credit. One reason why her wild schemes work so well is that she sells them completely. It's with utter confidence that she strides through the massive bay, passing by mechanics at work and a couple of employees washing the outer hull of a rather elite-looking cruiser. No one looks at us twice. She knows how to make it look as if we belong here, and so everyone else buys it, too.

She pauses and pretends to check her data-pad as we get to dock sixteen. "Yep, this is the one. Come on, trainee." She turns toward me and gives me a sly grin. "If you're nice, I'll let you fuck me in his captain's chair."

"Let's just find what we're looking for." I take back everything I just thought about Bethiah "selling" her position. Fucking in a customer's ship is definitely not allowed here. "The sooner we get back, the better."

We approach the ship and the boarding ramp automatically lowers, the safety protocols clearly disabled while it's being held here. We're both silent as we board the ship, and then Bethiah turns to look at me. "I'll take a peek at his ship's logs

if you want to scan the ship. Let me know if you see any signs of foul play or traces of DNA other than our buddy Nerit.”

I nod and separate from her, getting to work. As we discussed before arriving, Bethiah will break into his records and see if there are any hints there. With my eye, I can scan each room of the ship quickly, noting any traces of DNA or fingerprints left behind. I move through the ship, recording each room. There are hints of DNA all right, some belonging to Nerit, some human DNA belonging to Rhonda, and a few strands of hair from an unknown party.

I also find traces of a second human, which is intriguing. Most intriguing of all, however, is that everything is covered with a fine layer of dust. Lord Nerit apparently arrived here after dropping Rhonda off at Haal Ui, then left his craft behind and disappeared.

Or rather, he didn't entirely disappear. There are credit records from a few other planets scattered over the next system, but nothing that points an arrow to our missing lordling. I finish collecting the data and return to Bethiah's side. She's bent over the console in front of the captain's chair, concentrating on her work. “Anything?”

“Give me a moment,” she replies in a cranky tone, not looking up. “Overachiever.”

I snort, leaning against another console nearby. “Let me know when you want to hear what I've found.”

“Didn't I just say give me a moment?” She turns and gives me a scathing look. I swat her with my tail, and she whirls around in the chair. “Okay! Fine! What?”

“No one's been here for weeks.”

“That's obvious,” she says, running a finger along the control panel edge and leaving a line in the dust. “My guess is our friend disappeared shortly after ditching Rhonda.”

“We don't know that he ditched her. He might have been intending to come back for her and never made it,” I point out. “There are no traces of blood, though. Some skin flakes and strands of hair, of course. And some fingerprints, but most of



them are too smeared to make out. Nerit piloted this ship himself, and Rhonda's DNA is here on the ship, too, so she was with him at some point. There's also the trace of another male mesakkah who has no records matching with my database."

Bethiah grunts. "That doesn't mean anything. It's easy to wipe your records or have yourself declared dead so you won't show up as a current profile. Not that I would do such things." She blinks innocently at me.

"There's also evidence that another human was on board."

That makes her pause. "Another human, you say?" She taps a finger on her chin. "Rhonda didn't mention that. You think she knows?"

"Impossible to speculate."

"Oh, come on. Speculating's fun." She crosses her arms under her breasts and spins around toward me once more, expression thoughtful. "If I was to speculate, I'd say that Nerit was sticking his dick in another little human, and Rhonda spaced them both in a fit of rage. Now she's playing victim in the hopes of snaring a new master."

Not a bad theory. "Except that doesn't explain the second mesakkah or where they've all gone. Or who's using his credit records."

Bethiah pats her data-pad. "I'm downloading his files here and we'll see if he has anyone else logged. Hopefully that will give us some answers."

"We could always ask Rhonda. Get her version of events."

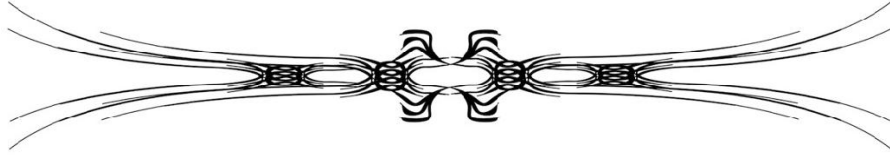
She groans dramatically and slumps in the chair. "Yes, but then I have to talk to her crazy ass. And she's gotten me in enough trouble as it is." She tilts her head and studies me. "Unless you're suggesting..."

"No. No torture."

Bethiah looks appalled. "I was going to suggest we spy on her on the ship or get Dora to sneak it out of her. Damn, Jamef. And here I thought you had no claws."

My face heats.

NINETY-EIGHT



## BETHIAH

I'm not entirely surprised to find that the records on Lord Nerit's ship are entirely blank. There could be a lot of reasons behind it. If I was smuggling contraband, I'd abandon an easily tracked ship and wipe its records. If I was murdering someone, I'd dump their ship and remove any trace that I'd been on board. If I was running from something, I'd hide all of my digital footprints.

It's clear that Lord Nerit il'Aiven is hiding from something or someone, if he's even still alive.

I ponder this as we return to our ship. Jamef is equally quiet, no doubt turning the problem over in his mind. No one from the resort seems to notice that the two guards are missing, and no one stops us as we take public pathways through the bustling port to return to the *Pleasure Spot*. If I was going to rob someplace for credits, this resort would be a very likely scenario, as the security is incredibly lax. There are rich lords everywhere, flaunting their wealth, and with our uniforms, it'd be easy enough to come back and clean several very rich vacationers out.

But Jamef probably wouldn't like that. Dora, either. I sigh at the thought. It's no fun when you're the only rulebreaker. I'm probably going to have to retire the corsairing part of my life and stick to the bounty hunting part, just to keep my mates happy.

Ah well. There are worse things.

We return to the ship and as we board, Jamef leans over and presses a kiss to my cheek. "I'm heading for the bridge to check if we've received any more credit pings."

There haven't been any in three days. I frown at him. "Don't you want to talk about what we found on the ship?"

"No." He heads for the bridge and I stare after Jamef, frustrated. This is our first bounty hunting job we're working

on together, so maybe he doesn't take to the whole "art of the chase" very well? Still, following dead ends is the biggest part of the job. If everyone was easy to find, there'd be no need to hire a bounty hunter.

I'll give him his space for a little while, I guess. Maybe he needs to mentally decompress alone for a bit. That means I'm responsible for telling Dora what's going on. She didn't come out to greet us, which is a little concerning, so I check the ship's computer. Dora's in the combat training room, and I'm proud that she's using this time to brush up on her skills. We'll make a corsair out of her yet.

Or a bounty hunter, whatever.

I check the computer records once more for Rhonda, and her signature shows...not in her quarters, but in the prisoner hold.

Uh.

Immediately, I head to the combat training room to talk to Dora.

The computer chimes an alert as I enter, and Dora immediately turns, lowering her blaster. The red light targets dance on the practice wall and she ignores them, giving me an overbright smile. "Oh! You're back already?"

"We are indeed." I return her smile and move to her side, turning off the practice program and then sitting on the control panel. "Didn't find out as much as we wanted, but that's just part of the game."

She sets her blaster down and comes to stand between my thighs, looping her arms around my neck. "I'm glad you're back, at least. I have something we need to talk about. By the way, where's Jamef?"

"Sulking on the bridge. I guess he was more disappointed at what we didn't find than I thought." I run a hand down her back absently, thinking about his strange mood. "Has Jamef been acting weird to you?"

Dora gives me a curious look. "Weird? In what way? And I really think we should talk. But tell me what's going on with

Jamef first.”

I kiss her cheek, considering. “I don’t know. He just seems really distant and not himself for the last few days. He seemed out of it when we were at the resort. I just worry something’s troubling him about our triad and he’s holding it in.”

“Jamef wouldn’t do that. He knows how important it is, to be honest.” She tilts her head, regarding me. “You want me to talk to him?”

I sigh, wondering if I’m overthinking things. Maybe I’m desperate to find something wrong because that’s what I do in my relationships—I find reasons for people to leave me, and it’s making me paranoid. “It might be in my head. Let’s give him some space today and if he wants to tell us what’s going on, he can. I don’t want to be pushy.”

“You? Pushy? *Never.*”

“Brat.” I pinch her rounded backside and she squeals, pulling out of my grasp with a giggle.

Her laughter quickly fades and she clasps her hands together, toying with her fingers as she does. “So, um, remember I said we needed to talk? I might have screwed the bounty up.”

“In what way?” I ask blandly, though I already know part of the answer.

Dora grimaces. “So remember how you two left earlier today and said that I should guard the ship and watch over Rhonda? And to hit the alert to notify the two of you if there was anything dangerous going on?”

Uh oh. “Yes...?”

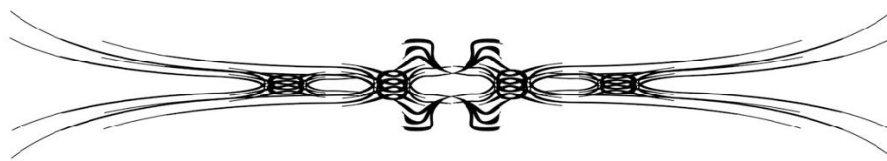
“Well, I don’t know if it’s dangerous, but...I locked up Rhonda.” She makes a face. “And I’m pretty sure she’s really mad about it. But I had my reasons!”

“Do they involve petty jealousy? Because you will find no judgment from me.” I grin at her, holding a hand out so she can come back to my arms. “In fact, I’d be flattered if you

were jealous all over again. It's cute and it makes you really aggressive in bed.”

She rolls her eyes. “Worse. I think she’s sabotaging the ship.”

NINETY-NINE





## BETHIAH

“She’s...what?”

“Sabotaging the ship.” Dora’s expression is completely serious.

I sift through what I know of Rhonda, and my memories of her. Lazy, indulgent, entitled...criminal mastermind is nowhere in there. Not even close. But maybe she’s changed a lot in the last ten years. I nod at Dora. “You saw her up to something?”

She nods. “She made a big deal of handing your boots back, right? And I kept thinking, why make a fuss other than to get me jealous, which she swears she’s not doing.”

“Which is probably a lie, but go on.” Rhonda’s favorite currency is jealousy and mistrust.

“Right. So I tried to think of reasons why she would take your boots if she swears she’s not trying to start something, and the only thing I could come up with is if she planted something on them.”

An uncomfortable prickle starts on the back of my neck.

“I couldn’t find anything on them, though, so I thought maybe I was being paranoid. But I also remembered her pretending to get dizzy in the hall, and how she hovered over one spot in particular. That made me suspicious, so while you guys were gone, I went back to that spot on the ship and looked at it hard. At first I didn’t see anything, but then I thought about how your technology is better than the ones I’m used to, and how you have the mask that makes people look like frog aliens. So I closed my eyes and ran my hands over the wall and the railing, and I felt a little something. I peeled it off and kept it.”

Dora reaches into her pocket and pulls out a tiny... something. It’s no bigger than her smallest fingernail, and

when she touches it, the color ripples and changes to match her skin tone. She hands it to me and I immediately recognize it—an extremely thin listening device.

“It was stuck on the underside of the railing,” Dora tells me, and her eyes are a little frightened. “Is it a bomb?”

I grimace and crush the impossibly thin component between my fingernails, like I would squash a bug. “No. It’s for spying on people.”

She exhales in relief. “Well thank goodness for that. I was worried she was planting explosives all over the ship.”

“She wouldn’t do that,” I say thoughtfully, staring down at the listening device. “She needs a ride to wherever she’s planning on going. But she’s definitely not telling us the truth, is she?”

“Does that surprise you?” Dora nudges my foot. “I think we should check your boots again now that we know what we’re looking for.”

Ugh. She’s probably right. “In a moment. I just want to say I’m really keffing proud of you, Dora. You had a hunch and you followed it through. We’ll make a good bounty hunter out of you yet.” I lean in and give her a kiss. “Good job, fluffit.”

She beams up at me. “So you’re not mad that I imprisoned her?”

I laugh. “I’m just trying to figure out how you managed it. Did you hold a blaster to her head?”

Her look becomes mischievous. “Nope. I told her I’d finished cleaning out the best guest quarters on the ship and did she want to check them out to see if she wanted them for herself. She walked herself right into the cell and I locked the door behind her.” Dora gives her yellow hair a confident toss. “She’s probably spitting mad right about now.”

“Rhonda never spits,” I tease.

“Ew.”

“Sorry. Couldn’t resist.” I eye the tiny component once more, the back of it sticking to my fingertip. “I wonder if this

has something to do with why we're getting such mixed signals on Lord Nerit. His trail is obvious, but he's also hiding his records and he abandoned his ship at the resort. And he's working with someone else."

"Someone else?" Dora asks. "So do you think Rhonda is in on this plan?"

"Don't know, and Rhonda won't tell us the truth even if we ask."

Dora grabs my arm and then points at my boots. Right. We need to check if we're being spied on even now. She could have planted more listening devices all over the ship, I'm realizing, and we'll have to go through the security footage and pay attention to her actions over the last few days.

I groan at the thought, because Jamef is going to think I'm an idiot for not being more suspicious of her. "That woman is more trouble than she's worth."

"Maybe she means well," Dora says, and then rolls her eyes while making a gagging motion with a finger to contradict her words. "Maybe she is what she says, a human just trying to get by in this end of the galaxy."

"Maybe..." I pull one of my boots off and hold it out to Dora while I remove the other. "She's really let herself go, though."

Dora's eyes widen, and then she presses her hand to her mouth in silent laughter. If Rhonda's spying on us, I'm going to give her something to keffing listen to.

"Did you see how wrinkled she is?" I tease Dora as I run my hand over the outside of my boot. "I've seen nutsacks that have better skin."

"Be nice," Dora says, her eyes dancing with amusement. "She can't help that she has jowls." Her hand runs along the inside of my boot, and a moment later, she pulls out another plas-film thin disk that was stuck to the inside, holding it up to me.

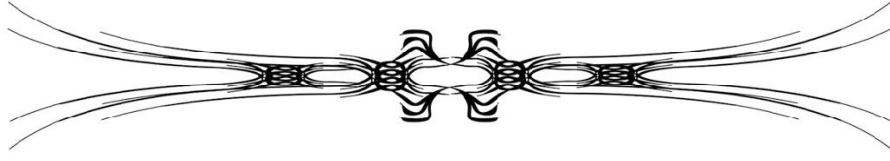
A split-second later, I find one in my other boot. It's nothing more than the tiniest ripple on my boot, the skin on

my fingertip barely catching over it.

That little shit *has* been spying on us. She's been playing innocent this whole time while she's had an ulterior motive.

I should have spaced her when I had the chance.

ONE HUNDRED



## DORA

**M**y relief that both Jamef and Bethiah are back and whole is almost as great as my relief that they're not mad that I locked Rhonda up. I worried I was being overdramatic. That there was a nice, simple explanation for this and I'm reading the situation all wrong.

But now, looking at Bethiah's face, I know I'm right. Rhonda is absolutely up to something.

"Such jowls," Bethiah says into one of the listening devices, before snapping it between her nails like the tiny blasting caps we used to play with as children. The memory drifts through my head, unbidden. Maybe that's why I was terrified this was an explosive of some kind.

I'm just relieved more than anything. I feel responsible for watching over the ship while they're gone, and I didn't want it to blow up under my watch. Bad enough that Rhonda's been placing listening devices all over the place.

"Come on," Bethiah says, tossing her boot aside. "I think I want to go talk to our friend."

I pause, set her boot down to grab her blaster, and then follow after.

Bethiah is right about one thing—Rhonda is very much not pleased to be locked up in the holding cell. The door is shut as tightly as I'd left it, but I also set the walls to one-way display. On Rhonda's side, it's dark, but on ours, we can see everything she does.

And she's sitting on the bed in the cell and pouting, her arms crossed under her breasts and a miserable look on her beautiful face.

Bethiah walks up to the door and slides open a compartment just large enough to slide a food tray through. "Well, well, how'd you get yourself into this mess, Rhonda?"

Rhonda gasps and jumps to her feet, putting her hands on the door and peering through the food slot to Bethiah. “Bethy! You have to help me! Your human has gone mad.”

“Her human is right here,” I call out, irritated. “And I’m not mad. You’re spying on us!”

“Nonsense! I would never,” Rhonda protests.

Bethiah takes one of the small, tacky-backed listening devices and sticks it just inside the cell, on Rhonda’s side. “Found this in my boot and another in the hall. How many of them have you hidden on the ship?”

Rhonda is silent, her wounded expression never faltering.

“Well?” Bethiah prompts.

“You’ve got me all wrong,” Rhonda says quietly.

“I bet I don’t. Why don’t you tell me who you’re spying for and what the real meaning behind this ridiculous chase is? We’ll let you pay our fees and we’ll even be so kind as to drop you at the nearest station all in one piece. Generous, if you ask me.”

“No,” Rhonda says, shaking her head. “This isn’t a ridiculous chase.” She stomps her foot like a child, glaring at Bethiah through the slot. “I need you to find Nerit! I’m not lying about that!”

“If that’s the truth, then why are you spying on us?”

She sighs, pursing her lips. “It’s called insurance. I’m sure you’ve heard of it.”

“Insurance?” I ask, but Bethiah waves a hand, shushing me.

Her gaze remains focused on Rhonda. “Insurance against what?”

Rhonda laughs bitterly, shaking her head. She pushes away from the door and takes a step back. “You name it. Insurance against you robbing me and dumping me on the nearest planet. Insurance against you murdering me, or reselling me, or any of those sorts of things. If I have information on you, you’ll

actually help me. You think I survived this long without knowing how the game is played?” She crosses her arms under her breasts. “I may be many things, Bethy darling, but I’m not a fool.”

“I swear to kef, that name makes me want to tear your head from your shoulders,” Bethiah growls, her tail lashing. She’s getting agitated, I can tell, and that’s not a good sign for our conversation with Rhonda. So much for keeping the upper hand in things. “You expect me to believe that you’re spying on us just because you’re protecting yourself? I call shenanigans on that.”

Rhonda shrugs. “It’s the truth. I upload your conversations and misdeeds to an off-site location. If you help me out without abusing my trust, then I keep your secrets. I think it’s a fair exchange. And I’m serious—all I want is my beloved Nerit back.”

“Misdeeds?” Bethiah retorts. “No misdeeds around here.”

“You broke into a resort earlier,” Rhonda replies.

She...did?

“No, I tested their security for them and found it lacking,” Bethiah says, all confidence.

“And Jamef created a security feed loop. I listened to all of it, Bethy darling. But don’t worry. Petty crimes won’t be enough to cause a problem. That’s not what I’m talking about. You’re going to help me find Nerit, and you’re going to let me out of here.”

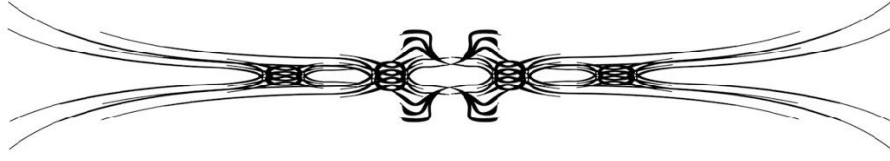
“You don’t have any room to make demands,” I chime in.

“Oh, I don’t know. I think both Jamef and Bethiah would get into a lot of trouble if someone found out they were harboring an illegal clone,” Rhonda says casually. “Now...are we working together or aren’t we?”

Bethiah snarls and lunges for the release on the door.



ONE HUNDRED ONE



## BETHIAH

I'm going to kill her.

I'm going to wring Rhonda's pretty neck once and for all, and I won't feel any regrets. She can threaten me. She can threaten Jamef. Those sorts of things won't stick. But if she blabs to the universe about who and what Dora really is...

I'll space her right now.

Except I can't...and that terrifies me.

Dora grabs my hand before I can hit the door release and barge in to strangle Rhonda. "No! Bethiah! Stop! She's trying to goad you into getting what she wants."

"Oh, does she want a strangling?" I snarl. "Because I want that, too."

Dora tries to tug me away. "Bethiah. Listen. She's not going to tell anyone what I am." She puts her hands on my arms. "Humans aren't exactly legal anywhere, are they? So if she marches up to the authorities and tells them that I'm illegal, they'll thank her for it and then send her on to the nearest auction block. I can't imagine that's her end game."

That makes me pause, because Dora's right. Rhonda can't sell Dora out without selling herself out...but Rhonda is also really good at landing on her feet.

I can't believe I ever beat myself up for not being good enough for her. It's idiotic.

"Come on," Dora says, her voice soothing. "Let's go talk to Jamef and see what he suggests. It's been a long day for everyone." She steps toward the door and holds a hand out to me. "Let's go get our mate."

Jamef will want to know what's going on. He's going to give me a keffing hard time for allowing Rhonda the viper on

board, too. I bite back a sigh. “This is what I get for trying to do the right thing,” I grumble. “I need to stop being so nice.”

Dora chuckles and wiggles her hand at me.

Oh, fine. I take it and let her pull me away from Rhonda’s cell.

“Wait!” Rhonda cries. “You need to let me out!”

I’m pretty sure that’s the last thing I need. “Nope. You need to stay in there until we’ve figured out what else you’ve done to the ship.”

“I haven’t done anything!”

Dora coughs hard, and it sounds suspiciously like she coughs the word “bullshit.”

Rhonda makes a whiny sound, pressing her face against the slot. “I can’t stay in here! I’m your client! This isn’t how you treat a paying customer!”

“You’re lucky we don’t space you,” Dora tells her, a fierce note in her voice. “So just sit down and shut the fuck up.”

I’m stunned by the ferocity in Dora’s response...and more than a little pleased. My fluffit has definitely been coming out of her shell. I’m so proud. “I did say Dora was in charge of the ship,” I tell Rhonda. “Sorry. Them’s the rules. It’s up to her if you get to come out or not.”

“But there’s not a real bed in here,” Rhonda protests, a whine rising in her tone. “It’s a cot! And the pillow in here has a rough pillowcase. I need my lotions and face creams.”

What she needs is a gag. I turn to Dora. “You’re in charge of the ship. Wanna let her out?”

Dora scowls. “No. Not until we find out what she’s planted and where.”

I shrug at Rhonda. “You heard her. Get comfy.”

Rhonda stomps her foot and makes a sound of pure outrage as we leave. I’m pretty sure I hear her calling my name as we head down the hall, but she can call all she wants.

Dora's right. We need to find out what our "customer" has been up to.



Jamef rubs his chin as we tell him about the tiny listening devices and how Dora locked Rhonda up. He curls his tail around her leg and gives her a look of pride. "Good job, sweetheart. I hope you weren't in danger."

"From Rhonda?" She snorts. "The only thing I'm in danger of around her is getting my ego punctured. Now that I've figured her out a bit more, I can handle her."

"Can you scan the ship for the devices?" I ask Jamef, holding out the tiny, sticky thing on the end of my fingertip. "If you can sweep for DNA with your eye, surely these won't be hard to find, right?"

"It's not that simple." He continues to rub his chin, thinking. "They're coated with a polymer that masks them from appearing on scans. Nothing will show up if I do a sweep, and that's why they're so useful for spying. We'll have to go back and check the security logs and see where on the ship Rhonda has paused." He rubs his eyes, and he looks exhausted. "I'll get started on it tonight."

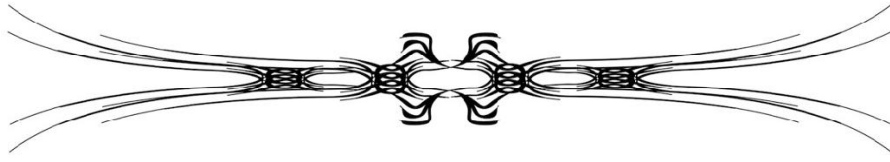
"No, you won't," Dora says. She slides into his lap and strokes one of his horns. "It's been a very long day and you're both tired. And I missed you both. It can wait until tomorrow."

"She might hear something," Jamef protests.

Dora gives me a wicked grin, reaching for my tail. "Then let's give her something to listen to."

"Naughty fluffit," I tease. "I like the way you think."

ONE HUNDRED TWO



## JAMEF

I t's easy to sink into the arms of my mates and push my worries away. I don't have to think about my leg, or about where our bounty is, not when Dora is kissing me and Bethiah's hands are roaming over my back.

Those sorts of things can wait for tomorrow. As long as no one notices that I'm a little more fatigued than usual, it'll all be fine.

"I missed you both," Dora says between kisses, her legs wrapped around my waist and her arms around my neck. "Who wants to be on bottom tonight?"

Before I can answer that I do, Bethiah grabs the base of my tail and gives it an enticing squeeze that makes my cock surge with awareness. "Jamef was on the bottom last time. He needs to be on top."

"Or I could do it," Dora offers, breathless as she nips at my lower lip. "I like being in control. It's fun." She pauses, and then adds, "Though I like it when you guys are in control, too."

We get to our quarters and I set Dora down on the bed as Bethiah tugs on my trou, loosening them. She immediately grips my cock, stroking me, and I groan, leaning against her. "Greedy females," I say, teasing. "Trying to decide how you want to use me. Don't I get a say?"

"No," they both chorus, and then Dora puts a hand on my cock, feeding the tip into her mouth as Bethiah kisses me.

Kef, was any male as fortunate as me to have two eager mates? I doubt it.

I grab a handful of Bethiah's mane and kiss her back, my other hand sinking into Dora's hair as she works my cock with her mouth. At times like this, I feel like I don't have enough hands to satisfy them. It's the best problem to have. Dora

moans, taking me deeper into her mouth as Bethiah undresses, her lips teasing mine with kiss after kiss.

“I think Dora should be in the middle tonight,” Bethiah murmurs against my lips. “You inside her, and she can lick me.”

On my cock, Dora moans, her mouth eager as she works me. She likes that idea.

I do, too. Sinking into Dora’s tight cunt while Bethiah is underneath her, and the two females pleasuring each other? Our triad gets better by the day. “Then let’s get Dora undressed. She’s wearing far too much, don’t you think?”

Bethiah’s attention turns from me and she gives Dora a fiercely possessive look. “Oh, absolutely. She looks so much better naked.”

Dora lifts her head from my cock, getting to her feet, her expression full of eagerness.

“No no, fluffit,” Bethiah purrs. She puts a hand on my shoulder and tugs me forward. “No one told you to stop. I’ll undress you. Keep your mouth on Jamef’s cock. He’s had such a long day and could use a little attention.”

Dora moans again, sinking in front of me. Her hot mouth suction around the head of my cock again, and I close my eyes, shivering at the surge of pleasure that moves through me. I put my hand atop her head again, and her arm steals around my thigh.

“That’s better,” Bethiah says in a soft voice. “You’re so pretty like that, with your mouth stretched over his cock. He needs this, don’t you think? And we need it, too. I need you to make him so hard that he can take both of us, I think. We need the stress relief of a good, hard pounding.”

Kef, her words are getting me worked up, too. I open my eyes, watching Dora bob her head on my cock, Bethiah kneeling behind her and unfastening Dora’s clothing, touching her breasts and toying with her nipples as she does. Dora’s eyes are closed with bliss, her hand on the base of my shaft as she continues to work me.

“Good job, fluffit,” Bethiah murmurs in Dora’s ear as her hand slides between Dora’s thighs. “Just don’t make him come yet. You’d be terribly naughty if you did and I’d have to spank you.”

Dora opens her eyes and looks right at me as she works her tongue against one of my piercings, clearly in a defiant mood.

“I think she wants to be spanked,” I rasp, keeping my hand tight on her hair. “She’s sucking me so hard that she’s trying to make me come.” I pull my cock out of her mouth and tease the tip of it against her wet lips. “Are you going to be a good girl for us?”

Dora whimpers, sticking her tongue out so I can put the head of my cock back in place. “Please.”

“Tell him nicely that you want his cock,” Bethiah’s hand works between Dora’s thighs, teasing her clit. She presses her front against Dora’s back, pinning her in place, though it’s clear that Dora’s loving every moment. “Tell him, or I won’t lick this for you.”

And she spanks Dora on the cunt.

Dora whimpers again, pressing kisses to my cock and looking up at me with those strange human eyes. “Please,” she breathes. “I want your cock, Jamef. Give it to me and I’ll make you feel so good.”

“You always make him feel good,” Bethiah tells her, one hand on Dora’s breast as the other continues to work between the human’s thighs. “It’s that you’re making him feel *too* good.”

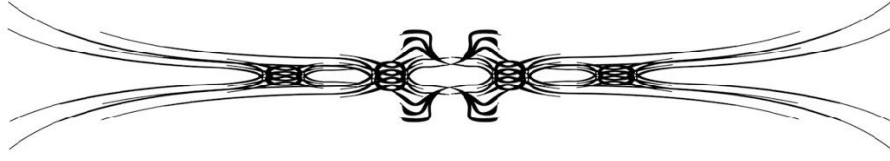
“Bethiah,” Dora cries, squeezing my cockhead even as she rocks her hips against Bethiah’s steadily working hand. “I’m gonna *come*.”

“No you’re not,” Bethiah replies, and with a wink to me, she spanks Dora’s cunt again and stops working her clit.

The howl of protest that Dora lets out is deafening.



ONE HUNDRED THREE



## BETHIAH

“Please, please make me come,” Dora pants, rubbing her face against Jamef’s cock as I run my hands over her pretty backside. She’s sandwiched between us, more or less, with Jamef looming over her so she can suck his cock, and me seated behind her, framing her with my legs as I tease her towards an orgasm.

Or at least, I *was* teasing her toward an orgasm. Now I’m just teasing.

I pinch her cute, rounded backside. “What happened to ‘I like being in control’?”

“I like it when you’re in control, too,” she pants, a wheedling note in her voice. “Please, I need to come.”

I eye Jamef, pretending to think about it. “Hmm. I don’t know. Our fluffit has been rather naughty today. I think she needs to prove she can be a good girl for us.”

Dora moans, and then she runs her tongue over the darkened head of Jamef’s cock, then sucks it into her mouth. With eager noises, she works him, her ass wiggling as she does. It’s impossible to resist. I slide my hand between her thighs again, and when she shifts to make room for my touch, I avoid her clit and move deeper, pushing a finger inside of her and working it in and out. She’s incredibly wet, my fingers squelching with her juices as I pump into her.

My cunt is probably just as wet, and no one’s even touching me right now.

It’s like Jamef can read my mind. Our eyes meet over Dora’s head, and then he tilts his head, indicating I should join her on his cock. Normally I’d resist being told what to do, but there’s something so keffing lewd about that suggestion that I can’t resist. I move in, adding my tongue to his shaft and Dora changes from sucking to licking.

“Both of you, kiss the head,” Jamef rasps. “And then kiss each other.”

Is that the game? I love it. I moan, tonguing the head of his cock and the piercings there. I deliberately extend my tongue a little further than usual, and Dora’s tongue brushes against mine. The human immediately turns her attention on me, her kiss so wet and enthusiastic that I forget all about being in control and lose myself to her lips. I bury my hands in her hair, holding her as we kiss and kiss, and her hands skim over my body, eager to touch me and pleasure me back. Her hand moves between my legs and she strokes her fingers through the wet folds of my cunt, soaking them in my arousal.

“On the bed, both of you,” Jamef commands. “You want to ride my cock? If you keep kissing like that, I’m not going to last.”

I’m tempted to keep kissing Dora just to see if me touching her indeed makes him come. That’d be delicious.

Dora breaks from my kiss and gives him a dazed look. “Wait! I have something.”

I pause, glancing over at Jamef, who looks equally confused. “What do you mean, you have something?”

“I have a toy,” she says, beaming at both of us. “A strap-on. I can go get it.”

“Who the kef gave you a strap-on?” I demand immediately. I’m going to murder Rhonda if it was her. Truly murder her. I can only imagine what the deal is with that. It’s probably covered in listening and vid devices all over the shaft. There’ll be sex vids of the three of us all over the comm waves within days.

Actually...that might be kinda sexy.

“Hazza gave it to me,” Dora explains. “When we were on Kaatir’s moon. She said we should have some toys to play with.”

“I should have known,” I retort. That female had seemed far too pleased with herself when we left. Kaatir’s moon is a keffing kinky little place, all right.

“I’ve been saving it for a special occasion.” She runs a hand down my front and then pinches my nipple, hard, just enough to give me a wisp of sensation. “Can I get it? Can we use it?”

“On me?” I ask, a little titillated.

“Or Jamef,” Dora says with a shrug. “I’ll peg either one of you. I’m an equal-opportunity strap-on kind of girl.”

She would be, our naughty little human.

I glance over at Jamef to see how he likes the idea of being pegged tonight. He just watches me, clearly leaving the decision in my hands.

My cunt decides for me. Dora pinches my nipple again, harder than before, and my cunt involuntarily clenches around air. “Me first,” I breathe. “Dora can fuck me, and Jamef can fuck Dora.”

“I love this idea,” Dora says, jumping to her feet. “Orgasms for everyone. Be right back!” She races over to her end of the closet and starts digging through her things. A moment later, she raises her hand in the air, waving a harness with an enormous fake cock dangling from it. “Here we go.”

“Kef me,” I say at the sight of it. “Does Hazza think your mates are hollow? That thing is an absolute monster.”

“You can take it,” Dora tells me, stepping into the harness. She straightens, and then adjusts the hips until the “cock” sits with the base flat against her pubic bone. She runs a hand down the shaft of it and gives me a wicked look. “Remember what I was saying about being in control? Get on the bed, Bethiah.”

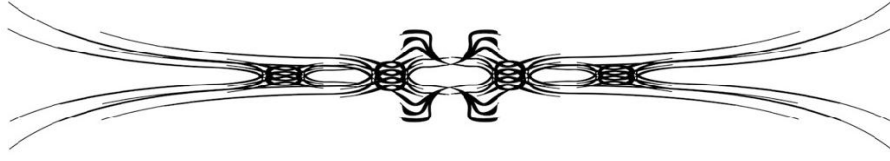
“I think I’ve created a monster,” I joke. But I get to my feet and move to the bed, sitting on the edge. “How do you want me?”

She turns and gestures at Jamef. “Go join her. Kiss her enough to get her good and wet for me.”

Jamef puts a finger under my chin and tilts my mouth toward his, and then he’s kissing me, hard and insistent and

intense. His body presses against mine, and I moan as his hands skim over me, and it seems we're both eager to please Dora.

ONE HUNDRED FOUR



## DORA

I adjust the straps around my hips and waist, watching as Jamef kisses Bethiah, lowering her onto the mattress of our bed. It's strange, but the strap-on feels familiar to me. I guess Starfish Dora was no wilting flower in the bedroom. Maybe she was an absolutely kinky badass and I've picked up some of her vibes. I like that thought.

Bethiah moans, her expression soft with arousal as Jamef kisses her again, his fingers stroking between her spread thighs. Her skin gleams with a hint of wetness, and I want nothing more than to drag my tongue over her cunt and taste her, but we can do that later. For now, I'm aching with my own need, and my strap-on needs to be broken in. "Kiss her cunt, Jamef," I demand in a bossy voice. "And then come and kiss mine."

Jamef gives me a quelling look, but leans in and gives Bethiah's pretty cunt a thorough kiss, his tongue dipping between her folds in a way that makes me squirm with arousal. He gets up from the bed and approaches me, his cock erect, the head coated with pre-cum, and moves so close to me that our "dicks" are practically touching. "Bossy thing," he tells me, cupping my face in one large hand. "I'll decide who and what gets to be kissed now, hm?"

And he leans in and kisses me, his mouth tasting of Bethiah's arousal. It makes me so damn wet that I want to rub all over him, demanding that he touch me. My pussy's throbbing with an aching need that hasn't yet been fulfilled, and I desperately want to come...almost as much as I want to go and work Bethiah over with my new toy. I look over at her on the bed and she's trailing her fingers over her abdomen, heading between her thighs as she watches us.

"If you're in charge now," I say to Jamef, "then tell me to go fuck her until she screams your name."

His mouth quirks with amusement. “Go on, then. Her cunt is wet with need. Play with your toy and satisfy her.”

I’m a little disappointed that he’s not flinging me down to the bed so he can have his way with me. I mean, I have a cunt that’s wet with need, too. But then I look over at Bethiah, her legs spread so prettily on the bed and her hand stroking between her thighs, and I decide my needs can wait until I’m done pleasuring her.

I move to the bed and settle between her spread legs, my hand on my “cock.” Her eyes are hooded with arousal as she watches me, and I rub the head of it through her wet folds, slicking it with her juices. “I’m going to go slow,” I whisper. “Tell me if it’s too big for you.”

“And give you a swelled head?” Bethiah jokes. “Never.”

I giggle, because this totally sounds like a guy line right now. *Is it too big for you, baby?* Wearing a big dick really does change a girl in bed, it seems. I stroke the head through her slickness once more, and then push it slowly into her, watching her face as I do. Bethiah’s eyes flutter and she trembles as I begin to move my hips, rocking deeper into her with each movement. I’m not entirely sure I’m working her like Jamef would, but she’s not protesting.

When I sink fully into her, I try to thrust, but my rhythm definitely leaves a bit to be desired. “This is harder than it looks,” I grumble to my mate, and I’m rewarded with a snort of her laughter that quickly dies when I rock into her again. “No pun intended.”

A big, warm hand caresses my backside and I jerk, making Bethiah twitch, too. Jamef’s big body covers mine, his skin hot and delicious against my back. “You need help finding the right way to fuck her, sweetheart?”

Now I’m the one trembling, because hearing Jamef say “fuck” instead of “kef” means he’s picked it up from me...and it sounds twice as dirty knowing that. “Yes, please,” I tell him. “Show me.”



He grabs my pillow and pushes it under Bethiah's hips with a little bit of maneuvering from the both of us. The new position forces me to bend over her a bit more, and as I do, Jamef's hand slides between my thighs and strokes through my folds, seeking my heated core. I moan, low and desperate, nearly collapsing over Bethiah with my need. She wraps her arms around me and holds me in place as Jamef pushes my thighs apart, and I feel the head of him seeking his way into my body.

When he thrusts inside me, he doesn't go slow, like I did with Bethiah. He plunges in, hard and fast, his spur sinking into my asshole as he does.

Bethiah gasps, her arms tightening around me, and I realize she's feeling his thrusting, too.

"You know the word if you want to stop," Jamef tells her—or me, who knows at this point—and starts to fuck us both. With every thrust into me, it pushes me into Bethiah. He grips my hips, and when he pulls backward, he makes sure to tug my hips along with him, steering things. I might be wearing the strap-on, but he's the one fucking both of us, and it's making me so incredibly aroused that I'm having a hard time paying attention to what I'm supposed to be doing. All I can do is cling to Bethiah as Jamef pounds into both of us, harder and faster. There's no sounds but the slap of our bodies together, the wet, slick noises of aroused flesh, and the needy whimpers coming out of both myself and Bethiah.

Bethiah comes first. And when she does, it's like a chain reaction. She stiffens, arching, and makes a soft whine as she clutches me even tighter. Her legs tremble and it's almost like she holds tight onto the fake cock with just how hard she squeezes it when she comes. Jamef's hand digs into my shoulder and he pounds into me twice as hard and fast, and I choke as my own orgasm builds deep inside my belly, brought on by the friction between the three of us and that delicious hammer of his cock deep inside me. My toes curl and my legs clench, and then I'm coming, too, my insides tightening so hard that it feels as if my lungs stop working.

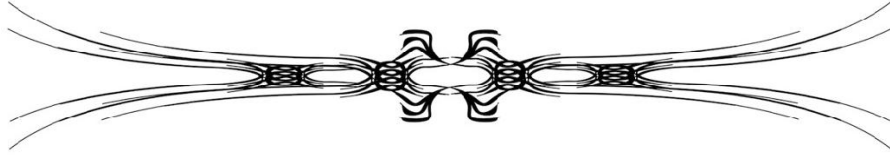
It's so good. *Sooooo good.*

Jamef grunts, and then he pulls out, spilling his seed down my backside and thighs. He lifts me up a little higher, which confuses me until I realize it's because he's spurting his release over both of us, where Bethiah and I are joined, too.

That was incredible. I'm so glad Hazza gave me that gift.

"Such filthy mates I have," I murmur as I rest my head on Bethiah's breasts and Jamef rubs his seed over our twined thighs. This might be the best moment of my life.

ONE HUNDRED FIVE



## BETHIAH

**I**t's the petty side of me that makes me get out of bed early. Jamef is curled around Dora, sleeping heavily, and her yellow hair is spread over his skin, her leg nestled between his. When I get up from her other side, she moves even closer to him, snuggling. They're such an inviting picture together that I almost want to get back into bed with them again.

Almost. But that petty side of me is awake and won't be satisfied until I go make Rhonda miserable.

I throw on my sleep tunic and leave our private quarters, knowing that I look like an absolute disaster. There's a nest of tangled hair between my horns from being rocked into the mattress repeatedly. My tunic is wrinkled and I probably reek of sex. I'm sure Rhonda will be utterly disgusted, which is why I want to show up like this.

I pad across the ship and head for the containment cell. Once there, I open the feeding slot and lean casually against the door, crossing my arms under my breasts and watching as she sleeps fitfully. Her hands are folded under her breasts, her face angled toward the ceiling. A strip of fabric covers her eyes and she's asleep atop the blankets, as if she's worried they'll somehow give her wrinkles. When she doesn't wake up, I decide she's slept long enough.

"Wow, you look rough," I drawl. "Being a prisoner is *hard* on the skin."

Rhonda jerks awake, her hands flying to her cheeks. She moves aside the blindfold and runs her fingers over her face. "Get me out of here, Bethy."

"You aren't a very good listener. Didn't I tell you not to call me that?" I fluff my snarled hair. "Maybe Nerit didn't disappear. Maybe he's deliberately avoiding you."

My words strike a nerve. Rhonda's nostrils flare and she gives me a look that could destroy warships. "You're wrong.

Something's happened to Nerit. He'd come back to me if he was able." She smooths a hand over her hair. "It isn't like you to be cruel, Bethiah."

"Isn't it? Seems like we both don't know each other very well." I regard her lazily. "Speaking of your Lord Nerit, is there anything you want to tell us?"

Rhonda looks confused. She sits up on the edge of the cot and purses her lips in a displeased fashion. "Like what?"

"Like the names of those that were with him on his ship?"

She gives her head a little shake. "I don't know what you mean. What ship? Nerit has several ships. What others?"

"I'll tell you if you tell me what listening devices you hid on the ship and where."

Rhonda straightens her shoulders and gives her bright red hair a toss. "I did no such thing. And couldn't you shower before coming here? I can smell you through the door."

"I could, but where's the fun in that?" I drag my thumb over the corners of my mouth. "I don't have anything on my face, do I? Any crusted fluids?"

"Disgusting."

I taste my thumb. "You're right. I probably licked them all off. So...the spying?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

I'm not falling for the wide-eyed innocence tactic. It only works with Dora. "Yes, you do. And you're not going to tell me where you hid them?"

"Are you going to let me out of here?" She gets to her feet, slinking towards the door.

"Probably not."

Rhonda sniffs, eyeing me with distaste from the other side of the cell. "Well then, I probably won't tell you, either."

It's obvious we're not going to get anywhere. She's too stubborn and so am I. Plus, I'm having too much fun baiting

her. But I should probably try to find out something at least. “Just tell me if your Lord Nerit has any other human slaves.”

She looks genuinely offended at the suggestion. “He wouldn’t. That would be like cheating on me and he would never do such a thing.”

“You are aware he has a mate, right?”

“That’s different. She’s mesakkah. I’m his only *human*.”

“You’re right. *So* different.” But when she continues to appear offended and hurt, I start to wonder if she really has no idea what Nerit is up to. “You told us that he took you to the station for shopping and left to pick something up and he never came back. Did he say what he was picking up?”

Rhonda gives me a sullen look, running her finger over the door seam as if mentally prying it open to escape. “No. But he likes to surprise me sometimes. I assumed it was a gift for me.”

Of course she’d assume that. She’s a spoiled pet. “And you weren’t traveling with anyone else?”

“No. Why would we?” She genuinely seems confused.

“Because we picked up the traces of another mesakkah and a human on the ship. Your master was meeting up with someone.”

Her hands press to her mouth. “Do you think they stole him?”

“If they did, he went without a fight. There’s no traces of a struggle and no blood.”

Rhonda doesn’t seem convinced. “Why would he fight? He’s a noble from an important house. He’s a diplomat.”

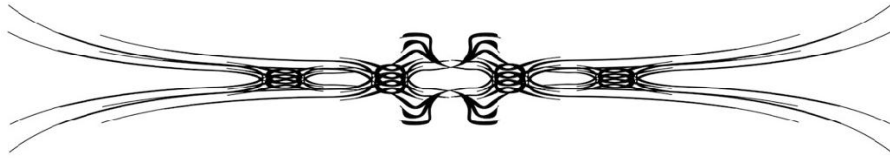
Yes, but even the most elite mesakkah would surely struggle against someone who kidnapped him, wouldn’t he? Unless he wanted to go? Or am I just assuming that because Rhonda’s making me crazy and therefore she’d make anyone crazy? “So basically you’re telling me you’re no help at all.”

“I’m the funds. *You’re* the help. If I could figure it out on my own, why would I need you?”

And that’s enough Rhonda for me today. I lean in to the food slot. “Dora will be by to feed you later. Maybe.”

Then I shut it and walk away, because damn, what did I ever see in this woman?

ONE HUNDRED SIX





## DORA

I flick through the footage on the ship at double-speed, my chin propped up on my hand. I'm curled up in the communications seat on the bridge as Jamef works alongside me, moving dots all over the navigation charts and running calculations. For once, I feel like part of the team, even if my portion is just to review what Rhonda's been up to for the last several days and search the ship anywhere she pauses while she's alone.

So far I've found four more of the listening devices, and each one makes me feel more and more like a valuable part of our triad. It's silly to be so proud of something so small, but I'm going to take the wins however I get them. I fight back a yawn as I watch a particularly boring stretch of Rhonda fussing with her hair in the mirror and nudge Jamef absently with my foot.

"Hmm?" he asks, not taking his gaze off his screen. He touches one of the dots and drags it over to the far end of the star map, then frowns at the calculations.

"Do we need to worry about what Rhonda said?" I ask him. "You know, about her leaking information about the fact that I'm a clone?"

He blinks and focuses on me, the steely red gaze of his bionic eye oddly comforting in its fierce appearance. "We won't let anyone touch you."

That's not exactly what I'm asking, though. "Yes, but do you think she'll blab about it? That I'm cloned? It feels like a dirty secret."

"I will chop her into bits and space the pieces in three different sectors if I truly think you're at risk, sweetheart. Trust me. You're all right. If she points a finger at you, she points several more at herself. Like she's said before, she's good at surviving. It's a bluff, nothing more."

He sounds so confident that I smile at him, rubbing my foot up and down his strong leg again. “Okay. Thanks, Jamef.”

Jamef just nods, but he also wraps his tail around my ankle, as if trying to reassure me, and turns back to his work on the flight charts. I turn back to my boring footage, wondering how many hours a day a woman can spend on fixing her damn hair.

To my surprise, on-screen-Rhonda leaves the room and goes to Bethiah. I check the date and this is from a few days ago. I watch, my jaw hanging open, as she goes into our living quarters and confronts Bethiah...

And then I watch as my mate grabs Rhonda by the throat and chokes her with a furious look on her face. “Jamef,” I breathe. “Did you see this?” I turn my monitor and play the vid back a few minutes, then let it roll for him.

He’s silent as he watches the interplay, and then glances at me when it’s finally done. “She never said anything to you?”

“Neither of them did.” I watch as Rhonda rubs her throat and glares at Bethiah’s back. “That might be the fucking sexiest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Jamef snorts, his tail slowly unfurling from around my leg.

“Seriously. I shouldn’t be turned on by violence, but god, I love that woman.” I want to reach through the screen and kiss Bethiah for being so trustworthy, even when no one was watching. Not that I doubted her, but it’s nice to see things like this play out on screen. It’s nice to know that Bethiah truly has zero hang-ups over Rhonda other than a soft spot for humans.

On screen, Rhonda moves to one of the walls and presses her hand against it, and I make a mental note, pausing the vid feed. “I think I found another bug.”

“Bug?”

“Oh, that’s what they call them back on Earth. Listening devices. Bug. Whatever.” I pause, shrugging. “At least, I think so. How’s your hunt going?” I get to my feet and wrap my arms around his shoulders, carefully dodging the dangerous horns that arch back from his head and tucking my chin

against his neck. I eye the screen he's working on but it just looks like a lot of calculations and nonsense. "What's all this?"

"A credit trail from a gambling satellite." He strokes one of my hands absently. "According to Lord Nerit's banking account, he withdrew a large sum two days ago. I'm not so sure I buy it, because if someone was cleaning him out, they'd pull out a large sum, too."

"So are we heading there to check it out?"

Jamef taps my hand. "No. At least, not right away. The gambling station is in a remote sector and it's going to take a hefty amount of fuel to head in that direction. Right now, I'm trying to hack into the station's vid feed to see if his face shows up anywhere. Then we'll know he was there and can proceed."

"Huh." I press a kiss to his ear, watching as he taps at one of the controls again. "Is there a hotel there?"

"Probably. Why?"

I shrug against him. "He doesn't strike me as the most crafty sort. If he's really in hiding, he wouldn't be using his credit account, right? So we have to assume that he's not in hiding. If that's the case, then wouldn't he check into the hotel? Wouldn't they have records of who's a guest there?"

Jamef turns his head and stares at me.

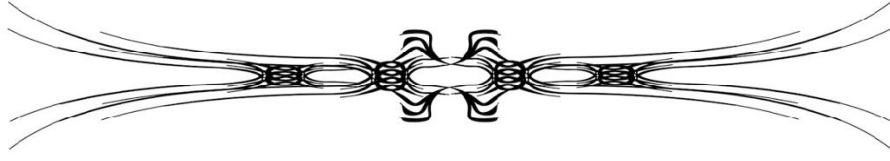
I straighten and stand upright, grimacing. "Let me guess, 'stupid idea, Dora, let me handle things.'"

"No," Jamef says slowly. "It's an excellent idea. I don't know why I didn't think of it."

"Because you like to make things too hard for yourself." I tell him, planting a kiss on his cheek. "You think everything in the universe has to be a struggle, but it doesn't always have to be. Sometimes people are just obvious."

He grunts, and I'm not sure if that's agreement.

ONE HUNDRED SEVEN



## JAMEF

**F**or someone without a lot of memories, Dora has some great instincts. Sure enough, I'm able to tap into the casino's guest records and Lord Nerit il'Aiven's name is there, clear as day. He's staying in an expensive suite near the central hub of the casino itself, which means he won't be easy to extract.

Then again, I'm not sure we have to extract him, just reunite him with Rhonda. It's an odd situation, and I'm far more used to grabbing petty criminals and hauling them before the courts for low-end bounties. I normally don't greet my bounty and leave him (or her) there.

It makes me think about what Dora said—how I make everything more difficult for myself. Is that true? If so, why? Am I punishing myself for some unknown reason? Or do I just assume the universe is going to shit on me and make things harder?

At least this bounty is close to being done. Despite Rhonda's annoying presence, it's been relatively smooth and proved that Bethiah and I can work together without murdering each other. I punch in the best navigation route to the casino satellite and watch as the ship turns itself slowly, orienting towards the new path. It'll take a few days to get to our destination, but then everything will be smooth after that. We'll drop Rhonda off, get our credits, and be on our way.

It sounds too easy. Easy always makes me suspicious. Maybe that's why I make things difficult—I just don't trust easy.

My leg aches and it's buzzing somewhere inside, so I decide to stay on the bridge for a while longer. I run a ship diagnostic, even though I ran a clean one just a few hours ago. As it runs, I idly pull up the bounty database for our particular guild and scroll through the new listings to see if there's

anything interesting. We're already occupied, of course, but it's habit just to check what's being posted in case it's in the current area.

The sight of one particular bounty makes my blood run cold: *ILLEGAL CLONING*.

I open the bounty to review the information, and the sick anger in my gut increases. *Homeworld Research and Learning Institute has uncovered a spate of illegal human clones flooding the slave markets. Look for humans without the crimson skin markers and registration codes. Anyone finding an illegal clone can bring the confiscated being to the Research and Learning Satellite for disposal and reward.*

The number listed on the bounty is a nice, round, fat amount of credits, enough to send a flood of bounty hunters to every slave-trading station on the hunt for a cloned human. Dora won't be safe, no matter what station we go to. Not until this bounty is gone. Humans are going to be hunted, cloned or not, just for a chance at the bounty.

And to turn them in to the Research and Learning Satellite is the worst part of all. Everyone knows that the experiments there are of a questionable nature. I think of Dora, being experimented on by a cold-hearted scientist, and I want to destroy something.

I need to talk to Bethiah. Now, more than ever, it's important that we keep Dora safe.

Hauling myself up from my seat, I ignore the twinge in my leg and head for our quarters. When the door opens, it smells like sex and Bethiah's reclining on the bed, a satisfied smile curving her lips. The shower is running in the en suite lavatory, and there's no sign of Dora.

"Oh good," Bethiah says, sitting up. "You're just in time. I'm trying to see if I can make Dora squirt and my hands are getting tired. You can sub in for me."

"Where is she?"

"Showering. We were taking a break, but now that you're here, I'm game for round two." Bethiah says. Her sleepy,

pleased look disappears at the tension on my face and she sits up straighter. “What’s wrong?”

I hesitate, glancing around the room. Even now, Rhonda might be listening, and I don’t want to give her any information. I pull out my data-pad and access the bounty, then hold the pad out to Bethiah so she can read it.

Her eyes widen and she looks up at me.

“No more space stations,” I say in a low voice. “Not even for dinner.”

“No.” She purses her lips, her expression concerned. “Fuel and that’s it. Do we tell her?”

I shake my head. “She worries enough as it is.”

“Yes, but I don’t like keeping secrets from her. She’ll be upset.”

“Better that she be upset at us for a few days than live in fear for months on end,” I whisper. “This is for the best and you know it.”

“Yes, but there still shouldn’t be secrets between us,” Bethiah hisses. “Also, why are we whispering? She’s in the shower and can’t hear us.”

The water shuts off.

Bethiah flicks off my data-pad screen and hands it back to me. “I won’t say a thing. We’ll do it your way. Now, come and play?” Her expression turns to one of enticement.

“Won’t say a thing about what?” Dora asks, emerging from the lavatory with a towel wrapped around her dripping body.

I go blank. I can’t think of a single good lie to cover for our conversation.

Bethiah lies back down on the bed and gives Dora a lazy look. “When we dock at the casino satellite, we have to declare pets. Jamef doesn’t want to declare you at all and have you hide in the hidey-hole. So I told him we’d do it his way. It’s not worth arguing over.”

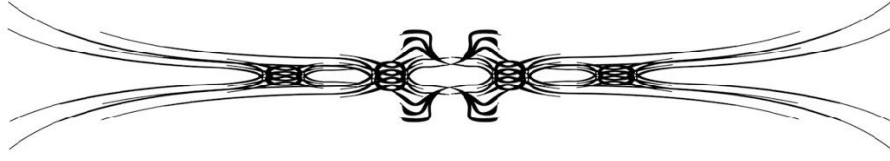
Dora makes a face at both of us. “I am absolutely not a pet. I’d rather hide, thank you.”

“Told you,” Bethiah purrs, reaching for my tail. “Now... come play?”

She’s far too good at lying. Or maybe this is just another thing that I make far too difficult for myself.



ONE HUNDRED EIGHT



## BETHIAH

“Oh wow,” breathes Dora as we circle around the gambling satellite, waiting for our turn in the parking queue. Her face is practically pressed to the screen, like a child. “Look at the colors. And the plating. And the windows. And there’s an enormous terrarium with a space walk. And did you see that ship that just flew past? This place looks really fancy.”

She’s not wrong. It does look a little fancier than I expected. I’ve always known that gambling satellites are an absolute credit sink, but this one caters to a much higher-end clientele than I expected. “They’d better be fancy for what they’re charging to dock the ship for a few days,” I grumble. “It’s practically robbery.”

“But think of how nice it must be inside!” Dora is still dazzled by the sight of the place. “You’re going to have so much fun just wandering around.”

“This isn’t a vacation. We’re on a mission.” I glance over at Jamef, who is suspiciously quiet. He’s seated in his regular chair, but his expression is distant. “Speaking of, we should discuss the plan.”

He rubs his jaw, movements slow, and glances over at me. “I’m thinking about it. I’m also thinking that I’m going to stand out.” And he taps a finger under his bright red eye.

I purse my lips, because he’s not wrong. That’s something we didn’t consider. But after spending days traveling here and all the fuel? We’re not going to return empty-handed. “Okay then, the usual plan is out.”

“What’s the usual plan?” Dora asks, tearing her gaze away from the strobing lights that flicker over the satellite covering her screen.

“Beat up an employee, steal their clothes, and then break in.” I shrug.

Dora makes an unhappy sound. “Seriously? That’s the big plan?”

“It’s an effective plan. I didn’t say it was a clever one.”

“Well, if they’re snobs, they’re not going to buy that Jamef is an employee. He looks too scary.” She glances over at Jamef. “Sorry, love. You’re just a little intimidating.”

He grunts, his gaze settling on her with a look of pure affection. He’s been moody ever since we saw that bounty about the clones. I think it’s weighing on him heavily that Dora could be in danger, especially with Rhonda knowing Dora’s secret.

We haven’t let her out of the holding cell yet. She’s furious, screaming her grievances out to anyone that shows up to feed her. We *also* haven’t spaced her, which she should consider herself lucky over. But Rhonda’s definitely a problem, one I haven’t figured out how to solve yet.

Dora looks over at me, her expression alight. “I know!”

“What?”

“You can be the rich lady and Jamef can be your bodyguard. That way no one looks twice when he seems scary. That’s the point!” She claps her hands together. “Now we just have to make you look like a rich lady. Makeover time!”

I glance over at Jamef, who shrugs. He locks his gaze on the screen, eyeing the glitzy satellite. “It’s as good a plan as any. Just keep your mouth shut and maybe we can pass you off as cultured if you don’t speak.”

I make a face at him. “Kef you.”

“None of that,” Dora says, hopping down from her spot on the bridge countertop. “You’re a lady. Come on. I bet Rhonda has some good swag we can steal to sell this set-up.”

Groaning, I drag my feet as Dora grabs my hand. “I don’t want to talk to Rhonda.”

“Who said anything about talking to her? We’re going to go through her stuff.” Dora has a mischievous look on her face as she exits the bridge, towing me behind her.

Rhonda's quarters are an absolute mess of dresses and shoes. Luckily for us, most of her cosmetics are spread across a table with a mirror on it, and jewelry is tossed into a pile next to pots of reddish lip-stains. I pick up a dangly earring as Dora digs through a pile of dresses atop Rhonda's unused bed. "I'm not sure she's going to have anything to fit me, fluffit. Maybe we skip the dresses."

"Most of hers are flowing," Dora says, determined. She tosses aside a filmy dark blue piece and considers a pink one. "I bet we can make them work."

"Just go easy on me. I'm a modest sort."

Dora snorts, and then pauses, hugging the dress in her hands to her chest. "You guys know you have to come back safe, right? No wild stunts. No getting imprisoned. You've got two humans on this ship and we're helpless without you. I know you don't give a fuck about Rhonda, but think of me at least."

Her serious expression worries me. "As if I'd forget you."

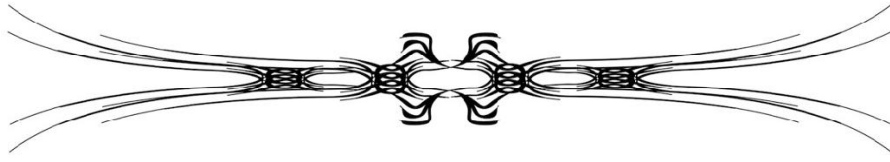
"I know you wouldn't. But you get carried away sometimes and I worry that you're going to find yourself in more trouble than you like and no way out. I think you should keep an eye on Jamef, too." She pauses, as if hesitant to say it aloud. "He seems a little distant lately."

"He's got a lot on his mind, fluffit." *Like your safety.*

She gets to her feet, holding out a silver-spangled dress that flows like water. "See if this will fit. And maybe after we find this guy, we go to that station for a dinner out, you, me and Jamef. Someplace with a terrarium. I'd love to see their flowers. I have memories of those, you know."

My heart squeezes, because the dinner we'd planned together to show her off isn't going to happen. Not with a bounty on any cloned human. "We'll see, fluffit. Help me put this mess on?"

ONE HUNDRED NINE



## JAMEF

**B**ethiah looks absolutely stunning dressed up. She's wearing a silvery sheath that I'm pretty sure I saw on Rhonda several days ago, but this one is stretched over her black bodysuit and covers her tattoos and scars enough that she looks elegant. Bangles line her wrists and her ears and horns are bedecked with glittering strands of jewelry. Her hair is pulled back in a sleek bun to allow the emphasis to remain on her adornments, and her cosmetics outline dark eyes and bright red, inviting lips.

"Beautiful," I tell her.

"Thanks. It keffing itches, though. I don't know how Rhonda wears this shit on a daily basis." She lifts one arm and scratches at her armpit, frowning. "Let's get going before I rip this off of my body in a rage fit." She turns to Dora, who's fussing with the hem of Bethiah's dress. "You sure you'll be all right without us, fluffit?"

"I'm heading into the hidey-hole for a nap the moment you guys leave, I promise," Dora says, patting the blaster at her hip. "And I won't come out until you return."

"Okay, good. And if Rhonda gets out, shoot her. We can space the carcass and make excuses later." She kisses Dora's forehead, leaving a bright red mark on the human's pale skin. Instead of wiping it away, though, she looks proud of it. "Leave that there. We'll mark you up more later."

Dora blushes and moves toward me, tilting her face up for my kiss. "You be safe, too," she tells me softly. "And look out for Bethiah. Trouble follows her."

"That's because she's the one bringing the trouble." I kiss her sweet face and run my thumb over her lower lip. "You're sure you won't be too scared in the room alone? I know you hate enclosed spaces."

“I’ll manage. The ship feels more like home now and it doesn’t stress me out as much.” She gives me a cheerful smile and I hope she’s not pretending for our sakes. “Now you two go on and find this guy so we can get Rhonda offloaded.”

She heads off to her hiding spot, and Bethiah and I head out of the ship and into the docks. I step onto one of the moving walkways gratefully and try my best not to rub my leg. It’s been flaring with pain all morning and getting difficult for me to hide. Luckily for this portion of the job, all I need to do is keep my head down and look surly if anyone gets too close to Bethiah. It doesn’t require chatter or being friendly, which is good, because I don’t think I can manage more than a snarl at the moment.

Bethiah is quiet, too, her expression regal as she stands a few steps ahead of me, clutching a tiny handbag that looks too small for her grip. As the walkway winds through the satellite, we leave the docking area behind and head into the entertainment district. Here, colorful shops scream their wares with glitzy signs, advertising tasty drinks to insect-protein snacks and all kinds of exotic brews. There’s gambling dens everywhere, of course, and each den seems to be accompanied by a cantina next door, complete with dancing girl in the window. There are crowds of aliens of all kinds, and most of them are drunk or in the process of getting drunk. It’s strange to see well-dressed Homeworld nobility tottering around like sloshed militia recruits, but I suppose that’s what this sort of place is for. A satellite like this caters to higher-end clientele by charging three times as much to dock—as my empty pockets can attest—and keeps the riffraff out.

A couple gets on the walkway ahead of us, and I see a huge, ugly moden male holding the delicate chain of a human female. She’s got a collar around her neck and a downtrodden look on her face.

This is definitely not a place I want to take Dora. For the moment, I’m glad she’s back at the ship. Maybe this is what Lord Nerit had in mind when he left Rhonda back at the other station? But then why not say anything? Why make her assume the worst?

My leg jolts with pain and I lean heavily to one side, staggering.

Bethiah jerks, shooting me a cold look, but I can see the concern in her eyes. “Watch it,” she snaps. “I’m paying you to guard me, not to get drunk on my time.”

“Sorry. Lost my footing.” I give her a quick nod of acquiescence and take a step back, curling my toes in the hopes of sending a surge through my malfunctioning leg. When we’re in private, I’ll casually mention going back to Three Nebulas. I know a guy there that works on bootleg prosthetics. He costs a small fortune, but he’s also honest. Maybe he can help me come up with a workaround that won’t eat up all of our credits. Even if I just have partial mobility in my leg, as long as it’s consistent, I’ll live with it.

“There’s the hotel,” Bethiah says under her breath, and takes a step off the walkway. “Follow me.”

I jerk after her, wobbling like a drunk, and again, I see the concern in her eyes. Her lips are pressed into a tight line, though, and she looks just like the disapproving noblewoman she’s supposed to be.

“Is there a problem?” she hisses at me as we walk toward the elegant hotel facade.

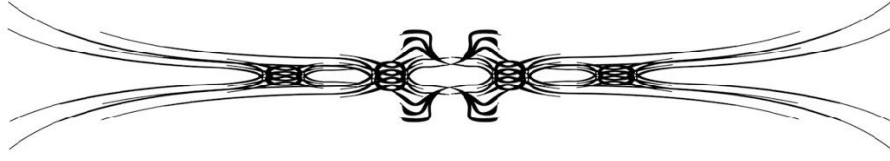
“Nothing I can’t handle,” I tell her. “We’re almost done with this mission. Let’s just get our bounty and get this taken care of.”

She stares at me for a long, hard moment, and it’s clear she’s not entirely buying what I’m selling. But then she shakes her head, turns forward, and practically stomps towards the hotel. “Work with a partner, they said. It’ll be fun, they said. Keffing liars.”

I can’t help but smile a bit at that.



ONE HUNDRED TEN



## BETHIAH

I'm so keffing mad at Jamef I can't see straight.

Keeping my features masked in my best nobility sneer is easy compared to keeping my hands locked at my side, because right now I'm itching to slap him. Or choke him. Or just shake him really, really hard...and then hug him.

Because it's clear that something's wrong with Jamef. I've been playing off his distance, his distracted expressions, his quiet as worry over Dora. I've been telling myself that maybe this is just how he gets when he's focused on a job and that I'm overreacting. I've been doubting myself and been distracted by Rhonda's unpleasant presence that I haven't seen what's happening right under my nose.

But when surefooted, strong Jamef stumbles on a moving walkway while standing still? It all clicks together.

I cross my arms under my breasts, doing my best to look like an imperious sort of Homeworld lady who's barely holding her shit together due to anger (a pretty easy task at the moment). I stop at a fountain in front of the hotel and pretend to stare at it. "How long has this been going on?" I hiss under my breath, turning my head just slightly so he knows that I'm addressing him. "And don't you dare say it's none of my business."

"I'm handling it," is all he says. Jamef sounds tired, too. Not like himself.

The thought makes my heart flutter in terror. He's clearly not well and I don't like it. He made me care for him and now I'm *scared* and I hate all of this. "You're clearly *not* handling it if you almost fell down on a keffing moving walkway. Are you sick? Dying?"

Oh, kef me, is he *dying*? Is that why he's finally agreed to let me catch him and be with him? The thought steals my breath with fear.

“It’s my keffing prosthetic leg,” he grumbles.

“What’s wrong with it?”

“A dead circuit, a feedback loop, I don’t know. It needs repairs.” Jamef glares at me as if I’m the problem here. “I’m not dying.”

“Good,” I snarl, so relieved I want to scream. “Because I’m going to kill you. Why didn’t you say anything?”

Jamef looks just as stiff and angry as I feel. “Because it’s not important right now. What’s important is the mission. I’ll contact someone after we’ve offloaded our bounty and see if I can get some cheap repairs done.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.” Cheap repairs, my ass. He’s going to get the best keffing prosthetic repairs all my non-existent credits can buy. I’ll rob every ship coming in if I have to in order to get him back to working properly. I don’t like him being in pain. I don’t like him not being himself. I eye our surroundings with a new sense of dismay, trying to determine the easiest, safest way to handle things. “Is there anything I can do?”

“Find our guy fast. That’s all.”

Fine. Focus on the work and then we’ll have it out later. I scratch at the boobs of my annoying dress and glare at him. “You’d better be ready to have it out with me and Dora both when we get back to the ship, because she is gonna be pissed when she finds out that you’ve been malfunctioning and hiding it.”

“I would prefer not to tell her,” Jamef says quietly.

“I would prefer you actually speak up when you’re hurting,” I snap back. “Doesn’t look like we get what we want, huh?” A snooty-looking noble in a heavily embroidered house robe pauses and stares at me, and I make a rude gesture at him. “Kef off, Junior, this is a private conversation.”

Appalled, the male staggers and hurries towards the sumptuous hotel.

“Bethiah,” Jamef growls at me. “You’re supposed to be a lady.”

“It’s hard to be a lady when I’m so keffing mad I can’t see straight,” I tell him. I turn towards my mate, my bounty hunting partner, my *person*. “You don’t get to keep secrets from your mates anymore, all right? We’re doing this as a team. You, me, and Dora. That doesn’t mean you soldiering on and pretending like your shit isn’t breaking down. If there’s a problem, you come to us and you tell us and we figure out how to solve it, together. Understand? None of this works if we’re not all three in this a thousand percent.”

Jamef stares at me long and hard, and then his mouth curves up in just a hint of a smile. “I almost think you care.”

“You are a keffing idiot,” I snarl at him as I lean in and grab the front of his bodysuit. It’s a plain black work uniform, standard with a lot of hired security, and it looks good on him. I haul him close and plant a big, sloppy kiss on his hard mouth.

“Disgusting,” someone cries in the nearby crowd.

“Bethiah,” Jamef murmurs against my lips. “You’re supposed to be a lady —”

“You think ladies never slum it with hot security guards? Wrong.” I nip at his lower lip and suck on it, loving the ragged breath he takes. “I bet a lot of ladies come here to have all sorts of indiscreet affairs.”

“We’re supposed to keep a low profile,” he points out, but he’s not moving away from me, and his tail brushes against mine briefly, telling me that he loves all the attention I’m giving him, even if it’s a little public.

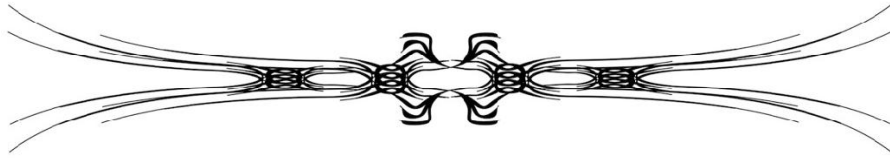
“I’m just playing the part of a naughty Homeworld lady,” I tell him in a husky voice. “One that needs to be serviced at the hotel by the most dangerous guard she could hire. Now come on. Lady Vanora va Sithai needs to get dirty with the hired help.”

“Did...did you say va Sithai?” Jamef stares at me. “Isn’t that —”

“Mathiras’s sister? Yeah. Now come on. I need a room.” I release his clothing gently and turn, wiping my lip-stain from the corners of my mouth and keeping an eye on Jamef as I do.

Just in case he’s worse than he’s letting on.

ONE HUNDRED ELEVEN



## BETHIAH

“This place is definitely fancy,” I point out yet again as we head inside. Circling chandeliers made entirely of exotic crystal float overhead, and an aquarium full of enormous, expensive fish is tended by a moden along one massive wall. There’s a bar nearby with a well-dressed male slinging drinks, and an ooli musician set up on an alcove a few floors up. I gaze up as far as the eye can see and the hotel itself looks hollow, with every floor neatly framing the interior lobby. An elevator made of pure crystal pauses to let in a richly garbed lord and lady, and I suspect that’s where we need to go.

I glance over at Jamef, who’s very quiet right now, and I want to choke him again. I wonder just how much pain he’s in. That makes me ache, because I hate that he’s hurting, and I hate even more that he didn’t tell me.

Well, the best thing for pain is a distraction. “I bet Kivian would love this place. I hope he’s not here.”

“Kivian?”

“Bounty hunter. He runs a ship called the *Jabberwock*.” I make a face. “Really loves a fussy sleeve.”

“And let me guess, you don’t want to see him because you owe him credits?”

“Me?” I feign surprise. “Impossible.”

Jamef snorts, but his expression looks a bit easier. I’ll take it.

“Let’s go for the elevator. Walk a few steps behind me,” I tell him. “If anyone asks, I’m heading up for a tryst. And if I show a little tit action, don’t be surprised.”

“Tit...action? Do I even want to know?”

“I’m sure you can guess. And if you can’t, well, let’s just say that they can look but they can’t touch.” I give him a confident smirk I’m absolutely not feeling and then saunter toward the elevator. We don’t have the number for Lord Nerit’s room, but I suspect that all we really need is to find the most expensive suites and we’ll locate him there. How hard can it be?

A large guard steps in front of the elevator doors as I approach. He wears a smarmy smile and puts a hand up. “Apologies, my lady, but my sensors are stating that you are not a guest here at our hotel.”

Kef. He must have scanned me as I approached. I keep a confident smile on my face and try to shoo him aside like I would a bug. “That’s right. I’m meeting someone.”

“May I ask who?”

I pretend to be offended. “No, you may not. It’s a private matter.”

He continues to stand in front. “Then I’m afraid you cannot enter the elevator.”

“I’m *meeting* an old *friend*.”

“That may be, but you might be more comfortable meeting your *friend* in a cantina. Or at a hotel that charges for partial evenings.” The look he gives me is meaningful.

Kef me, he thinks I’m an escort. I want to burst out laughing, but that will ruin the disguise. I draw my shoulders up and stand as tall and proud as I can, deciding to try pushiness instead. “If you don’t let me on this elevator this instant, you are going to regret it.”

“If you don’t turn around right now, I’m going to pick you up and toss you out of here,” he says, getting in my face.

Jamef immediately steps forward, a low growl in his throat.

Oh, kef. Normally I’d be thrilled to have Jamef brawl with security because then I could slip my way past, but with him not seeming like himself, I don’t want him doing anything that



injure him. “You know what? We’ll come back later,” I say, grabbing Jamef by his sleeve and hauling him after me. “Thanks again!”

Jamef is silent as we hurry back through the lobby, and I pause by the aquarium, noticing that there’s a hitch in his step. Is it his leg that’s bothering him? Before I can ask, Jamef jerks out of my grip. “If I’m not supposed to be your bodyguard, why am I here?”

“Don’t be so fussy,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest and pretending to scan the room. “We’re not giving up. We’re just regrouping. How are you feeling?”

He bares his teeth at me. “Annoyed.”

Well now, that makes two of us, especially since he doesn’t want to tell me what’s going on with him. We can go back to the ship and orbit until Lord Nerit leaves and try to catch him then, but that means staying here and that means keeping Rhonda for longer.

That’s not going to work. We need a new plan.

I watch as an elegantly dressed male and his companion head towards the bar, and a new idea hits me. “I know what we can do to get in.”

“What’s that?”

I grin at Jamef. “Our friend at the elevator thought I was an escort. Maybe I pretend to be one and get myself a date at the bar —”

“No.” Jamef gives me the most surly, displeased look I’ve ever seen on his face, and I’ve imprisoned the male multiple times and stolen his ship. “Absolutely not.”

“It’ll work. I’ll go flirt with someone and give him my rates, and then we head up to his rooms —”

“Still no.”

“And then once we’re up a few floors, we ditch our date and go find our bounty —”

“Absolutely *not*, Bethiah.” His jaw is so tight it looks as if it could snap off.

I tap a finger on my chin. “How many credits do you think a sex worker asks for in this joint?”

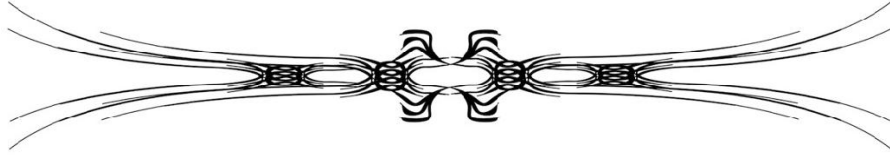
“Are you not hearing me? I said no.” Jamef tries to step in front of me, but I go around him. “Bethiah, you’re not listening —”

“I suppose I can just go with a cheap price,” I tell him cheerfully, working my way past him and the aquarium and turning towards the bar. “An escort with a sale going on is sure to get some business, right?”

“This is the worst idea in a long line of your bad ideas,” he snarls after me.

“The worst idea *so far*,” I correct, and adjust my cleavage. Time to go get myself a john.

ONE HUNDRED TWELVE



## JAMEF

**M**y bad leg is buzzing—or a circuit is sizzling—and sending unpleasant pings up my thigh. I’m not sure if that’s worse than the scene I see unfolding at the bar, though.

Bethiah sits with a pricey cocktail in front of her, a pink smoke pouring forth from the globules in her delicate glass. She ignores it, preferring to flirt with the elderly praxiiian male that purchased the drink for her. He rubs his tail deliberately against hers and it makes me want to get up from my seat across the room and beat his whiskered face to a pulp.

I know this is part of her plan, but it wasn’t *my* plan and I didn’t like it. I still don’t like it. Bethiah might think she can do as she pleases to get the job done, but things are different now that we’re a triad, and when we get back to the ship, I’m going to give her a piece of my mind.

“You’re so funny!” Bethiah coos loudly, reaching over and brushing her hand down the praxiiian’s golden-furred arm. His tail tries to brush against hers once more, but Bethiah neatly maneuvers hers away from his jewelry-encrusted one.

Keffing praxiiian.

Keffing Bethiah.

The praxiiian leans in toward her and whispers something, and she nods. She picks up her drink, spears all three blobs and downs them, belching a puff of pink smoke, and then gets to her feet.

Immediately, I stand, ignoring the sharp pain that slices up my leg. Shaking it off, I cross the bar and head to her side.

The praxiiian notices my approach and steps closer to Bethiah.

It only sets off my anger even more. “Get your keffing hands off her.”

“It’s okay,” Bethiah says, putting a hand on my chest to stop me and then smiling at the praxiian. “He’s with me.”

The praxiian’s lip curls, showing fangs yellowed with age. “I’m not into threesomes.”

Then he’s definitely picked the wrong female. Before I can comment, though, Bethiah steps in front of me. “This is my bodyguard. Zasson is here to make sure I don’t get hurt.”

And she swats my good leg with her tail.

That’s my cue to let her take the lead, but I hate this. I bare my fangs back at the praxiian as he puts a hand on her waist and leads her towards the elevator, leaving me no choice but to limp after them. I do my best to keep up, though my leg is starting to really pain me. To her credit, Bethiah takes small, mincing steps and flirts the entire way across the lobby back to the elevator, where this time the guard rolls his eyes and lets the three of us through without a word of protest.

I say nothing as we go up floor after floor and Bethiah coos over the praxiian’s “fine whiskers.” I continue right on saying nothing as we get off the elevator and head down the hall. Glaring at the male’s back, I almost miss Bethiah’s signal. She gestures at something with her hand and then exclaims, pausing to fiddle with her shoe. “Oh, I think I broke a strap.”

The praxiian waits with an amused smile as she pulls the shoe off and makes a big show of fussing with it, and then flicks her tail to get my attention. I look over at the corner of the hall where she keeps indicating...and the security cameras are there. Of course.

“Can you believe a female like me wears this kind of shoe?” Bethiah giggles, sounding far too much like Rhonda at the moment. “Guess what planet I got these on.”

I move past both of them and pause when my eye sensors intercept the feed from the camera. I make a loop of the hall quickly, and then work on delicately tapping at the security system, looking for flaws in the code where I can force my way in. The security is incredibly lax, and I have access within

moments, inserting the feed of Bethiah and her client standing in the hall and talking.

“All clear,” I say.

“Oh thank kef,” Bethiah says loudly. She grabs the praxiian by the throat and slams his head into an ornate sconce on the wall. The metal clangs loudly, the praxiian’s eyes roll back, and he slumps to the ground. She immediately crouches over him and rifles through his pockets, looking for the pass-key that gives access to the hotel. “If he grabbed my ass one more time I was going to make a rug out of him.”

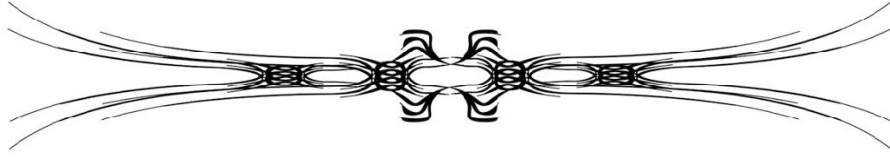
“He grabbed your ass?” I growl. “I told you I hate this idea of yours.”

“You hate all my ideas,” she says, unfazed, and holds up a decorated fob with a room number and the hotel’s logo engraved on it. “It worked, didn’t it?”

“Except now I’ve hacked into the hotel, we’ve got a praxiian hostage, and we still don’t have our bounty.” I shake my head at her. “I’m starting to see why you get arrested so often.”

“Stick with me and I’ll teach you all my tricks,” she jokes, which only makes me growl harder. “Come on. Let’s see if we can find the suites.”

ONE HUNDRED THIRTEEN



## BETHIAH

This job is turning out to be no fun at all.

Normally I'd entertain myself by causing some chaos. Maybe try to drop in through a vent, maybe rob a few people, maybe see how many drinks I could have at the bar before I decided to go swimming in the aquarium...but I can't stop worrying over Jamef. I feel every step acutely, wondering if it's bothering his leg. When we turn down a long hall, I inwardly look for a shortcut so he won't have to walk so much.

Kef, I'd carry the guy if he'd let me. But Jamef is far too prickly for that sort of thing, so the best I can do is try to get this job over with quickly. Then we're heading to the nearest station and we're getting him repaired. I don't care how much it costs.

I'll sell Rhonda to the highest bidder before I'll let Jamef go another day in pain.

After the praxiian is stashed in his room, we find another elevator and head up a few more floors, hunting for the suites. They're not on the top floor, nor the floor underneath. I glance over at Jamef as we ride the elevator down another floor. "You want to wait here while I search?"

He glares at me. "No. I'm fine."

"Oh, clearly," I say sarcastically. "You're not limping at all."

Jamef's eyes narrow and I wonder if it has to do with some sort of foolish masculine pride that he won't admit that he's hurting. I don't understand the need to keep silent over it. If I have so much as a blister, I scream it for the universe to know. I don't get remaining quiet.

"You're going to be in so much trouble when we get back," I tell him. "Dora is going to let you have it. You think



*I'm* being fussy, wait until she unloads those tears on you.”

He scowls and when the doors to the elevator open, steps through. “We don’t have to tell her anything.”

“Oh yes we do! There’s no secrets in our triad, remember?”

“Except for the one about the bounty on cloned humans? Since we agreed that’s for the best? Maybe this one is for the best, too.” He hauls himself down the hall, doing his best not to limp, but I notice the hitch in his gait.

And I’m silent at his words, because he’s right. We swore we wouldn’t keep secrets and then the moment something came up, we decided to keep it from Dora. We really are shitty mates. When we get back, we have to tell her everything. Keeping it from her isn’t right.

“This is the floor,” Jamef says before I can comment.

I’m immediately focused back on our job again, my hand sliding to my belt and searching for a non-existent blaster. Kef, this stupid dress. I scan the hall, but it looks the same as the other ones, with nothing to tell it apart from any other floor of rooms. “How do you know?”

“I’ve been scanning for DNA traces on every floor. He’s got a higher concentration of particle residue here. Probably skin flakes or strands of hair left from frequently coming back and forth.” Jamef moves down the hall, and I hear the faint whirr of his red eye processing as he takes everything in.

I follow after him. “That eye of yours is pretty handy. I should get one.”

“No.”

“No? Not even up for discussion?”

He glances back at me. “No, because I like your eyes.”

Well, damn. He sure makes it hard to stay mad at him. I want to preen under the compliment. All my jokes about us having a matching set go out the door, all because he *likes my eyes*. I’m such a soft touch.

Jamef pauses in front of a door in the middle of the hall. He scans it for a long moment and then turns to me, nodding. “This is the one.”

I frown, because it doesn’t look like a suite. I would have thought they’d have double doors or some fancy plants in the hall or something. “Don’t tell me our Lord Nerit is slumming it with a regular room after all? I thought he was staying in a suite.”

“Maybe he changed recently.” Jamef shrugs. “If you’re wanting to hide out, would you take a suite?”

I suppose that’s a good point. “You’re sure this is the one?”

“I am. How do you want to handle this?” He looks over at me, waiting.

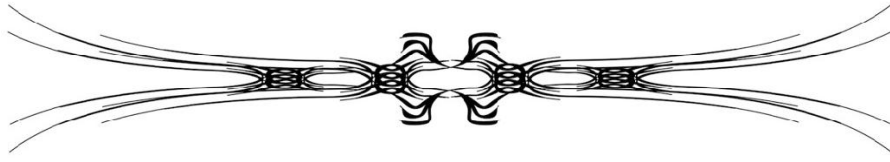
How do I want to handle this? The obvious way, of course. I reach out and knock on the door.

Jamef gives me an angry look.

“Did you have a better idea?” I ask, beaming at him.

The door opens, and a mesakkah soldier takes a step forward, putting a blaster to the center of my brow, right between my horns.

ONE HUNDRED FOURTEEN



## JAMEF

**A**nger roars through me at the sight of the male holding a blaster to Bethiah's brow. The need to protect her makes me desperate to surge forward, but I don't dare. If I trigger him, he'll kill her. Quickly, I search through my installed programs, looking for something to assist in the situation. I'm better at hacking than disabling a blaster, but I have to do *something*.

"Who are you?" the male snarls, pressing the weapon against her skin.

A growl of fury lodges in my throat. I scan the room for security feeds—

"Trigger happy much?" Bethiah drawls, pushing the barrel of the blaster away from her brow as if she doesn't have a care in the world. "I'm the escort Lord Nerit il'Aiven requested."

That makes the male pause, and he lowers his weapon, which means I can breathe again. I twitch with the urge to move to Bethiah's side and step in front of her protectively, but I know she'll murder me in my sleep if I try anything. It's hard to let her do as she likes, but Bethiah isn't like Dora. She doesn't need protecting, no matter how much I might want to.

"Lord Nerit didn't order an escort."

"So he *is* staying here?" Bethiah tsks. "If you're hiding him, you're doing a terrible job, my friend."

And with that, she pushes her way into the room.

I'm starting to learn that Bethiah's method of piracy and bounty hunting is one percent skill and the other ninety-nine percent is sheer bluster. The male steps aside, frowning as Bethiah swaggers into the hotel room, looking around.

"Why would I be hiding him?" the male asks, following after Bethiah. He glances at me and then continues to chase after her. "Lord Nerit il'Aiven is a very important male who

lives a just and honorable life. There is no reason for him to hide.”

Some bodyguard. Lord Nerit should get his credits back. I enter the apartment after them, more to keep an eye on my mate than anything else. The quarters are an utter mess, with discarded drink vessels all over every surface and the remains of food wrappers in a pile on one table. My sensors light up with Lord Nerit’s traces all over the room, leaving no doubt in my mind that this is the right place. It looks as if he’s been having a grand time for several days now, if the smell of old booze and sex in the air is any indication. I’m surprised he’s not in a lord’s quarters, but maybe that’s part of his hide-out plan.

Or maybe he just prefers to spend his credits on drinks instead of his quarters.

“If there’s no reason for your lord to hide, then why do we have a bounty to find him?” Bethiah takes a look around the room and then gestures at the private quarters, where the bed will be. “Is he in there?”

“Wait, you’re a bounty hunter? I thought you were an escort?” The guard glances between the two of us. When Bethiah heads for the door to the private quarters, he chases after her. “Stop it, female. He’s occupied!”

“Bethiah,” I call out, my tone full of warning. The male is getting anxious, and the last thing I want is an *anxious* poorly trained security guard chasing after my mate with a blaster. “Stop for a moment, love.”

She turns to me, her eyes bright. “Aww, you called me ‘love.’ My heart’s melting.”

“I figured you wouldn’t stop if I called you a keffing blowhard.” But I temper my words with a smile.

“All this dirty talk is getting me worked up,” she tells me with a wink. Then, she gestures at the door to the private quarters again. “Do us all a favor and make this easy. Go get your boss.”

The guard crosses his arms over his chest and plants his feet in front of the door, protecting it with his body. “I’m not doing anything until you tell me what’s going on.”

He’s not reaching for his blaster, and that’s the only reason I don’t pull mine. I give them space, but move forward anyhow. Just in case.

“No one’s in danger. This isn’t a robbery.” Bethiah gestures towards the door with her chin. “We have a bounty for Lord Nerit il’Aiven. To bring him back alive and well, of course.”

“Is he in trouble of some kind?” The male looks between Bethiah and then me.

“He’s missing,” I say.

The guard takes this in with surprise. “He...he isn’t missing.”

“According to his human slave, he is. He abandoned her on a space station and she’s afraid for his life.”

Recognition dawns on the guard’s face, along with dismay. “The pretty flame-haired human? Ronta?”

“Rhonda,” Bethiah corrects. “But yes, that’s her. She’s paying a hefty fee for the return of her beloved lord.”

The guard groans and rubs his neck. “Not this shit.”

This *shit*?

Bethiah glances over at me, and I shrug. I’m just as lost as she is.

He holds up a finger, indicating we should wait, and then knocks on the door to the personal quarters. “My lord,” he calls out. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but we have a problem.”

All is quiet for a long moment, and then the door whooshes open. An older mesakkah male with a soft body and an imperious expression comes out, tucking a robe around his waist. Behind him, I can just make out the sight of a dark-haired human female naked in the rumpled bed.

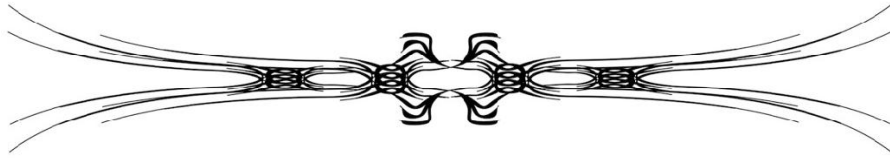
A female that is obviously *not* Rhonda.

Lord Nerit il'Aiven takes one look at the two of us and then groans. "Not *again*."

Not...*again*?

The guard nods. "Rhonta is up to her old tricks, my lord."

ONE HUNDRED FIFTEEN





## JAMEF

**B**ethiah and I exchange a look.

She speaks up first. “What do you mean, Rhonda is up to her old tricks? This isn’t a legit bounty?”

Lord Nerit looks annoyed, his arms crossed over his slender chest. “Oh, I’m sure it’s legit enough. She hired you and she’ll pay you. But it’s harassment to me all the same.” He waves a hand at the two of us. “She does this with her allowance. Every time I try to sneak away to have a quiet moment, she declares that I’m missing and sends bounty hunters after me to bring me back to her.”

I frown, because this answer seems too glib. “You’re telling us that she’s hunting you down because she doesn’t like being left behind?”

“Oh no, she’d be fine with being left behind if I was alone,” Lord Nerit complains. “It’s that I’ve acquired a new human companion and that’s the part she gets upset over. She’s jealous and trying to ruin my good time.”

Bethiah peers into the private quarters over Lord Nerit’s shoulder. “Rhonda said you didn’t have any other humans.”

“Well, yes, she would say that after she sold the last one out from under me, wouldn’t she?” There’s a peevish look on his face. “I went to stay with a friend at a country estate, and when I came back, Estrella was gone, sold off. Rhonda feigned ignorance, but now that I’ve got Simone here”—he waves a hand at the human in the bed—“she’s doing everything she can to try and get rid of her rival.”

Bethiah grimaces. She moves over to my side and turns her back to them, leaning in close to me. “I don’t want to say that this sounds like Rhonda,” she murmurs, voice low. “But this sounds exactly like Rhonda.”

I nod. The calculating human strikes me as the type to get rid of her rival and keep her claws sunk into the person she's decided she wants. I glance over at Lord Nerit. "To confirm, you're not in any danger?"

"None whatsoever."

"And you left a valuable slave alone on a space station? This seems like a poor decision to me."

The bodyguard and Lord Nerit exchange a look.

"You've met Rhonda," the bodyguard snaps. "Tell me you wouldn't dump her somewhere in the hopes of getting rid of her."

The lordling runs a hand through his mane, smoothing it. "She found out I was in the process of purchasing another female and she grew upset. I said I would take her on a shopping trip, and I did." Lord Nerit lifts his chin and straightens his shoulders. "I just didn't bring her home again. That's my right."

So Rhonda was getting replaced and didn't like it. Not sure why she's decided that this puny lordling is the one for her, but perhaps he's easily controlled. Then again, maybe someone like Rhonda is just looking for security, any sort of security. I think of the vid recordings she made on our ship and how she approached both Bethiah and me to worm her way in, no doubt as a backup plan of some kind. "Well, we brought her here," I point out. "As per the bounty we need to determine that you're alive and well so we can close out the assignment."

"You look like an enterprising pair of bounty hunters," Lord Nerit says. A sly look crosses his face. "Since you're for hire, I would also like to know how much you would charge to make Rhonda...go away."

Go...away?

Bethiah speaks before I can. "You want us to keffing kill her?"

Lord Nerit raises a hand to his chest in mock offense. "What? I didn't say that."

“You kinda did,” I growl. I don’t like Rhonda either, but killing someone just because they inconvenience you seems like a drastic step. Some bounty hunters might not blink an eye at murdering an innocent target, but I don’t like it. I’ll take down a criminal on the run, or take out someone that’s slaughtered his way across the galaxy. But killing a helpless female because she’s petty and jealous? That’s just wrong.

Lord Nerit steeples his fingers, his ornately covered horns gleaming in the room’s light as he angles his head. “I’m afraid that Rhonda, while attractive, is proving to be a problematic sort of pet. She’s jealous and disruptive. She needs to be rehomed.”

Bethiah seems to relax at that. She shrugs and looks over at me. “Fine. You want us to make her go away, we can make her go away. But we need to collect our bounty first.”

“You’re going to collect from her and from me?” Nerit frowns. “That’s robbery.”

“It’s really not,” Bethiah says in a blithe voice, and I wonder what she’s up to. She strolls forward to Nerit’s side and loops an arm around his shoulders, earning her a confused and slightly repulsed look from the lordling, and an irritated scowl from his guard. “We’re just going to get paid for the job we were hired to do, and then we’re free to take on your job. See?” She pats his chest. “You’re lucky we’re here.”

“Am I?” He plucks at one of Bethiah’s fingers and removes her hand from his robe. “If I hire you for this, I want you to ensure that she’ll never bother me again. She’s grown tiresome in her demands.”

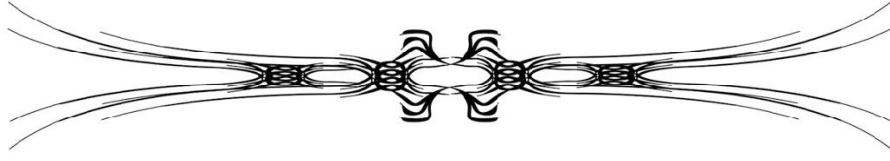
“She cares for you,” I point out. “She was concerned about your well-being.”

Lord Nerit huffs. “No, she cares for my credits and the safety they provide. Rhonda is only concerned about her own well-being, as I’ve learned. She’ll get rid of anything and anyone she perceives as a rival.”

That makes my hackles go up, because we’ve left Dora alone on the ship with Rhonda. Thank kef Rhonda is locked

away. If she even tried anything, they'd be picking up her pieces across seven different star systems.

ONE HUNDRED SIXTEEN



## BETHIAH

Lord Nerit il'Aiven is kind of a dick. I see Rhonda continues to have bad taste in her lovers, myself included. I'm just not liking the guy, no matter how agreeable and pleasant he tries to seem, and I can tell Jamef doesn't like him, either. It's evident on my mate's hard, angry face. He doesn't even like Rhonda and he feels like Lord Nerit is being a dick to her.

I like him even less for making me sympathize with Rhonda. Of course she's desperate and grasping and unlikable. She's an aging plaything being supplanted by a fun new toy and the person that's supposed to care for her just sees her as a problem that he wants to "go away."

Ugh.

A plan forms in my mind, but I remain quiet on what I want to do. Instead, we vid conference with the guild back on Haal Ui, confirming that our bounty is alive and well and processing the appropriate releases so we can get paid. I glance over at Jamef as Nerit talks with the guild representatives, touching my tail to his and tapping my chest once to tell him to let me take the lead on things.

He nods, and I'm grateful to have a mate that trusts me enough not to ask questions. I mean, it might be insane of him to not ask someone like *me* questions, but I can appreciate it all the same.

My data-pad chimes at the same time that Jamef's does, signaling we've received our payment. I beam my cheeriest smile at Lord Nerit and his guard. "Looks like our bounty with Rhonda is done. Are you sure we can't just drop her off on your doorstep and call it a day?"

"Absolutely not," Lord Nerit says in a lofty, snooty tone that nobles use on the rest of the galaxy trash to make them

feel like less. “As discussed, I would rather hire you to make the problem go away.”

“Mmm. Well, you can only hire us through the guild. You want to open a bounty?” I sidle my way toward the bedroom, moving myself between Lord Nerit and the doorway where the human female waits in bed.

“I don’t see why that’s necessary.” Lord Nerit hmphs. “You’re here. I’m here. Can’t we just agree to work together?”

“It has to be recorded with the guild,” Jamef says, speaking up. His hands remain on his belt, his posture one of complete boredom, as if this is an everyday thing and there’s nothing to worry over...which is perfect. It’ll keep them off-guard. “Trust me,” Jamef continues. “It’s for your safety as well as ours. How do we know you won’t rob us?”

Lord Nerit sputters, and I take that moment to lean into the personal quarters, the room that Dora calls a bedroom. The human doesn’t seem to have a recognizable face, which is good. It means she’s not one of the clones we ran into recently. I probably would have shat myself if I was looking at yet *another* Ruth clone. This female looks to be slightly younger than Dora, and she’s got pale golden skin and long dark hair. She clutches the blanket to her chest as if it’s a shield and gazes at me with fright when I step inside the private quarters.

“What is she doing?” Lord Nerit says behind me.

“Just securing the premises,” Jamef tells him in that bored tone. “It’s standard for a bounty. We have to make sure you’re not scamming us.”

They continue to argue, but I focus on the human instead. “How are you doing, honey?” I ask in a low voice as I pretend to move around the room, tapping on walls as if checking them for secret doors. “Does he treat you well?”

She seems startled that I’d speak to her. Her nervousness is evident. “Well enough.”

I’m such a softie when it comes to humans. “And did you want to stay here with him?”

Her brows draw together. “Wait...I get a choice? He bought me —”

“There’s a farm planet I know of that’s a human refuge,” I continue in a low, soothing voice. “The lord there is married to a human and considers anyone that lands on his private planet a refugee. You’ll be among other humans again and you won’t have to have sex with anyone if you don’t want to. You’ll belong to yourself.”

She sucks in a breath. “I want that. Yes, please.”

I thought so. I nod, giving the wall a satisfied thump with my knuckle. “Get your clothes on, then.”

The human scrambles from the bed, grabbing a dress and shoving it over her head as I move back to the main quarters. Lord Nerit stares at me, aghast, his useless bodyguard flanking him. “I’m not giving up my new toy! She’s mine! I just purchased her.”

“She’s a person,” I tell him. “You can’t just own someone because you say so. And we’re taking her somewhere safe.”

The bodyguard steps forward, his hand on his blaster, but before he can pull it out, Jamef has his pointed at the male’s plated brow. “Not so fast,” my mate practically purrs. “We’re not aiming to harm anyone, but we’re also not letting you keep a human against her will.”

The bodyguard immediately hands over his weapons, and Lord Nerit sputters again, his face turning a dark blue with outrage. “You...you thieves! You said this wasn’t a robbery!”

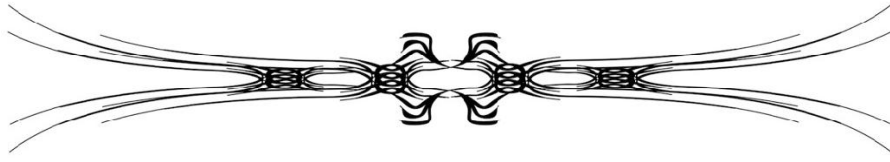
“I said it wasn’t a robbery then,” I correct, pulling out a pair of plas-cuffs from my belt. “It is *now*.” And I turn to Jamef, grinning. “Might as well go all in. Where do you think he’s hiding his credits?”

“Wall safe,” Jamef says immediately, tucking the bodyguard’s weapons away.

Lord Nerit’s dismayed little moan tells me that my mate is right. I toss the cuffs to the human female. “Here, honey. You get to do the honors. Lock them up tight. We want them to squirm for a good while.”



ONE HUNDRED SEVENTEEN



## JAMEF

**T**hank kef Dora is safe when we return. At least one good thing has come out of that mess of a bounty. “You’re safe?” Bethiah asks as she races up the ramp, handfuls of her silver dress held high. “Rhonda didn’t try anything?”

“No. I kept away from the holding cell and didn’t give her a chance,” Dora says. She gives both me and Bethiah surprised looks when we return with the new human, Simone, in tow. “Is everything all right?”

Bethiah just nudges Simone inside, not saying anything. I don’t speak, either. I’m just amazed at how quickly things get keffed when Bethiah is involved.

“Is everything *all right*?” Dora asks again as we board and retract the ramp on the ship. She casts a curious look at Simone but seems far more concerned with myself and Bethiah. “Did it go according to plan?”

“We completed the bounty,” Bethiah announces, scratching at her dress again. “Another job well done.”

“Well done?” I retort. “You held Lord Nerit hostage and stole his new human from him. We’re going to have bounties out on our heads now. We’re never going to be able to go back to that particular satellite and we’ll have to watch our backs until the bounty on our heads expires! How is that well done?”

Bethiah shoves a finger in my face. “You don’t get to talk, Lord                    ‘Oh-my-leg-is-JUST-fine-unless-I-need-to-do-something-crazy-like-use-it.’”

I glare at her, pushing her finger away. She doesn’t need to know that even now, it’s sending pulses of pain past my knee and up my thigh. “My leg doesn’t put you and Dora in danger. My leg —”

“The kef it doesn’t!” Bethiah explodes, leaning towards me with a snarl on her face. “You’re not flying solo anymore,

you bucket of bolts, and you need to realize that what affects you affects us, too!”

“Guys! Guys!” Dora steps between us, putting a hand on both of our chests. “Stop it, all right? Remember that we all love each other and if we argue, Rhonda wins.” She shakes her head. “Now, someone’s going to need to update me on what happened with the bounty, but first we need to leave this place. If you’re right and there’s going to be a bounty on your heads”—she nods at me and continues—“then we need to get as much distance between us and this place as possible. We need to get Rhonda off the ship and get going pronto.”

“Rhonda’s not leaving,” I point out. “Apparently we’re collecting humans now.” My tone sounds bitter and Dora gives me a hurt look. I shake my head. “Sorry, sweetheart. That came out wrong. We can’t leave Rhonda there. I’ll explain more later. You’re right that we need to leave quickly. I’ll get the engines started.”

“Oh, don’t be so pissy, Jamef,” Bethiah says, following me as I head to the bridge. “It’s just a couple of bounties. What’s a bounty here and there between friends? Anyone with two brain cells to rub together will see our names attached to it and won’t pursue. And we can just hide out for a bit. It’s not a big deal.”

Hide out. Right. Hiding out usually means finding an abandoned asteroid and parking the ship for a few months until no one’s looking for our flight paths any longer. We could find a vacation planet and use fake names, but that costs credits and we’ll probably need what we just earned to bribe anyone that does bother to come after us.

It also means no leg repairs for me. Not only can we not go to Three Nebulas, but the credits will be needed. I’ll just have to manage somehow. See if I can fix the wiring on my own. “Fine. Whatever. I’ll find us a place.”

I slide into my seat on the bridge and my breath catches at the flare of pain that sears up my limbs.

“How’s your leg?” Bethiah asks.

An alarm sounds on the docking bay and I immediately fire up the ship's thrusters. "Can we talk about that later?"

"What happened to Jamef's leg?" Dora asks, coming onto the bridge. Simone is a few steps behind her, a worried look on her face. "That's the second time you've mentioned it. What's going on?"

An alert overrides the comm waves. "CRIMINAL ACTIVITY REPORT. BE ON THE LOOKOUT FOR VANORA VA SITHAI, ACCOMPANIED BY A CYBORG BODYGUARD OF UNKNOWN IDENTIFICATION —"

I switch it off and shoot a look at Bethiah. "Get the humans settled. We're using the slingshot drive to get out of here. We can talk later, or we can talk in prison. Take your pick."

Bethiah gives me a tight-lipped look, but nods. She turns away from the bridge and puts a hand on Dora's back. "Come with me, fluffit. You too, Simone. We need to strap in."

The doors shut behind them and I feel like I can breathe. I power up the slingshot drive - the one-time-use high-speed power burst that will allow us to surge out of range...and chew up a boat-load of credits in the meantime. I keep one slingshot fuel cell on board for emergencies, and now looks like the emergency I've been waiting for. I belt myself in and flick over the ship's monitors as we lift away from the dock and into one of the travel chutes that will open to the blackness of space. We've got a very brief window of time before things are locked down entirely and we'll be trapped here.

It's a matter of seconds.

My leg twinges again, heat shooting up my calf as if I'm being burned. I ignore it, because it's a metal limb. *It's not real. You're not burning.*

The ship chimes with an onboard alert. "Five passengers secured and belted for slingshot."

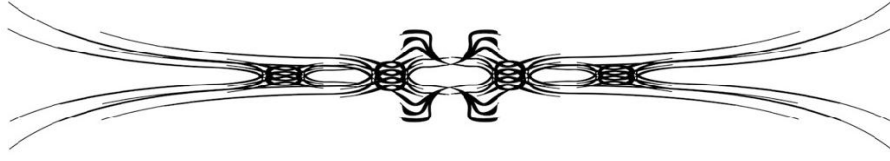
It's go time.

I slam a hand over the control, and we whip away from the gambling satellite so quickly that my head snaps back in my

chair. I'm pressed against the seat with the force of our launch, my limbs frozen as the ship's environmental systems pause for a brief second to send all power to the slingshot drive.

Something pops, and then red-hot pain shoots through all of my limbs, not just the malfunctioning one. I bite back a bellow of agony and slump over in my seat as wave after wave of black agony pulses through me.

ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEEN



## DORA

I t's the first time I've felt the "slingshot" drive and it's overwhelming. I huddle against the cushioned seat, feeling as if I'm being slowly pressed into a pancake by the force of the ship. At my side, the new girl whimpers, and Bethiah's hand is pressed over mine on the seat. She probably can't move it, but I'm still glad it's there.

Then, the surge finishes with a gradual slowing, like a carnival ride coming to a stop. The change in pressure is so stark that I want to roll forward and collapse on the floor, but the belt at my shoulders and hips is holding me in place.

"Ugh," announces Bethiah. She quickly unbuckles herself and races away, leaving me alone with the new girl. I watch as Bethiah staggers down the narrow hall, heading to the lavatory. A moment later, I hear the sound of vomiting.

"You okay?" I call after her, fumbling with my straps.

"I *hate* a slingshot," Bethiah calls back, and then the sound of puking hits again.

Oh. I'm a little queasy, but nothing like that. It's good to know that Bethiah is affected by something, oddly enough. It makes her human. Well...mesakkah. Whatever. I turn to the woman next to me. She has a terrified expression on her face and gives me a pleading look. I instinctively know this isn't a rival. This is Bethiah and Jamef saving another human, and I want to hug them both for it. "Did I introduce myself? I'm Dora. I live here on the ship with Jamef and Bethiah."

"Simone," she tells me in a trembling voice. "They're helping me escape."

"I guessed as much," I tell her, helping with the straps of the harness for the couch we're seated on. I'd wondered about the fold-out ultra-squishy bench with lots of straps in the hall near the control room, and now I guess I know what that's for. "You hungry? Thirsty?"

She shakes her head, getting to her feet and wobbling.

I feel a little unsteady myself, and I suspect the ship is still surging from our launch. Isn't that how space works? You keep going at the same speed indefinitely until you run into something? Then again, my clone brain might be misremembering. "Let me see what's going on with Bethiah and Jamef," I say to Simone. "Then we'll get you settled. You can stay in Rhonda's quarters since she's not using them at the moment."

"Is she still on board?" Simone asks, startled.

"Oh, wait, you know Rhonda?" I'm equally startled.

Simone nods. "She was the other human slave owned by Lord Nerit il' Aiven."

Aaaah. There's a wealth of meaning in Simone's careful words. Rhonda's jealous actions are starting to make more sense. "Yeah, she kinda sucks. She'll be really nice to you and then stab you in the back, so we locked her up for everyone's peace of mind. I didn't realize we were keeping her longer, but I'm sure there's a plan."

I *hope* there's a plan.

Bethiah returns and lingers in the hall, a pale cast to her vibrant blue skin. She presses the back of her hand to her mouth. "Well, that was unpleasant."

"You okay?" I ask. "Can I get you anything?"

She shakes her head. "Happens every time I slingshot. Not a fan." Pushing herself off the wall, Bethiah straightens. "And speaking of unpleasant things. I suppose I should check on Rhonda and make sure she's alive."

"She might not be alive?" Simone gasps.

"I'm sure she's just joking," I reassure Simone. "We wouldn't have launched like that if we knew it'd hurt someone."

"Even if that someone is Rhonda?" Bethiah teases, and then grimaces, scrubbing at her teeth with her finger. "I'm kidding. The holding cell is padded internally so she won't



break more than a limb or two if she lands badly. It's fine. Everything's fine."

"So she's staying for a while longer?" I ask, even though I know it makes me a terrible person to be annoyed by that.

Bethiah nods. "We're taking Simone to Risda so she can have her freedom. We're also going to dump Rhonda there. Lord Nerit doesn't want her, and I figure the worst thing we can do for her is to make her farm for the rest of her life."

The mention of Risda makes me tense. "And then what?"

She shrugs. "Then you and I and Jamef hang out somewhere quiet for a while until the bounties disappear. We could always visit our buddy Kaatir again. Or maybe Jamef has a suggestion of where he'd like to go."

I relax at her words. Risda isn't for me. We're heading there for Simone and Rhonda, and no other reason. "I'd love to see Hazza and the others again, but I'm happy to go anywhere."

"I know, fluffit." She rotates her shoulders. "Why don't you go see if Jamef needs anything and me and Simone will say hello to our buddy Rhonda."

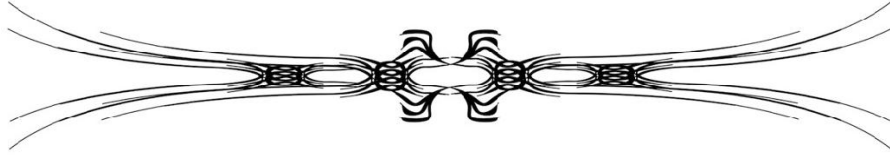
Nodding, I pause to hug her and then slip past towards the bridge. I'm looking forward to tonight, when I can curl up between my mates and hear the real story of what happened today and how it went. They'll probably argue a little, but I don't mind it. They're just passionate about their jobs and how they want things to go. And I want to hear about everything, especially what's going on with Jamef's leg. I didn't notice a problem when he came on the ship, but I also didn't get very long to look at him. Too much was happening.

The door to the bridge is shut, and a little vase I set on a nook in the wall has fallen to the floor in front of the double doors. I pick it up and set it in its place, wondering if I need to move it back to my tiny garden nook that was added to the ship. I haven't even had time to plant seeds yet. I tap my hand on the door unlock even as I study the vase a bit longer and

pick it up again. Maybe at the next station I can ask for them to look for Earth seeds—

A scream builds in my throat as the doors to the bridge open and I see Jamef's big body slumped over his console.

ONE HUNDRED NINETEEN



## DORA

I press my face to the glass pod, watching Jamef's chest slowly rise and fall underneath it. He's been in the med-bay for hours now, lying as still as a dead man, stretched out on the diagnostic slab with the glass shield protecting him...and keeping me from holding his hand. Test after test is run over every inch of him. My eyes are swollen from crying, and I can't seem to pull myself away from his side, not even for a moment. I want to be there when he wakes up.

I want him to know we're here for him.

At his other side, Bethiah has her arms crossed tightly over her chest. She glares at the screens, displeased with the results. "His leg is completely fried," she tells me. "Several of the circuits have melted down and they're causing a feedback loop with his other systems. It's overriding everything else, and even if we shut off his leg, the bad feedback won't stop. It's like a corrupt file has wormed its way into his system and affected everything."

I bite my lip, because that sounds awful. I know Jamef has a lot of artificial parts, and the thought of them working against him hurts my soul. "What do we do?"

"If we'd have known about it earlier, maybe we could have done something." The look on her face is hard. "But that keffing idiot didn't say a thing. I don't know how long he's been hiding this from us. It's like he thinks he doesn't matter."

She looks furious at the thought.

I touch the glass again, wanting to reach through and hold Jamef's hand. "He has hang-ups. We all do. He's been on his own for so long that he probably thought showing weakness was a bad idea."

"But we're his mates," she protests. "If he can't show weakness to us, who can he show weakness to?"

I shake my head, because I don't have answers. As we've been worrying over Jamef, Bethiah told me all about their venture into the casino satellite, and how Jamef tried to hide the fact that he was in pain. He's seemed off for the last few days, but I thought maybe it was due to Rhonda or stress over the job. Fresh tears spring from my eyes. "I hate that he didn't trust us more."

"Well, when he wakes up, we'll just have to show him how much he means to us," Bethiah says. "Right after I finish murdering him for scaring us like this."

I manage a watery chuckle at that, wiping my wet cheeks. "So what do we do now? How do we fix this?"

Bethiah moves to my side. She wraps her arms around me from behind, resting her chin atop my head. "We have to leave him here in med-bay, in stasis until we can get him somewhere they can help him. His limb work-up is too complicated for me to even attempt to look at, and I assume if he knew how to fix it, he would have. We need an expert. There's a famous male that deals with prosthetics on Three Nebulas, but he's expensive."

My heart hurts. "Too expensive for us, you mean?"

"Nah." She squeezes me tight. "We robbed Lord Nerit and he had a fat chunk of credits on him. Anything we lack, we can sell some of Rhonda's crap. If she doesn't like it, well, it doesn't matter."

I hug her back, my hands on the arms she has wrapped around me. "But you said you two now have bounties on your heads. How do we get to Three Nebulas station if you're wanted?"

"That's the tricky part of things," she agrees. "And we're going to need to refuel at least once before making it to Risda. Jamef comes first, though. Simone and Rhonda are just going to have to wait to get to their destination." She pauses, thinking. "My cousin has prosthetics, but he doesn't know how to fix them. Still, he might have some ideas we haven't considered. We need to go see him. We can hide out at his place."

“We can? Where does he live?”

“He’s operating an old abandoned station. People sell scrap to him.”

A guy running a space junkyard. Sounds about right for someone in Bethiah’s family. “If he can help us with Jamef, I’m all for it. How long until we get there?”

“A few days. He’s out in the middle of nowhere. Jerrok’s not exactly a people person.”

“But he might be able to help Jamef?”

“If he doesn’t slam the door in our faces, yes.”

“He’s your family. Why would he slam the door in your face?”

“Fluffit, have you *met* me?” At my wry snort of laughter, she continues. “Besides...I owe him some credits.”

I groan.

“It’s fine,” Bethiah assures me. “He’s got a mate and she’s a real softy. She’ll convince him that it’s a good idea to help us. We can always offer to sell Rhonda to them for meat for their pet carinoux.”

“A...carinoux? I’ve never heard of it.”

“You’ll see it when we get there. And I’m surprised you didn’t say that we couldn’t sell Rhonda for meat. You didn’t even protest, fluffit.”

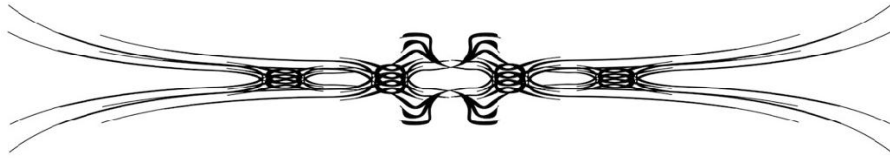
I hold onto her tighter. “That’s because Jamef’s life is at stake here. I don’t care if we sell Rhonda for spare parts if it means making him better. He’s all that matters right now.”

“You’re growing more and more vicious every day,” she tells me. “I approve.”

I don’t know that it’s viciousness as much as just being protective of my mates. I gaze down at the sleeping Jamef, and my heart hurts. When he wakes up, we need to make him realize how important he is, and how he can’t keep secrets from us.

Secrets destroy everything.

ONE HUNDRED TWENTY





## BETHIAH

**D**ora refuses to leave Jamef's side, even though he's unconscious. Our fluffit is steadfastly loyal, and it makes my heart proud. "You have to run the ship," she tells me as she caresses the glass, hypoallergenic dome covering him. "But I can stay here and watch over him. He'd do the same for either of us."

She's not wrong, and there's a lot to be done still on the ship. So I kiss her, kiss the glass since I can't kiss Jamef, and head out.

Simone is sitting in the living area alone, hemming one of Dora's tunics so it fits in the bust. I hate that Dora's sharing more of her stuff because she doesn't have much as it is, but neither of them wanted Rhonda's things. They're too overwrought and ridiculous for everyday wear. Simone looks up from her project when I appear in the hall, her expression expectant. Well, kef. "Um, everything okay?" I gesture at the room. "You know, here? Do you need anything?"

"I can look after myself," Simone says, and I'm relieved. Good, because if I have to babysit someone at this point I might lose my keffing mind. "Is there anything I can do to help out? Can I cook? Clean?"

I recognize the desperate-to-please look on her face. Dora's worn the same look before. It's the look of someone who has everything to lose and nothing to bargain with. "I'm fine. You might make Dora something to eat later, but I need to go handle the bridge." I need to check to see if we're being tailed, if our location has been determined, if our fuel cells are holding up, if Jerrok's responded to the encoded message I sent his way... "But thanks for volunteering."

She continues to watch me with that wary expression.

"We've had a bit of a...hiccup in our plans. We're still going to Risda, but we need to make a pit stop to visit

someone first.”

Simone nods but doesn't return to her sewing. “What about Rhonda? Should I check in on her? Has she been fed?”

Ugh. I just realized that we haven't exactly been taking care of Rhonda in all the chaos with Jamef's injury. For all Rhonda knows, we're still looking for her master. She's unaware that everything has changed, and I'm pretty sure she'll be upset to hear that Lord Nerit wanted her taken out. “Why don't you make some noodles to take to her in about an hour? I'll go break the news that Nerit's a creep. It'll give her time to have a good cry and then fix her makeup.”

“I can do that,” Simone says, getting to her feet and moving past me, heading for the mess quarters. I watch her leave, and then, oh-so-reluctantly, turn and head for the holding cells. Even though Rhonda is one of my least favorite people in the universe, she deserves to hear the bad news. Might as well get it over with.

The moment I turn down the hall, Rhonda raps on the door frantically. “Let me out! I know you're there, Bethiah! Let me out of here!”

I put on my best swagger and saunter over to the door. “Let you out? Are you going to behave?”

She makes an outraged sound, her voice hollow through the metal of the door. “I don't know why I'm locked up in here in the first place! I haven't done anything wrong!”

Count on Rhonda to forget about all of her transgressions. I flick open the food slot and peer at her through it. “You haven't? What about the listening devices? I'm still finding them all over the place.”

She forms a pout, bending down to meet me face to face. “You know that's just me looking out for me. Can you blame me? No one in this universe is fair to a human woman alone.”

Kef, she is way too good at eliciting sympathy. I have to remind myself that she might play the victim, but she's absolutely willing to get rid of someone she perceives as

competition. “I’m not letting you out just yet. I’m not sure that you can play well with others.”

Rhonda makes an indignant sound. “You know I can! I shall be on my best behavior if you free me. You can count on it.”

Oh, I’m sure. I ignore the sunny smile she sends in my direction. “I have good news and bad news. Which one do you want first?”

She hesitates, worry moving over her fine features. “There’s bad news? Is Nerit all right?”

“That’s the good news, I’m afraid. The bad news is that he doesn’t want you back.”

Rhonda relaxes. She rolls her eyes and adjusts her wrinkled dress. “He always says things like that, but the moment I show up again, he remembers he loves me. I just need to remind him of our bond sometimes. If you can take me to him, it’ll be fine.”

I shake my head. “You don’t get it, Rhonda. He wasn’t planning on coming back to pick you up. He left you there in the hopes that you’d become someone else’s problem.”

“But...but he left his ship! Isn’t that what you said?”

“False flag. Doesn’t have anything to do with you and him, I imagine. He had a new toy with him.” I don’t mention that we stole that toy. “He said you sold his last human out from under him. I think he’s holding a grudge for that.”

Her expression grows canny. “She wasn’t a good fit for him. I simply made sure that she found a master more suited to her nature. I’m sure she’s very happy in her new home, and Nerit forgot all about her soon enough. I know how to keep him content, Bethy. I know him and I know what he likes. Is he nearby? You can take me over to his ship and —”

“He doesn’t *want* you, Rhonda.” I’ve been trying to soften the blow, but it’s obvious she’s not listening. “He didn’t ask to have you back. When he heard you hired us, he tried to hire us to get rid of you. He didn’t care if you were *murdered* or sold

to someone else, just as long as you weren't *his* problem anymore. Do you get it now?"

She blinks. "You must have heard him wrong."

"I assure you, I know a murder bounty when I hear one. You're on your own, I'm afraid."

Rhonda licks her lips. "I see."

"You all right?"

She blinks her eyes rapidly and then reaches through the food slot to touch my hand. "Thank you for being so kind —"

I pull away. "Nope. That's not going to work. I don't want you either."

Rhonda makes an outraged sound. "Let me talk to Jamef \_\_\_"

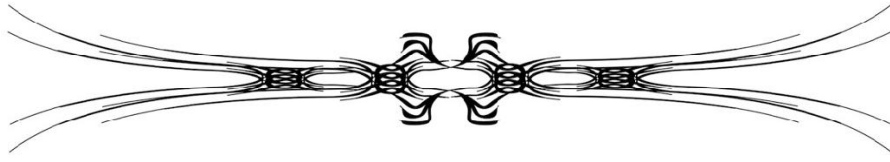
"Again, no." I flick the food slot shut, getting a little too much pleasure out of the yelp she makes when it smacks against her hand and she withdraws it. "It looks like you're in one piece, so I'm going to leave you in there for now."

"What are you going to do with me? Are you going to sell me?" She raps on the door, her voice hollow and tinny again. "Bethy, we can talk about this —"

"We're going to Risda," I call out to her through the door. "I hope you like fresh vegetables, because you're gonna be growing them."

She makes another outraged sound, and I have to admit, it brings a smile to my face for the first time today.

ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-ONE



## BETHIAH

Two days later, we're orbiting just outside Jerrok's junk station. It looks the same as ever—desiccated corpses of ships floating around like the universe's most cluttered asteroid field. Piles of broken machinery chained together and floating free. A comm satellite floats next to a delivery freighter that's missing the front end. In the center of this vortex of space junk is the station itself, coated with garbage thanks to the artificial gravitational pull on the system that leaks out into the surrounding space.

Jerrok doesn't mind the mess. He says it keeps away unwanted guests. At this point, I'm used to it, too. I turn the *Pleasure Spot* onto manual controls and ease my way through the mess with all the speed of a crawling infant. In a way, it's a good thing to sink myself into the piloting of the ship. I need the distraction.

It's been hard to have Jamef in stasis for the last few days. So hard. I miss his strong form. I miss the way he rolls his eyes at my wild ideas. I miss his smile. His cock. His tail twining with mine. Dora and I sleep together at night, wrapped around each other, but it's not the same without him. We tried having sex and it just felt wrong knowing he was in med-bay, unconscious. Dora cries every night, and I hold her close and wish that I could cry, too. But I'm being strong for her, and for the other humans on board who need me to keep my shit together.

Once I'm close enough to the docking bay, I send a request for the bay doors to open so I can land.

No response.

I send another automated request from the ship to the station.

When that gets no response either, I make a face at the console. "So we're gonna be like that, huh? Fine, you big

baby.”

And I send a personal comm to the station itself.

It takes forever before the station finally acknowledges my request. I put a bright smile on my face and beam at the vid comm, only to see Jerrok’s big ugly face scowling back at me.

“Have you decided to apologize?” he asks.

“What the kef am I apologizing for?” I retort.

The comm abruptly ends.

I huff. Apparently my beloved cousin has his tail kinked over something. I initiate a comm again, smiling into the screen. This time, when Jerrok accepts the call, I give him a sweet apology. “I am so sorry. So, so sorry.”

He isn’t satisfied. He crosses his arms—new cybernetics, and fine ones at that—over his chest. “And just what are you sorry *for*?”

I’m supposed to know? I shrug. “I’m sorry that I made you mad about something?”

Jerrok growls, leaning in to the screen. “You stole a ship, Bethiah! Remember? The last time you were here? The briskwing racer?”

Oh. That was several months ago. “I left you some credits!”

“Not enough!”

“You weren’t using it! You never leave the station!”

“It was promised to another client, you keffing nightmare. Do you have air between those horns of yours? He showed up on my doorstep, furious, and Sophie was scared to death that he’d try something —”

“Softie’s scared of everything,” I say casually, waving a hand in the air as I interrupt. “That should be normal.”

He lets out a sound of animalistic rage and smashes a fist down on the comm controls, terminating the call again.

Whoops. Okay, so Jerrok is a teeny bit sensitive over me stealing a crappy ship. “If it makes you feel any better, I lost it in a sticks game,” I mutter to no one at all. Sophie getting upset over things is a problem, though. My cousin is the most hard-nosed, uncaring keffing bastard in the universe unless his beloved Sophie is involved. Then he turns into an absolute, well, lovesick fool.

I need to play the Sophie angle. My cousin would forgive me eventually, of course. If I show up with enough credits to pay him back and a few more apologies, he’ll eventually ease off. I *did* give Sophie that kitten she loves, after all. But I need the credits we have for Jamef’s repairs, and I’m already strained to the breaking point.

So I comm again. Part of me expects Jerrok to not pick up. That he’s going to make me sit out here with the nose of the *Pleasure Spot* pressed to the cargo bay doors until Sophie realizes I’m out here and makes him let me in. But that could take hours. Days. Jerrok doesn’t pick up right away, so I send another comm. And another.

He finally answers, still grumpy as kef. “What, Bethiah?”

I put my hands in the air. “I know you’re mad at me and I probably deserve it,” I say in a rush, words flooding out of me. “And I don’t have the credits to pay you back right now, but my cyborg mate is on the fritz and my other mate is a human female and she won’t stop crying and I want to cry too, except I’ve got a human refugee on my ship and another one in the holding cell—but she’s a nasty piece of work and should probably not be let out—and I can’t go to any stations because there’s a bounty on my head and I really didn’t think this through but here I am and I need help and I might be having a breakdown of my own. So...help?”

Jerrok stares at me through the vid screen. Then he sighs heavily and hits a button.

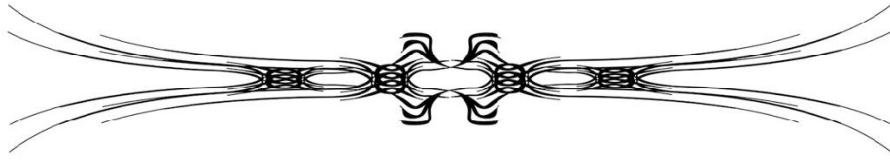
This time, the cargo bay doors open.

“Sophie’s gonna want to meet your mates,” is all he says, but I know I’m forgiven. In his own way, Jerrok can be as soft as his human mate.



Thank kef.

ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-TWO



## DORA

When Bethiah said her cousin handled junk for a living, I didn't realize we were going to be living on an actual junk station. But there's so much crap floating in space around the station and tethered to the station itself that it's incredible. Every other space station I've seen looks elegant, smooth, and organized to a certain extent. This place looks like someone plopped a station down in the midst of a trash heap. And because we're in space and there's no gravity, it looks like the trash heap exploded and everything's hanging in midair around it.

We dock in a massive cargo bay, and I pull my nose away from the window in med-bay, glancing over at Jamef. He's still asleep and hasn't stirred in days. Bethiah says he won't until we induce consciousness, but I've been lingering at his side anyhow. It feels like one of us should be with him at all times, especially with Rhonda and Simone on board. Simone seems nice and sweet, but she keeps to herself. And Rhonda? Well, I don't trust Rhonda not to fill Simone's head with all kinds of nonsense and turn her against us. If Jamef wasn't in a coma, I'd be at Simone's side constantly to contradict anything Rhonda might say. But he comes first and I'm not leaving his side.

The ship gives a little jolt as we land, and then the engines shiver as the propulsion systems are turned off. I peer out the window again, and I see a man that—from a distance—looks painfully like our Jamef with the amount of prosthetics he has. Bethiah never said her cousin was a cyborg. Count on her to omit pertinent information. He watches with arms crossed over his chest as the ramp lowers, and then disappears from sight from my window.

A moment later, there's a knock at the door.

Bethiah pokes her head in, glancing at me. "I'm going to go say hello to my cousin. You want to come say hi? I'm sure

he'd like to meet one of my mates."

"Not yet," I tell her, and touch the glass encasing Jamef. "I want to stay with him. Someone should."

Her expression immediately turns to one of guilt.

"I didn't mean you!" I tell her quickly. I move to her side, grabbing her hand. "There's a lot going on. I can't do a lot to help out on the ship, but I can sit with Jamef. You've still got to run the show, love. Go say hello to your cousin. Talk to him and see how we can fix Jamef. I'll be here waiting."

Bethiah nods, lifting my hand to her mouth and kissing my knuckles. "I will. Jerrok knows what it's like to have shitty prosthetics. He'll have some answers. If not, he'll know who to contact and how much it should run." She gives my hand a squeeze and then releases it. "Send Simone after me if you need anything?"

"Actually, I think you should take Simone with you," I reply. "She might need to get away for a bit, and you don't want to leave her alone with Rhonda. If I need you, I'll come get you."

"Mmm, you may be right about Simone. Rhonda's still looking for an angle to work."

"Of course she is. She's Rhonda."

Bethiah makes a face. "Fine, I'll take Simone. You sure you're going to be okay here?"

I nod, moving to the stool I have set up next to Jamef's sick bed. "I'm fine. We're fine. Just come back and let me know what you find out."

She hesitates in the doorway, then blows a kiss at me and heads out. Dimly, I hear her and Simone talking, and then a third voice, a deep, bass male voice speaks. They fade and I turn to the window, watching as the trio head down the ramp and head into the station.

"Just you and me, Jamef," I say to my sleeping mate. I stroke the glass as if I'm touching him, and press my cheek to the surface, closing my eyes.



**B**ethiah is gone for a while, so to keep myself occupied, I work on my mesakkah alphabet, trying to read the messages that scroll across the med-bay screens. I'm pleased when some of the words start piecing themselves together in my mind instead of just being random disconnected sounds. One of the screens reads *subject is stable with* and I'm trying to figure out the next word when there's a knock at the door.

Oh. Jeez. Someone else is on the ship? I move toward the door to the med-bay. If it was Simone or Bethiah, they'd just come directly inside, so it can't be them. "Hello?"

"It's Sophie, Jerrok's mate," calls out a sweet voice. "May I come in?"

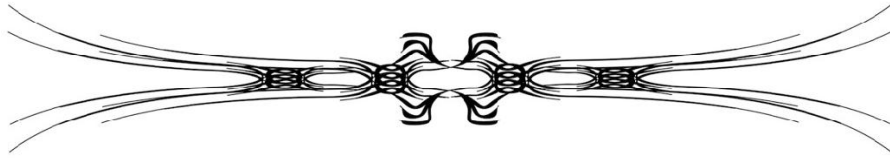
I open the door to the med-bay—and step back as two large, pale, opalescent creatures slink inside ahead of her. They have long bodies and multiple legs, but remind me oddly of lions. I've seen one of these before, I realize. Alice had one, but these two are massive and far bigger than her pet. "Um..."

"Sleipnir! Freyja! Leave her alone!" The sweet voice takes on a stern note, and the two creatures immediately move back to stand behind the woman that strides forward. "Sorry about that. They love new smells, but I promise they're harmless as long as you don't raise a hand to me."

Sophie beams at me, and I can immediately see why Bethiah calls her "Softie." She just looks so...sweet, like a Disney princess. Her hair is long and dark and sleek, pulled back behind one ear with a shiny clip, and she wears a vibrant red tunic that clings to her body and makes her look feminine and delicate. She has bright eyes with long lashes and an even brighter smile. Just looking at her makes you want to protect her and be her friend.

She holds up a tray, beaming that warm smile in my direction. "I brought sandwiches when I heard you weren't coming on the station. Would you like company?"

ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-THREE



## DORA

Sophie is just as sweet as Bethiah indicated. She doesn't have a mean, aggressive bone in her body. We talk about nothing at all and nibble on the strange, paste-filled sandwiches that she's brought.

"It's a spread from a nut that grows on a nearby planet," Sophie explains as we eat. "I mentioned once that it reminded me of peanut butter from home, and the next thing I knew, Jerrok had an entire case of it for me."

"I don't remember peanut butter," I tell her, taking another bite of the gluey substance.

Her eyes widen. "No? It was a staple when I was growing up."

Oh. It's probably another one of those memories I'm supposed to have but don't, because I'm a clone. I give her a weak smile and decide to change the subject as she feeds a bit to the fatter of the two lizard-like creatures. "Your carinoux are huge. Alice has one but I don't remember it being nearly as large."

Sophie's face glows with pleasure as I mention her pets. She grabs the closest one by its huge head and squeezes it to her chest like it's a teddy bear. "I spoil them. They're supposed to be attack pets but they're my babies." She squeezes the thing's fat jowls. "You're my baby, aren't you? Yes you are."

I giggle at the thing's expression. It looks disgusted at Sophie's baby talk, but remains perfectly still so she can keep squishing its face. "Those are some big babies."

She scratches at the carinoux's head, giving special attention to the ear buds. "Sleipnir—that's the boy over there"—she points across the room where one is flopped in front of the door—"is naturally big, but Freyja here is a different strain and she's just a big fat, lazy sweetheart."

She squeezes the jowls again and then rewards Freyja with a kiss on the side of her snout.

“And they don’t mind living on station with you?”

Sophie shakes her head. “Carinoux are pretty adaptable. They imprint on their people and as long as their people are happy, they’re happy. Freyja wouldn’t be able to go back in the wild because of her breeding.” She kisses the carinoux’s nose again. “And Jerrok likes that I have plenty of protection. But as for them being happy on the station, they don’t seem to mind it. They do all their bathroom duties in my garden, and the terrarium is big enough that it can handle two aggressive diggers.”

I perk at that. “You have a terrarium on station?”

“A huge one,” Sophie agrees, beaming. “I love plants and so Jerrok gets me seedlings from all over the place. I grow fresh vegetables so we have nice, delicious things to add to our noodles, but I’ve also got a bed of flowers. Do you want to come see?”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to blurt out that yes, I would love to see her flowers, when I remember that I’m keeping watch over Jamef. I touch the glass cylinder where Jamef rests, far too still. “Maybe once my mate is awake.”

“Oh, of course. My apologies.” Sophie gives me an understanding look. “The plants aren’t going anywhere.” She holds another sandwich out to me, and when I decline, she tears it into pieces and feeds a chunk to Freyja, who does look a bit plump compared to the other carinoux. “So...can I ask how you two got together with Bethiah? I’ve been telling Jerrok for forever that she needs someone in her life, but she’s very good at pushing people away.”

I warm up at discussing my favorite topic—my family. “Bethiah was there when I was rescued from slavers.” That much is the truth, at least. I don’t need to tell Sophie they were slavers purchasing clones on the cheap. “I was scared of everyone and everything, but Bethiah was so kind to me and went out of her way to make me feel comfortable. Like I had a friend in her.”



“She’s always had a soft spot for human women,” Sophie agrees, smiling.

“I was offered a chance to go with the crew on Lord Straik’s ship, or head to Risda, but I wanted to stay with Bethiah. And one thing led to another.” I shrug. “As for Jamef, well, we just clicked right away, which is good, because he and Bethiah love to argue and imprison one another, it seems. But we work well as a triad.” I trace my fingers over the glass over Jamef, missing him desperately in this moment. “More than well, actually. Everything is perfect when the three of us are together. There’s no jealousy, and no one’s left out of anything. Each of us smooths out the edges for the others, you know? We don’t fit right when it’s just the two of us. It feels like something’s missing.”

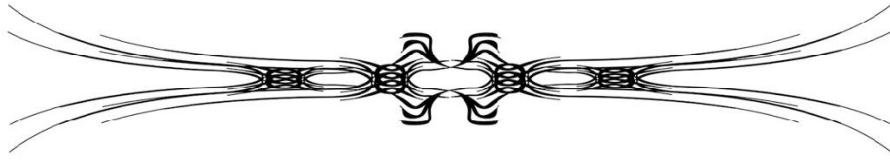
“I understand,” Sophie says in a gentle voice. “And we’ll get you your mate back, I promise. Jerrok likes to bluster about everything, but he really does care for Bethiah. He just worries that she’s going to bring trouble with her and that it’ll somehow affect me.” Her cheeks pinken with a blush. “He’s extremely protective of me.”

“I’ve heard.” I manage a smile as she feeds another chunk of sandwich to Freyja. “And I know what it’s like. Jamef is protective of us, too. Now we have to be the ones to take care of him.”

“Well, you can stay with us as long as you need. Ignore any griping that Jerrok might make.” The look on Sophie’s pretty face turns to one of sheer determination. “We’re family, and whatever you need, we’ll help with. We’ve got some connections we can pull, for all that we’re in the middle of nowhere. Things will work out. You’ll see.”

“I know they will.” Because I’m determined not to think of the alternative.

ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-FOUR



## BETHIAH

“**W**hat do you mean you have a bounty on your head?” Jerrok snarls at me, stripping the suspension system out of an old chassis with expert hands. He straddles the metal frame with his new limbs—rather shiny new-looking ones—and glares down at me from above. “And you came here to my station? Endangering Sophie?”

I roll my eyes, watching him work. “Oh, get over it, cousin. When do I *not* have a bounty on my head?” I point at a corner of the frame. “And you missed a spot.”

I expected Jerrok to be grumpy when we got here—he always gets grumpy when those he cares about are in danger—but I’m a little frustrated that he’s scolding me instead of offering solutions.

He continues to glare, even as he swings his leg over the other side of the chassis, bends over, and rips a handful of fresh wiring and components out of the framework. “I just don’t like your carelessness. You know that. You have mates to think about now. You shouldn’t be putting them in danger with your antics.”

Simone taps my shoulder. She’s been quiet this whole time, standing patiently behind me as Jerrok grumps and I snark back. When I turn toward her, she gives me a wary look. “Is this a good time? Do you need me to go back to the ship?”

“It’s fine,” I tell her, and then speak louder. “He’s surly because he cares.”

Jerrok straightens again, tossing a clump of ripped wiring down at my feet. “I’ve worked hard to make this place safe and secure for Sophie. I just don’t want her troubled or afraid that some bounty hunters are going to show up looking for you. And I don’t like surprises. You could have sent a comm that you were heading this way.”

“I did,” I lie, knowing perfectly well that Jerrok never checks his comms. “Didn’t you get it?”

He grunts. “Must have missed it.”

“Must have,” I reply cheerfully. “So the way I look at it is like this. You’re family. We might gripe and not get along, but at the end of the day, we help each other out, right? Like that time I got Sophie that carinoux kitten? I got it because I thought of you and her. I think that thing is worth the price of a ship you were going to scrap anyhow.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “Nice try. What are you getting at?”

“I like to think we’re even. Or if you want, I’ll even owe you one in the future. Once Jamef is fully repaired, I will absolutely bring you back a ship to scrap, even if I have to steal it out from underneath someone. Thing is, I need help right *now*. We can stand here playing our games where you’re grumpy at me and I keep avoiding responsibility, or we can get down to business and actually help my mate. I know which one I want to do.”

He jumps down from the chassis with ease, a movement he couldn’t have done two years ago. Huh. His new limbs are a definite improvement. I feel a surge of wistfulness as he straightens and moves towards me, because Jamef’s had struggles with his leg for so long and I never realized. Am I just used to people having terrible prosthetics because Jerrok did for so long and never complained? Are my standards skewed? Or am I just that unobservant? I don’t like the thought.

“You’re not usually so direct,” Jerrok tells me, his gaze piercing.

“I’m not,” I agree. “I keffed up and stole a ship. That’s on me. But I really do need your help. If I could do it on my own, you know I would.”

He grunts, crossing his arms over his chest. His gaze goes to Simone, who has retreated a few steps and is pretending to be extremely interested in a pile of junk off to the side. “You

pay me back for the ship when you can afford it,” Jerrok says. “And don’t take without asking again.”

“Of course.”

“And when you head to Risda, get Sophie some seeds. And some fresh fruit. She’s got a hankering for some fruit lately. I don’t care how much it costs, just get everything you can.”

I nod.

He pauses for a moment, and then reaches out and pulls me into a tight hug. I’m so startled by this show of affection from Jerrok—*Jerrok, of all people*—that I don’t dare move. He pats my back and then releases me. “I’m glad you came to us, even if I want to keffing strangle you sometimes.”

“Everyone that loves me feels that way sometimes,” I manage. “But thank you.”

Jerrok nods, indicating I should follow him out of his work room and into the station proper. “Come on. We’ll put in a comm to Zakoar of the Broken Back. He operates out of Three Nebulas —”

“I know who he is,” I say, and try not to wince. Zakoar is the best at what he does, but he’s pricey and he might still be mad at me for trying to get Dora fitted with some prosthetic limbs. “Are you sure we should comm him?”

“Do you trust anyone else with your mate’s life?” Jerrok stares at me as if I’m insane.

He’s got an excellent point. “Will he come here? I thought he never left Three Nebulas.”

Jerrok eyes me. “If the price is right, he will.”

Ah, kef. “Just...don’t tell him it’s a favor for me, all right? He’s not one of my biggest fans at the moment. Mention Jamef’s name but not mine.”

“Did you steal something from him, too?”

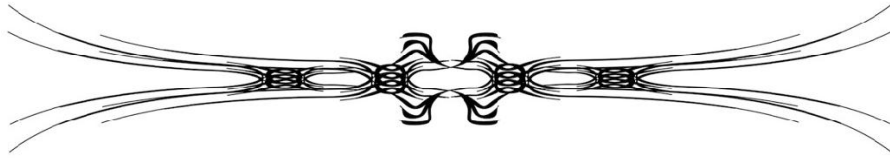
“Me? Never!” When he continues to stare at me, I mention, “I might have tried to get Dora outfitted with an arm

cannon against her wishes, but that was weeks ago!  
Everything's different now!"

"You...what?" Simone asks, startled and probably a little scared.

Jerrok just groans. He shakes his head and walks away.  
"Why did I even ask?"

ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-FIVE



## BETHIAH

Waiting is the worst.

It takes Jerrok a full day to convince Zakoar of the Broken Back that he needs to come here to fix Jamef's prosthetics. They haggle over the price for a bit, and then Zakoar asks me a thousand questions about Jamef's enhancements that I don't know the answers to. Things like "Is it a split connection or a quad connection." As if I know. It's a keffing leg. One that isn't working.

Finally it's agreed that Zakoar and his mate will arrive in two days.

Two days doesn't sound so terrible in theory.

Except that it's two more days that Dora refuses to leave med-bay and Jamef's side. It's two more days that someone has to babysit Simone so she stays away from Rhonda. It's two more days of Rhonda's whining that she should be let out, or that her bedding needs to be cleaned, or that her clothes are wrinkled.

It's two more days that Jamef lies, still as death, under a glass bubble. Two more days that our triad remains broken, because Dora and I can't really function while he's hurting, nor do we even want to try.

It's a very keffing long two days.

The others help out where they can, of course. Simone does her best to stay out of everyone's way, and I suspect that's how she's managed to survive as a slave—by being out of sight. Sophie, who is possibly the nicest human in the history of all humans, does her best to be a gracious hostess, bringing food to the *Pleasure Spot* and spending long hours talking with Dora and Simone and trying to keep them occupied. Jerrok is, well, Jerrok. He scraps by himself, suiting up and hauling ship carcasses into the cargo bay so he can tear them apart. I try to help him some, but Jerrok works best



alone, so I retreat back to my ship and go through Rhonda's valuables, looking for things we can trade to Zakoar in exchange for the repairs on Jamef.

Even going through Rhonda's things doesn't give me pleasure. I miss Jamef too much. I worry about Dora.

I just want things back to normal for us.

I want *us* back.



I feel like Dora with her face pressed against the glass as I watch the smooth, delicate little cruiser settle itself in the landing bay next to the larger, piecemeal *Pleasure Spot*. I'm on the other side of the hangar, watching impatiently as the doors close and the environmental come flooding in again.

Keffering *finally*, he's here.

Once the green light flicks on, I charge out into the cargo bay to meet Zakoar and his mate. He pauses at the top of the exit ramp, looking fearsome. There's far more metal on him than Jerrok and Jamef combined, and Zakoar makes no effort to hide his prosthetics or even to get them to blend in with his skin. They're a stark, silvery metal against his deep blue skin, his head covered with metal and the most jarring of all is the metal, artificial jaw that covers the lower half of his face. I've met Zakoar plenty of times, but I always find him to be an ugly cuss.

Now I could kiss his ugly cuss face.

He turns and extends a hand, waiting. Tessa emerges from the ship, her hand slipping into his, and they come down the ramp together. She's an athletic human with brown hair and an attractive figure, and dresses in flowing, delicate clothes that show off her status as a prized possession. Zakoar's name is tattooed boldly across her throat in our language, and she gives him a sultry little smile that promises a lot of fun for both of them later. I've heard they can't keep their hands off one

another, and it makes my heart twist in a wistful sort of way, because I miss that between Dora and Jamef and myself. That casual touching, the eagerness of a willing participant who cares about your pleasure.

Zakoar's descent down the ramp is noisy, his prosthetics clanking and hissing as he moves to the floor. I know he can give himself better cybernetics, he just chooses not to. There has to be a reason behind it.

I'll ponder that some other time. Right now I just want my mate back.

I bolt towards them with my best, most winning smile. "Glad you're here. If you'll come with me onto my ship, I'll show you where Jamef is so you can get started."

Zakoar stares at me with displeasure. "Are you here to show my mate around the station?"

Like I have time for that nonsense? "No —"

"Then get out of the way," he says coldly. "I will see my Tessa settled first."

"I don't mind," Tessa says, speaking up. She keeps her face tilted towards his, an expression of amused affection on her features. "I'm sure Sophie's got quarters set out for us."

"I mind. I did not come here to be rushed. I came here to work at a friend's bequest, but even that friend would be a gracious host." Zakoar continues to eye me with distaste. "Your mate is in stasis. Tessa can get settled and we can discuss my payment, and then I will get started."

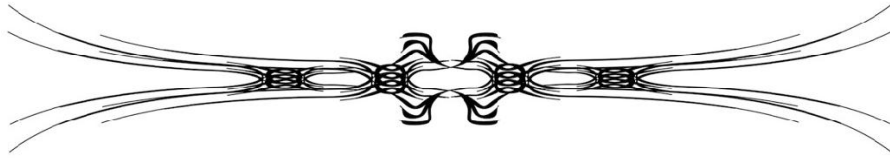
Grr. Okay, fine. "Jerrok's on his way," I say with a tight smile. "He was just spending a few minutes with Softie. And as for your payment, could I interest you in some human-sized jewelry and expensive dresses? Because we've acquired several trunks of the finest adornments any human could ask for."

Tessa's eyes light up, and I know I've got a winner on my hands. Rhonda's wardrobe just might end up taking a big chunk out of what we're going to owe Zakoar and get me in

his good graces. Because if Tessa's happy? Zakoar of the Broken Back is happy.

“Come on,” I say encouragingly. “You look like the right size. I've pulled a few trunks into the station so you can take a look through them, and once you've decided what you want, then we can discuss Jamef's repairs.”

ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-SIX



## JAMEF

“Let me know when you’re fully awake.” The male’s voice pierces the darkness, rousing me from a deep sleep.

Disoriented, I open my eyes. My bionic eye automatically scans the area, noting one enhanced mesakkah life form and behind the door a short distance away, a human life form. Location—the *Pleasure Spot*. Keffing hate that name, but it looks like it’s sticking.

I’m in the med-bay. I raise a hand to my forehead, frowning to myself. Other than a dry mouth, nothing is shooting with pain or sending uncomfortable twinges. That’s new. So is the male seated beside the pallet I lie upon, running a diagnostic over my limbs. I don’t need to ask who he is. The metallic jaw and chrome covering his head tells me plenty.

Zakoar of the Broken Back, the infamous prosthetics supplier, is here on the ship. That’s going to cost us a pretty amount of credits. From what I’ve heard, he never leaves his shop. I wince.

“Any pain?” he asks. “Error messages?”

“Where are my mates?” I demand. “Are they all right?”

“I’m going to take that as a no,” Zakoar continues, making a note into the scanner. “As for your mates, Bethiah is probably arguing with her cousin, and your human had to be pried away from the door. She hasn’t left your side since you went down, and the only reason she’s not in here right now is because I can only work in a sterilized environment. Truth is, she’s hovering too much. Makes me nervous.”

“Her cousin?” I ask. “Jerrok? What’s he doing here on Three Nebulas?”

Zakoar lifts the scanner and runs it over my cybernetic arm. “We’re not on Three Nebulas. I’m doing a house call, as

Tessa likes to refer to it. We're on Jerrok's station. And your old leg was possibly the most outdated model I've ever seen. Except for Jerrok's, of course, but he replaced that last year. You mind if I take it back with me? I want to show my assistant what a real antique looks like."

I sit up gingerly, making sure nothing surges or twinges or even lets out an uncomfortable pop. "You can if you pay me for it."

He huffs with amusement. "I'll take it off your bill. It's a piece of junk, you know. Not sure how it worked this long."

"It worked fine."

"Oh, clearly. That's why you've been in a coma for the past week with a feedback loop destroying all your circuitry." His tone is dry, matter-of-fact. "I had to replace three components in your other prosthetics that melted down because they were getting overloaded. You were a few hours away from a total shutdown."

I don't like hearing that.

Nor do I like hearing that I've got a brand new leg and several new components. I know how much everything costs...and it's a lot. The credits we just made on Rhonda's mission were so we could hide out somewhere quiet for a while, and I'm worried those are gone. Kef, worse than gone. We're probably in the red by several missions.

Zakoar of the Broken Back is the best at what he does, but he isn't cheap.

I swing my legs over the side of the bed. "How do I pay you?"

"Already paid." He gets to his feet with a mighty creak of his cybernetics, which look just as ancient as mine were. "I'll remain on station for a day, and we'll watch for any sorts of program errors or limb rejection, but I suspect you'll be fine."

"What do you mean, already paid?" The only thing we have of value is the ship...or Dora. Cold pours through my veins. Bethiah wouldn't...no. She wouldn't dare. The moment the thought crosses my mind, I shove it away. Bethiah loves

Dora as much as I do. More, actually. She wouldn't sell the human to save me. "What exactly were you paid with?"

He puts away the scanner, distracted. "You have a human on board that had a lot of jewelry and dresses. My Tessa liked them."

Rhonda? They stole Rhonda's wardrobe and sold it to Zakoar? I bark a laugh, because I'd be willing to bet that Rhonda doesn't know that she's now a pauper. "Perfect."

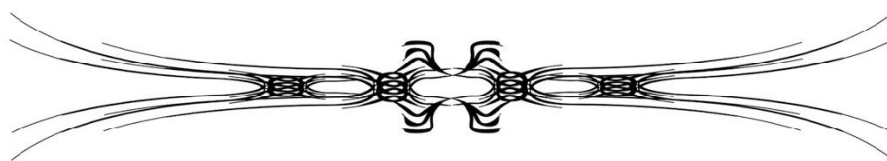
"I thought so." He inclines his horns towards the door. "Should we let her in now? She refuses to leave."

Dora? I nod. I just hope she and Bethiah don't resent me for how much I've cost us. I bet Rhonda's wardrobe cost a small fortune and they probably could have done a lot with the credits.

Zakoar moves towards the door and activates the unlock. The door slides open and Dora flies through, making a line straight for me. Her arms go around my waist and she presses her cheek to my chest, sobbing.

"You're back," she cries. "Oh, thank god you're back. You scared the shit out of us!" She hugs me, and then grabs the front of my tunic and hauls my face down to hers for a quick, forceful kiss. "Never, ever do that again!"

ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-SEVEN





## BETHIAH

**W**ith a pair of heavy gloves covering my hands, I tear an old environmental system apart like it belongs to Rhonda personally. I rip out components, wiring, and then I get a heavy sledgehammer and pound out all of the soldered-in pieces. The value is in the metal itself, not all the crap inside, which has already been picked through for parts. That means I can attack it with abandon.

It feels good to rip something apart. The amount of credits I'd get from helping Jerrok is negligible, but whatever I can do to pay down our debts to Zakoar of the Broken Back? It'll be worth it. Mostly, though, it's not about the credits. I just have to stay busy. I can't sit patiently at Jamef's bedside like Dora. Seeing him lying there, so still, it makes me crazy. I want to reach through the glass and shake him until he's awake, and I know that's a bad idea...

So here I am, attacking anything I can with a sledgehammer to get some of the anxiety out of my system. The metal clangs loudly as I hammer at it, the sound ringing through the second cargo hold that Jerrok keeps for the bigger scrapping tasks. I like the sound—it drowns out my thoughts—and so I swing harder and faster, trying to make the entire chamber reverberate with noise.

Something bounces off one of my horns and lands at my feet. It's a twisted knot of wires, and I pause in my efforts, frowning down at it as if it offends me. How the kef did that fly through the air?

“Are you going to attack that shit all morning or are you going to say hello to me?”

*Jamef.*

I turn, incredulous, and see my mate standing there at the base of the tall scrap pile I'm currently perched atop. Dora is at his side, a bright smile on her face and her eyes shining with

happy tears. Jamef looks thin, his color pale, but he's on his feet and the look on his face is his usual dry humor.

A thousand responses spring to mind—to tease him, to pretend like he hasn't been sick, to go back to scrapping and force him to get my attention. To be *me*.

Instead, I burst into tears.

I'm so keffing *relieved*.

“Are you crying?” he asks, incredulous.

I sit down atop the busted environmental system, gasping with sobs. “I'm not crying,” I manage. “These are tears of rage.”

“They don't look like rage,” Dora teases, wiping at her own eyes and giggling.

Jamef holds a hand out to me, inviting me to join him and Dora below. I sniff, feeling like the most ridiculous creature in the universe. Crying over a mate. Me. It's ridiculous. I get to my feet and dust my gloves off on my bodysuit, trying to hold my scraps of dignity together. I peel my gloves off as I descend, ignoring the hand he holds out to me as if that will somehow give me strength.

But then I'm standing next to him and he gives me that tight-lipped look even as his tail reaches out to twine with mine.

And I burst into tears all over again. “I hate you,” I sob even as he folds me into his arms. “I was doing just fine without you making me fall in love with you, you prick. You and Dora are the worst.”

“I think that's her way of telling us that she loves us,” Dora says with a watery giggle.

He rubs my back. “I love you, too —”

“No, you don't!” I push away from him, remembering that I'm keffing furious. “If you did, you wouldn't have scared us to death like that.”

“I didn’t think it mattered. I figured it was my problem, and I needed to handle it. I didn’t want to bother the both of you.”

Not bother us? With his keffing health? I’m glad Dora’s wearing the same look of incredulous disgust I am. “We’re your mates, remember? Your problem is our problem.”

He shakes his head. “Yes, but —”

“Yes, but what?” Dora prompts. She moves to my side and crosses her arms under her breasts, giving him the same skeptical look I am. Our tears are gone. She’s growing as irritated as I am. “You kept a life-threatening secret from us. Why would you do that?”

Jamef is silent for a long, quiet moment. I untangle my tail from his and thwap him with it, demanding an answer.

“Because I thought you’d get rid of me sooner,” he admits. “Once I wasn’t convenient to have around, you’d decide you’d be better off with a pair than a triad.”

Now I’m the one that’s silent.

“Why would you think that?” Dora asks, hurt in her voice.

He shrugs, as if that answers everything, and the closed-off look is returning to his features.

“Well,” I say finally, and gesture down at his new leg. He’s wearing his favorite pair of worn trou, but the fabric hangs slightly differently. There are less bumps and bulges, a sign that his prosthetic is one of the newer, sleeker, more expensive types. “Everything working all right with the new parts?”

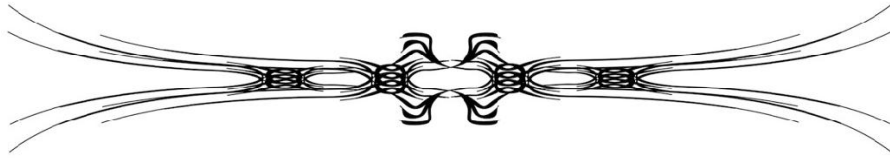
“Seems to be,” Jamef says gruffly, as if he doesn’t really want to talk about it.

“Great. And is your old leg still around?”

He eyes me with a wary expression. “I suppose so. Why?”

“Because I’m going to find it and beat you over the head with it for thinking that we would be together without you,” I snarl. “What the kef are you even *thinking*, you absolute idiot?”

ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-EIGHT



## JAMEF

**B**oth Bethiah and Dora are completely and utterly furious with me...and I can't help but bask in their reactions.

It's an even better feeling than my leg, which no longer hurts in the slightest. I didn't realize how much the defects in it were troubling me until they disappeared, and now I feel fantastic. Better than fantastic. I feel like a youth again, with a whole body and the entire universe in front of me.

And apparently I have the love of two very, very angry females. That's the part that's the most surprising.

"How could you even doubt how we feel about you?" Dora asks. "Haven't we told you that we love you? Haven't we *shown* you?"

Bethiah is silent, her glare livid, the twitch of her tail showing just how furious she is. I'm surprised she isn't yelling at me any longer. Instead, she's just fuming in silence, which is worse.

"I overheard the two of you talking once," I confess, so they don't think I'm making this all up in my head. "Bethiah, you were talking about how you hadn't felt love for anyone before Dora. And I knew your prior relationships were with women, so I figured I was a very distant third in our triad and that it was only a matter of time before you both got tired of me."

Dora tilts her head, a confused look on her face.

Bethiah is equally puzzled. She glances over at Dora, as if trying to place the conversation, and then shrugs again. "I think whatever drugs Zakoar had you on aren't out of your system."

"No drugs. I know what I heard."

"Prove it to me," Bethiah says, her hands on her hips. "You can access the security footage on the ship, right? Show me

where and when I said that I loved Dora and only Dora.”

I immediately connect to the *Pleasure Spot's* network using my eye's computers. Once I'm in, I sort through the footage at high speed, looking for a frame that matches the query I send through. I'm searching for a time when Bethiah and Dora were in the bedroom and I was in the hall outside. A few instances pop up and I review the first one, then discard it.

In front of me, Bethiah examines her nails. Dora nudges her.

“Any time now,” Bethiah complains when I check the next instance and discard it, too.

I raise a finger to indicate that I need a moment, accessing yet another batch of footage. This time, I skim the visual, seeing myself react to what the females are saying on the other side of the door, and me turning around and heading back to the bridge. I slow down and rewind, then add the audio files so I can listen in to their conversation and prove that I'm right, that they've never wanted me nearly as much as they've wanted each other.

*Dora's voice. “I appreciate you saying this, Bethiah, but Jamef—”*

*“Isn't in this conversation, remember? This is about me and you. I love him. Adore him. He's keffing perfect. But he deserves better than just being our referee. You're emotional, and I'm as dense as a black hole, so we're going to clash from time to time. We need to figure ourselves out.”*

Wait, I'm perfect?

I roll the footage back further, convinced I've missed something.

*Bethiah's voice as she speaks to Dora. “We need to talk about you and me.”*

*“Okay...but if we're talking relationship stuff, shouldn't we bring in Jamef? He's just as much a part of this.”*

*“I don't have any hang-ups about being with Jamef. You and I both know he's a fantastic mate.”*

I frown to myself as Dora elbows Bethiah again. I play all the footage all over again, listening in silence as the two women talk about how they can communicate better...and no one says a negative thing about me. In fact, they talk about how amazing I am.

“You...” I rub my jaw, humbled, and turn the footage off. I save it for later, just because seeing and hearing them talk about me makes my heart ache in all kinds of ways. “You sure you both want me around?”

“Oh kef me,” Bethiah exclaims, throwing her hands up. “Are you fishing for compliments or what? Yes, we love you, you bucket of bolts. Your cock is amazing. You’re patient and kind. You’re smart and I like talking to you. How much more do you want to hear?”

Dora glances at her with amusement and then gives me a knowing look. “We’re a mess without you. Bethiah’s been impossible. I’ve missed having someone that actually listens to me —”

“Hey! I listen!” Bethiah frowns.

Dora continues. “And I’m sorry if you felt like we took you for granted. Maybe we did, too caught up in our own drama and with Rhonda showing up.” She steps forward and puts her hand on my chest, gazing up at me. “What I’m saying is that your mates have been very, very naughty, and we clearly need to show you just how important you are to us.”

And she licks her lips enticingly as she gazes up at me.

Bethiah slings her arm around Dora’s shoulders even as her tail swats me again. “I haven’t been naughty. That’s what you get for not talking to us. Serves you right.”

Dora gestures at Bethiah as she looks at me. “You see what I’ve had to put up with while you’ve been out?”

It still hasn’t quite hit me that they truly want me. That there’s never been any doubt. That all this flirtiness is for me as much as them.

That I really do have a family after all this time. People that love me. I press my fist over my heart, overcome.

Both Bethiah and Dora immediately get panicked expressions. Dora races toward me, sliding under my arm as if she can somehow prop my much larger form up.

“I’ll get Zakoar,” Bethiah calls, racing away.

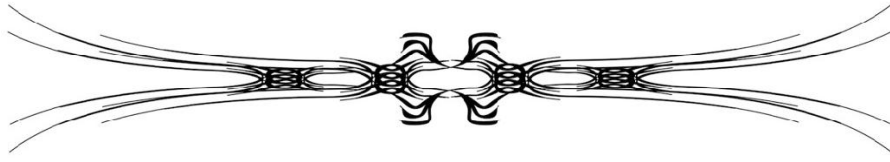
“Wait,” I tell them. “I’m fine. I just—I was feeling a lot.”

“You’re fine?” Bethiah echoes, and then her expression grows furious. “You’re fine and you scared the *kef* out of us like that? I really am going to murder you!”

And she bursts into tears again.



ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-NINE



## JAMEF

**B**ethiah and Dora both fuss over me, as if they're unconvinced that Zakoar has done his job. I'm immediately dragged to med-bay and Bethiah argues with Jerrok, crying. Dora holds my hand, her expression tight-lipped as Zakoar runs yet another scan over me.

When he pronounces me fine, I expect Bethiah to yell at me again. But she just sags with relief, leaning against the nearest counter for support. Jerrok awkwardly pats her back, as if he's not entirely sure what to do with his newly emotional cousin.

"It's a good connection," Zakoar says. "No error messages. No system issues. No slowdowns. Like I said, we'll continue to monitor him for another day, but I'm confident in my work."

Dora simply rubs my arm, gazing up at me. "How do you feel now?"

"Like I felt earlier. Fine." At their clearly skeptical expressions, I elaborate. "I promise I'm not in any sort of pain. If I was, I'd speak up, especially with Zakoar here. I'm stubborn, but I'm not an idiot."

"You let your mates be the judge of that." Dora nudges me affectionately. "You do realize we're going to worry about you for the next while? And we have every right to?"

I know they will. And strangely, I don't mind it. Two beautiful, protective females fussing over me? Looking after me? It's every male's dream. "I truly do feel fine."

"Well." Bethiah composes herself, giving a toss of her hair. "If that's the case, then you won't mind giving things a trial run. Put your system under a little stress to see what it can handle."

Dora gets a wicked look in her eyes and her fingers tease up my arm. “You know, I think that’s an excellent idea. A stress test, if you will.”

By the looks on both their faces, I can just imagine what the stress test involves.

“That’s my cue to leave,” Jerrok says. He gives his cousin one last affectionate slap on the shoulder and heads out of med-bay.

Zakoar just eyes the three of us. “I’m supposed to invite the females to go have tea in the garden with Tessa and Sophie.”

“Not right now,” Bethiah says brightly. “We’re about to fuck the daylights out of our mate.”

He grunts. “Thought so. I’ll pass on the message. Let me know if any issues come up.”

“The only thing that better come up is south of Jamef’s belt,” Dora teases. She grabs me by said belt and tugs me off the exam bed. “Come on.”

“Oh, are you in charge, fluffit?” Bethiah moves to my side, her tail twining with mine as she slides an arm around my waist. I’m not sure if it’s because she wants to hold me up or if she’s truly so anxious over my health she can’t stop touching me. I suspect it’s the latter...and I keffing love it.

I know Bethiah doesn’t like to show weakness, or any emotion other than sardonic boredom, but the fact that she is tells me more about how much she cares more than anything else. It’s going to take some time before I truly believe that they do want me in their lives. No one ever has. I’ve always been on the fringes, watching others enjoy happiness and contentment with mates.

I never thought I could have that, too. But it feels possible now, and I’m starting to realize just how much I want it.

Dora tugs me forward, leading me by my belt. “Shall we go back to the ship? I don’t want to fuck in an exam room. I’m starting to hate them.”

“I agree.” Bethiah gives a delicate shudder. “Being in here is making me drier than a desert.”

“Looks like I’ll have to work on that,” I murmur.

Both women shoot me indignant looks. “Oh no you’re not,” Dora replies. “You’re going to let us take care of you, not the other way around.”

“That’s right,” Bethiah adds. “You just get to lie back and enjoy. Let us do all the hard work.”

Kef, this is sounding better and better. “Careful, you’re going to make me like all this fussing way too much.”

“You should enjoy it.” Dora continues leading me forward, and as we head through the halls of the station, I realize she’s directing us back to our ship, back home. We turn down another corridor, nearing the cargo bay where the *Pleasure Spot* is docked. “The fact that you have to comment on it tells me that we haven’t fussed over you enough. Everyone deserves to be spoiled, especially by their mates.”

That makes me grin, and I turn towards Bethiah to see what kind of smart remark she has for that, but the misty look is in her eyes again, her expression full of emotion. I squeeze her tail with mine and decide not to press things.

They really were on edge, thinking they would lose me. My poor mates. “I’m sorry I made you both worry so much.”

Dora chuckles, her tone forcibly light. “You *should* be sorry. Just promise us it won’t happen again and I’m sure we’ll forgive you.”

“If I ever have trouble with my prosthetics again, or if I’m in pain of any kind, I will absolutely tell both of you right away,” I promise.

“You’re not alone anymore.” Dora pauses, glancing back at me and Bethiah. “No more lone-wolf shit.”

“Agreed,” Bethiah says, and then adds, “Because if you do this again, I’m giving you to Rhonda.”

“A fate worse than death.”

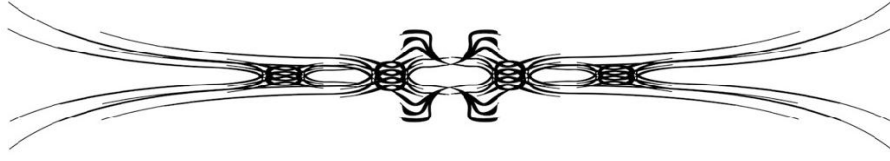
“No, but you’ll probably *wish* you were dead after she asks you for the tenth time to buy her a present, or if a certain color makes her skin look sallow.”

“In that case, I’m glad the two of you are just going to take me to bed and use me until I can’t speak.”

Dora gets a wicked look on her face. “You should be very, very glad about that.”

Oh kef, I really am.

ONE HUNDRED THIRTY



## JAMEF

**T**he moment we get into our quarters, I expect both females to jump me.

Instead, they lead me to the bed and lie down with me, one on each side. Bethiah touches my cheek, turning my head towards her, and gives me the softest, gentlest kiss I've ever had from her. Dora tongues my ear, then presses small kisses up and down my neck.

We stay like that for a long while, both of them content to just kiss and touch me. When Dora wants my mouth, I turn my head and then Bethiah is on my ear, her teeth giving me gentle love-bites.

It's probably the most careful we've ever been with each other, but the connection feels needed. It's like we're finally realizing what we mean to each other, and taking a moment to celebrate it, to simply revel in the knowledge of it. I kiss each one of them, full of love for both Dora and Bethiah, in their differences and how well we all three fit together.

How I am truly wanted between them. How keffing good it feels.

I kiss Dora and then turn and kiss Bethiah again. "Now you two kiss each other," I tell them. "Show me."

"I have a better plan," Dora says, sitting up. She casts a grin at Bethiah and puts a hand on my belt, undoing the auto-fastener. "You want his cock or you want me on it?"

"I want it," Bethiah strokes her hand down my chest, then reaches down and cups my achingly hard cock. "You can play with his tail and his balls."

I groan as they casually divide my body parts up like I'm a piece of meat.

Dora tugs at my belt and trou. "If that's the case, then you're going to have to sit up, love." She pulls on my clothes

and when my skin is revealed, her mouth goes there, licking and sucking at my lower stomach. “Unless you want us to take turns instead of both of us on you at once?”

The thought makes my cock twitch in response. “However you want me. I’m not gonna say no to any of it.”

“Then stand up,” Bethiah says. She’s been unusually quiet. Normally she’s the loud one, the one that can’t help but bark out orders or make jokes. She watches me with intense eyes, though, and I know she’s still emotional over my injuries. It’s going to take some time for that to heal, I suspect, and I feel guilty that I put her through that.

I shouldn’t have put either of them through that.

“I love you both,” I say, my voice husky with emotion. I cup Bethiah’s cheek and turn to Dora, who’s wrestling with my trou. “You know you’re everything to me, right?”

“We know,” Dora says, and gives my clothing another tug. “And we can be emotional in a moment. For now...are you going to stand up so your mates can show you how much we care? Or do you just want words instead of actions?”

“I want it all,” I admit. “Words, actions, everything.”

“So stand up,” Dora demands again, tapping an impatient finger on my abdomen. She abandons my trou and hops off the bed, pulling off her own bodysuit and then gesturing for Bethiah to join her.

I prop up on my elbows, watching from my viewpoint in the bed as Bethiah gets up and Dora undresses her. Kef me, what a gorgeous sight. When Dora’s hands skim over Bethiah’s bared skin, I groan. “Touch each other.”

“Soon.” Bethiah steps out of her clothes and drops to her knees on the floor, looking over at me with an enticing glance. “We want to make you feel good, first.”

I’d be an absolute keffing fool to resist what they’re offering, and I get to my feet. I can’t help but notice that they both tense as I stand, and Bethiah’s gaze goes to my leg, as if she’s waiting to see it fail again.



“I’m fine,” I reassure them both. I take a few steps forward and caress Bethiah’s jaw, because she seems like she needs more reassurance than Dora. Our human mate never left my side, from what I’ve been told, but Bethiah is used to running from her feelings. She’s going to need more time to work through things.

Bethiah nods and then both of them put their hands on me, caressing my legs as they finish undressing me.

“It looks different than your last one,” Dora comments, running her fingers over my new leg. “Does it feel different?”

“Not too different.” I don’t want to turn it into a big deal, because then they’ll get upset all over again.

Dora stands up behind me and her arms go around my waist. She slides one hand lower, wrapping her fingers around the base of my shaft. “He’s all yours, Bethiah. Taste him.”

Bethiah puts one hand on my thigh, then the other. She looks up at me, her gaze vulnerable and full of emotion...and then her lips close over my cock and she takes me into her mouth.

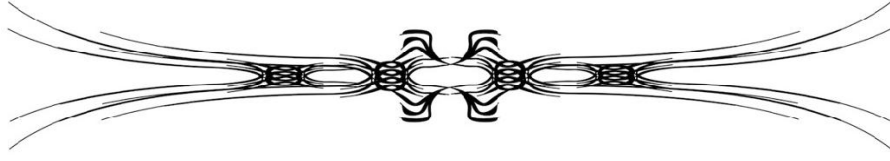
I groan with wonder at how good her mouth feels, gloving my cock with wet heat.

“We’re no good apart,” Dora breathes. “Any of us. You realize that, right? We’re people that don’t fit quite right unless you put all three of us together. And then it’s magic. Pure magic.”

She strokes Bethiah’s cheek as Bethiah works my cock with her mouth, and it’s a keffing gorgeous sight.

The only thing better than how it looks? How it *feels*. And when Dora lifts her hand and lightly scratches her nails over my thighs, I can’t wait for what else they have in store for me.

ONE HUNDRED THIRTY-ONE



## JAMEF

The sight of Dora gripping my cock and feeding it to Bethiah takes my breath away. It's lewd and gorgeous and erotic all at once, and I can't stop the hungry growl that escapes my throat.

"She's so gorgeous, isn't she?" Dora's voice is husky as she gives the base of my cock a little squeeze. "Show us your tongue, Bethiah. I want to watch his cock moving on it."

She makes a rude gesture at Dora, as if proving that she's not entirely willing to be bossed around, but she opens her mouth in silent invitation, her tongue extending over her lower lip.

"There you go," Dora whispers to me. "Dirty her up."

My breath hitches and when Dora's hand slides away from my cock, I put mine there instead. I feed my cock into Bethiah's mouth, watching with fascination as the head glides over her ridged tongue. It's a gorgeous sight, and one I can't help but take advantage of. I tap the head of my cock against her tongue and then trace it over her lips. Bethiah gazes up at me, and our eyes meet as she licks the crown free of pre-cum.

Keffing perfect.

"We should have Bethiah like this more often," Dora teases as Bethiah takes me deeper into her mouth again, sucking on the head of my cock before mouthing one of my piercings. "She's so quiet."

Bethiah's tail whips around and lashes around me, and Dora squeals and giggles as it smacks her. A moment later, Dora wraps her hand around the base of *my* tail and gives it a squeeze. "Can I touch you here?"

I grunt agreement, the pleasure now two-fold. "I'm yours."

She grips my tail tightly and shuttles her hand up and down it as if she's working my cock, and I suck in a breath,

because it feels incredible. She sinks down behind me, one hand caressing the back of my thigh as she works my tail, and presses a kiss on my buttock. “Can I play with your backside, too?”

As if I can refuse either of them anything. I widen my stance, a silent invitation for her to do as she likes with me.

Dora lets out a soft little sigh of pleasure at the same time that Bethiah gives me a slow, wet lick, and then I feel the human’s fingers lightly drag along the crease of my backside. Dora continues to work my tail, and the combined sensation with Bethiah’s mouth on my cock is overwhelming. When a finger touches the sensitive pucker of my ass, I jolt at how good it feels.

“Not going in,” Dora murmurs. “Just giving you a little tickle.”

I groan, gripping one of Bethiah’s horns as she sucks harder upon me, working my cock with her pretty mouth. Kef. No male was ever so lucky as I am in this moment.

“Now tell Bethiah you love her,” Dora says in that sultry voice of hers, and teases the tip of her finger against my ass.

“Love...you...” I manage to choke out, gazing down at Bethiah. She gives me a heart-rending look with those eyes of hers, and her hand caresses my thigh in response, even as her mouth stretches over my cock.

“Now tell her that you believe it when she says she loves you,” Dora commands. “And that you should have realized this before.”

There’s steel in her voice, and I’d be amused at how demanding our “sweet and delicate” human is, but they’re working me so expertly between them that all I can do is hold on. I clutch at Bethiah’s horns as she takes me deeper, and I babble something about how I’d never doubt either of them again.

“Tell me you love me, too,” Dora adds.

“Both...incredible. Both...mine.” I’m on the edge, thrusting harder into Bethiah’s mouth even as Dora continues

to work her finger against a spot I never thought was sensitive.

“Good enough,” Dora declares. “Now give us your release. Come for your mates.”

And she bites down on the muscle of my backside.

The shock of it is enough to tip me over. With a choked groan, I climax, spurting deep into Bethiah’s throat. She immediately pulls back, and I think at first it’s too much for her, but when she grabs my cock and squeezes it, dragging the tip over her mouth, I realize she wanted me to watch my release all over her skin. Dora’s there a moment later, and then I’m coming on her pretty mouth, too, all pink and hungry and messy.

I let out a ragged breath and reach for the bed to brace myself as I come down. Bethiah and Dora remain where they are, kissing and covered in my seed, and kef, the sight of it fills me with such joy and awe all at once. “Did you come?”

Dora mock-pouts and shakes her head at me, even as she bites down on Bethiah’s lip and tugs on it.

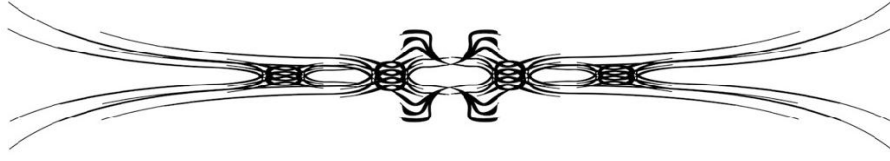
“Naughty fluffit,” Bethiah murmurs a moment later and looks over at me. “She’s just been impossible since you went down. Obviously she needs to come.”

“Then you should make her come,” I say, running a hand over my messy cock. “And I can watch.”

“I have a better idea,” Bethiah says, cupping Dora’s breast and teasing the nipple. “You’ve got two hands. We’ve got two cunts. Can we borrow you?”

Borrow me? She needs to even ask? “I’d be honored.”

ONE HUNDRED THIRTY-TWO



## DORA

**W**e spend the afternoon in bed together, all three of us, simply because we can. It's nice to have a day to relax, in which everyone is healthy and happy, and there's nothing more pressing that needs to be done. Simone and Rhonda need to be taken to Risda III, but there's no urgency attached to that particular job, and so we can laze about. I curl up in bed on one side of Jamef, his arm around Bethiah on the other side, and I trace his scars with my fingers as he and Bethiah talk about jobs they've done in the past.

I'm filled with a lazy sort of contentment and hope for the future.

If all of our days can be like this, I'd be a very happy woman indeed.

"We should probably go down to dinner at some point." Bethiah rolls onto her belly and eyes the two of us. "Sophie will be upset if we're not somewhat social, and if Sophie is upset, Jerrok's upset." She makes a face. "And I feel like I owe my cousin for all his help."

"In addition to the ship you have to pay him back for?" I add.

"Hush, you," Bethiah mutters, reaching over and tweaking my nipple. "One thing at a time."

"Dinner sounds good," Jamef says, patting his stomach. "I'm starving."

And that makes me happy, too.



**A**n hour later, we're all cleaned up and dressed, and we head back into the station. The scent of something delicious wafts through the air and Bethiah leads us

towards the area Jerrok has designated as his “dining hall.” It’s just another room filled with clutter, but in this one, the clutter has been shoved aside and a long, weather-beaten strip of metal has been set up as a table, complete with benches on each side. Jerrok sits at one end of the table with one of the carinoux at his side, his metallic hand scratching idly at its ear buds.

Simone is seated with the other carinoux on a bench next to her, the fat creature pushing at her hand as she feeds it tidbits. Across from them, Zakoar is seated, legs spread wide and the strange mechanics of his back evident through his form-fitting bodysuit. If I wasn’t already familiar with Jamef, he might have been terrifying to look at. But I’ve learned that these guys with the metal parts seem to have the softest hearts, so he doesn’t bother me. Plus, he fixed our Jamef. I could kiss him for that.

At his side, Tessa is dressed in a gorgeous peach gown with billowing sleeves. A circlet dripping jewels adorns her head and her hair is pulled into a loose bun atop her head, showing off her slim neck and the garish tattoo that covers it like a choker. She wears a thick belt of hammered metal and touches her jewelry with pleased little caresses. I notice Zakoar’s big hand is on her thigh, and the look he gives her is one of pleasure, too.

Rhonda never wore that stuff so good.

“Excellent,” Bethiah announces. “We’re just in time for dinner. I’m starving.” Instead of sitting down, she puts her hands on Jamef’s back and more or less shoves him towards the table. He sits on the opposite side of Simone, and Bethiah immediately sits in his lap, shooting me a look of amusement as she does.

It’s an unspoken agreement between us—that we’re going to watch over him and be with him constantly until we’re certain that he’s one hundred percent better. Plus, I think she really needs him right now, and I want her to get that extra attention. “Where’s Sophie?” I ask.

“Putting the finishing touches on dinner,” Jerrok replies.



“Can I help?” I head for the antechamber he gestures at, not waiting for an answer.

Sure enough, Sophie’s inside, chopping up strange-looking fresh vegetables. She beams at me as I approach. “Not too much longer for food. I hope you like noodles and veg. It’s Jerrok’s favorite.”

“I love it all,” I admit, grinning. “You want me to chop or stir?”

“If you could help me peel, that’d be lovely.” Sophie holds a long green vegetable out to me that looks like a spiky cucumber. “Get all the prongs off that one or it’s really tart.”

“Prongs. Got it.” I get to work with the knife and start cutting. “You didn’t have to share your fresh vegetables with us. We’d be just as happy eating nothing but noodles.”

“I know. I grow them in my garden and we always have plenty, though. If you want some seeds to take back with you, I can give you some. Bethiah mentioned you have a garden area that you haven’t broken in yet.”

Oh. The thought fills me with a strange amount of joy. “I would love some seeds. Thank you.”

Sophie smiles, her expression sweet. “We’ll put aside a portion of food for Rhonda, too. I know she’s no one’s favorite, but she deserves to have a good meal, too.”

“You’re too nice.”

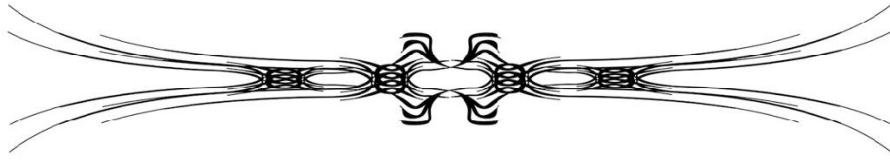
“I just know what it’s like to be a slave,” Sophie says. “I understand where she’s coming from, and she doesn’t have someone like Jerrok to save her. I feel sorry for her.”

“We can leave her here with you, you know,” I offer.

She looks over at me with an arched eyebrow. “Not that sorry.”

I snort.

ONE HUNDRED THIRTY-THREE



## BETHIAH

Sophie's cooking is always fantastic. Even though the majority of the food is just noodles, she adds the right amount of veggies and spices that it tastes light and fresh and special.

"This is delicious," Tessa exclaims. "I haven't had better on the station, even in the fanciest cantinas. We'll have to come back again sometime."

Zakoar just eyes his mate with a resigned look. "If you like."

She touches his hand, smiling. "It'll do you good to leave the station more often, love. I promise. And we can pick up scrap from Jerrok directly. It works out for everyone."

The males exchange a look and I can tell Jerrok is probably about as thrilled as Zakoar is, but neither will complain. They like making their mates happy.

Sophie and Dora enter with heaping bowls of food, catching the last of the conversation. "I suppose we could always visit Three Nebulas if you both make an effort to come visit us."

Jerrok just stabs at a bit of veg, looking miserable. My poor cousin. I smirk.

"Oh, that's probably not a good idea," Tessa exclaims. "At least, not until the whole cloned humans bounty nonsense dies down."

Dora pauses in the midst of serving Jamef a plate full of noodles. "The what?"

Oh *kef*.

I'd forgotten all about the fact that we haven't told Dora about the whole clone bounty thing. "It's just...some bounty that was put out," I say lamely. "About clones and stuff."

Wow, self, way to sell it.

Jamef's hands tighten around my waist and I watch as Dora continues to serve food calmly and then takes the empty bowl back to the kitchen. The room is silent, and Tessa has a look of absolute confusion on her face.

“What did I say?” She asks.

“It's not your fault. It was a secret that shouldn't have been,” I tell her as I get to my feet. “I'm a jerk. Let me go talk to her.”

“Do you want me to come?” Jamef stands.

I shake my head. “You eat. I'll handle it.”

And I don't want Dora to hate him, not after she's spent days and days at his side, ever vigilant. I'll take the hit for this one. I head to the kitchen, making sure the door closes behind me as I approach Dora. She's stirring some vegetables in a skillet, the scent of sautéed veg warming the room. Her movements aren't jerky or angry...which means it feels like a trap.

“You want to talk about it?”

Dora's jaw works and she continues to stir the food. “I'm not sure what there is to say. You kept a secret from me even after we had a big talk about how secrets shouldn't come up between us.”

“I know. But there was a lot going on and I didn't want you to worry even more. Things have been messy and we had Jamef to stress over. I didn't want you to panic so we kept it a secret.”

“So clones are being hunted?” She adds a little spice to the veg, not looking at me.

“I think that's the theory behind it. That if anyone finds a clone on a station, they need to turn them in for a reward. It means we can't go to a public station for a while, I'm afraid.”

She turns and looks at me. “I don't like the public stations, so I don't care about that. Are you and Jamef planning on getting rid of me?”

“What? No! Never.”

She studies my expression, then nods. “Then I’m not freaking out.”

That...isn’t the answer I expected. “You’re not upset?”

“I’m a little hurt you didn’t tell me, yes. But at the same time, I understand why. Things have been a mess since we picked up Rhonda and you’ve always tried to protect me—both of you. So while I’m not thrilled with hearing about it, as long as I’m with you and Jamef, I’m not worried.” She stirs the food again and then pours the contents over a pile of noodles. “But if you guys lie to me again, you’re really, really going to break my trust.”

“I know. It was never my intention to hurt you. It was wrong and I’m sorry.”

Dora tilts her head up at me. “That was a very sincere apology.”

“I mean it. Almost losing Jamef made me realize just how much both of you mean to me. Just the thought of losing one of you absolutely crushes me.” I clench my hand at my belt, because even thinking about it makes me uncomfortably tense. “So please don’t hate me. Let me make it up to you.”

“Bethiah,” she says, voice calm. Dora sets the skillet down and turns to me. “I’m not mad, okay? If things were super peaceful and you withheld it from me I’d be furious because there’d be no reason for it. But we’ve both had so much to stress over lately, I’m glad in a way that you didn’t say anything. It let me focus on Jamef. Maybe that’s weird of me, but I feel safe with both of you. What am I going to do on a station anyhow?”

“Well if it makes you feel better, Jamef and I can’t really go on station until the bounties get lifted on our heads, too.”

“Great. That’ll give you both time to show me how to fly the ship. I can be the getaway driver. Just...I need to be part of the team, all right?”

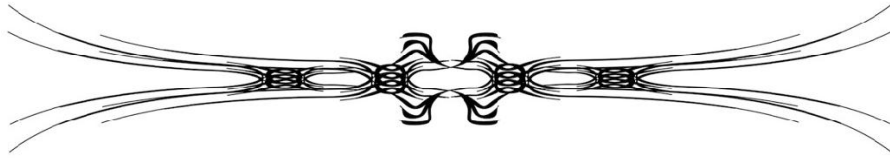
“You absolutely are,” I reassure her. “You’re a huge part of the team.” She moves into my arms, hugging me, and I

squeeze her tight, so thankful that she loves me enough to not be too mad over things. “And if you want an arm cannon, say the word and we’ll get it done.”

Dora laughs, and I know she doesn’t hate us. Thank kef. We got out of that one easily. Next time...

Actually, no. There won’t be a next time. Because Dora’s my mate, and mates don’t have secrets.

ONE HUNDRED THIRTY-FOUR



## DORA

I should be mad. I really should be. But all I can think is that they were protecting me again, because they love me and worry about me, and it fills me with a warm glow. I can tell Bethiah is anxious about my reaction, and the realization that clones are being hunted is a little frightening, but I know Bethiah and Jamef won't let anything happen to me.

We don't need to go to Three Nebulas to have dinner. We have friends right here, on Jerrok's junker station. Or we can visit Kaatir again. I wouldn't mind seeing Hazza again. She's a good friend. So I'm smiling as I plate up more food and hand one to Bethiah and keep one for myself.

"You sure you're not mad?" she asks, wary.

"If you keep asking me, I might *get* mad," I tease. "But no. You were looking out for me. We've been stressing over enough lately. I'm not going to stress over even more. Maybe later on when I've slept on it for a few days I'll get upset, but right now I'm just going to enjoy dinner with my two mates and enjoy some good conversation."

She pulls me in, mindful of our plates, and kisses my forehead. "You're amazing, you know that?"

"Flattery will get you everywhere." I bump her hip with mine, and then we head out to the rest of the diners.

There are distinctly uncomfortable looks on their faces as we enter, and Tessa's expression is one of utter chagrin. Sophie picks at her plate, and the only one that seems comfortable is Freyja, the plump carinoux, who noses Simone for another bite.

I move to Jamef's side and when he looks up at me, I kiss him on the mouth. "It's fine, guys. We're all good." I sit down next to him and Bethiah sits on my other side, her tail wrapping around my waist.



“I’m very curious how your triad works,” Tessa says brightly. “You all seem so happy together. I know if another woman even looked at Zakoar, I’d get jealous. How is it no one gets jealous with you three?”

“If they get jealous, we work it out of them,” Bethiah says, and Jamef places a hand on my thigh, as if he wants me to remember that I belong to both of them. It makes me feel good. They’re going to go overboard for the next while trying to reassure me after Bethiah’s omission...and I’m going to eat up every bit of the additional attention.

Sophie chuckles, and Jerrok covers his mate’s hand with his. “I’m just glad Bethiah is happy. Maybe now she’ll settle down in one place.”

I snort at the same time that Jamef does.

“Maybe not,” Bethiah teases. “I like adventure and new things. I like seeing the universe. And once we get these bounties off our heads, we’ll do some exploring together. First, though, we’re going to hide out for a while and Dora needs to learn how to pilot the ship.”

“Excellent idea,” Jamef agrees, and I feel warm and fuzzy at their affirmation.

“Until the bounties are gone, you can stay here,” Sophie says, and Jerrok shoots her a look that she ignores. “You’re family.”

“We need to take Simone and Rhonda to Risda III first, as promised,” Jamef says. “We have a duty to them, first.”

Simone speaks up for the first time. “I’m in no hurry, truly.”

“Yes, but we are,” I point out, taking a bite of veggies. I’m definitely getting some of these seeds from Sophie. The food is delicious. “We still have Rhonda on board and I won’t relax until she’s settled on Risda and farming.”

“Farming? Her?” Bethiah shakes her head. “You wait and see. A year from now, Rhonda will have found herself a new patron, the richer the better.”

“She’s going to have a hard time finding one on a farm planet.” Sophie glances over at Simone. “Are you looking forward to it? I know the farm life isn’t for everyone.”

Simone shrugs, offering another tidbit to Freyja. “I’ve never farmed a day in my life, but I’m willing to learn. I just want peace and quiet...and to be left alone. I hope I get that on Risda.”

Tessa gives her a sympathetic look. “If it makes you feel better, I thought it was lovely when I was there. Very pastoral. Like something out of a movie. But my home is with Zakoar.”

“Being around all of you is encouraging,” Simone says. “Maybe when I’m ready, I’ll meet someone new to spend my life with. Being a slave is awful, but I also don’t want to be alone for the rest of my life.”

“Risda isn’t exactly teeming with males,” Bethiah says between mouthfuls of noodles. “You might have a dry spell.”

Simone’s mouth quirks. “Men aren’t my preference.”

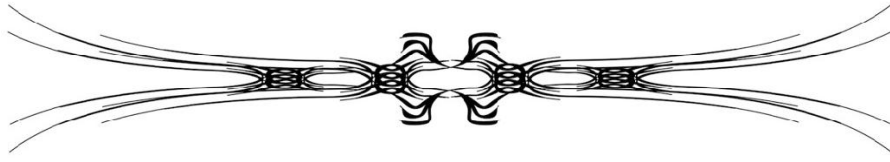
“On second thought, Risda’s perfect for you, then. Lots of single ladies.” Bethiah winks and shoves another heap of noodles onto her eating sticks. “I’m keffing starving. This is so good. Maybe we will come stay with you guys after all. We’ll get to eat all your veggies.”

“Lovely,” is all Jerrok says. Bethiah’s cousin looks sour at the thought, but I think he secretly likes it. Sophie just beams at us and I suspect if it comes down to her, she’ll win. Something tells me Sophie wins all the arguments between them.

“A toast to the future, then?” Tessa asks, raising her glass.

“To the future,” I say, lifting my drink, too. I don’t know what it’s going to hold, other than Jamef and Bethiah, but with them? I know it will never be boring.

# EPILOGUE



## BETHIAH

“Home sweet home,” I say as Dora carefully maneuvers the ship towards the Risda III port lanes.

The moon, as always, looks lovely. Clouds striate over the gold and green mottled land and only one other ship is ahead of us, waiting to dock. The sight of the planet always fills me with a rush of affection.

“Risda isn’t your home,” Dora calls out from her spot, perched on the edge of the captain’s chair. “Am I doing this right, Jamef? Do I need to hit any controls?”

“You’re doing just fine, sweetheart. Don’t panic. I’m right here with you and I’m watching things.” He’s seated behind her, with Dora tucked between his spread thighs, and his bigger form frames hers. He’s watching her steer things, and his expression looks completely calm, only the twitching of his tail giving away how nervous he is that she’s flying the ship.

I’m glad she’s taking an active role. It makes me feel better to know she’s got something to focus on that interests her. Space can be pretty boring if you’ve got nothing to do. I shouldn’t interrupt them, but I can’t help but rise to the challenge. “Risda is absolutely my home. I’ve done lots of jobs here. I’ve got friends here, too. One even named her kid after me.”

“Bullshit she did,” Dora retorts, her gaze locked on the screen. The ship dips and then surges forward, and my human mate winces.

Jamef reaches past Dora and adjusts the throttle. “Concentrate, sweetheart. You can bicker with Bethiah any time.”

“She’s trying to distract me,” Dora grumbles, sending a half-smile my way to take the sting out of her words.

“If I wanted to distract you I’d come straddle your face,” I point out. She doesn’t know the meaning of distraction yet. I smirk over in her direction. “Which I can do, if —”

“No!” Dora yelps out, and Jamef covers her hand with his, calming her.

He glares over at me and I put my hands up. Right, right. No distracting the pilot while she’s piloting or we’re all going to be nothing but a couple of smears on Risda’s nice green grass. I cross my arms and turn back to the view, eyeing the planet as we get closer. The brilliant greens and golds segment as we approach, turning into squares of cultivated fields that seem to stretch on forever. Closer still, and I see the large sprawl of Lord va’Rin’s elegant home atop a hill and then we slowly move over Port itself. The town is just as I left it—literally two streets lined with small, uniform buildings and that’s it. It curls at the base of the stacked platforms of Port and looks as serene and unbothered as it ever does.

Dora would hate it here.

I tell myself that, even as I worry that she’s going to fall in love with the place and want to stay. She loves green things, right? And seeds. And what is life on Risda III but growing things and farting around in the soil? That’s totally something she’d love to do. Our “greenhouse” here on the ship has been transformed in our short journey over to Risda. Dora’s planted every seed that Sophie gave her and she waters them faithfully every day, checking the nutrient charts to ensure that everything is as it should be. I even caught her talking to her seedlings yesterday, encouraging them to grow.

Maybe Jamef and I should talk about what our plan is if Dora decides to stay. Maybe he’d be down with farming. I guess we could all give it a shot if it makes Dora happy. I don’t think I’m a farmer but we need to hide out, and as long as we’re together, I don’t suppose it matters what we’re doing.

I guess.

If I have to handle a beast of some kind, I’m not sure how happy I’m going to be. Meat-stock shit everywhere. Absolutely everywhere.

I glance over at my mates. Jamef's hand is over Dora's, his face close to her ear as he whispers instructions. Our human mate is wearing a look of supreme concentration, biting down on her lip as she carefully maneuvers the *Pleasure Spot* into the appropriate lane. They look so good together that my heart aches.

Okay, I guess I'll deal with beasts and dirt and farming if they want to.

## DORA

I'm still coming down from the adrenaline rush of landing the ship.

Well, okay, I didn't actually land it. Jamef did, and the system course-corrected us to a minute level every time we moved even slightly off track. But I got a feel for things. I got to guide her down. I got to see what it was like, and I might be addicted. I can't wait until I can fly her on my own and without the assistance of others. I'll be so useful then that my third-wheel feeling will completely and utterly disappear, and I'll never have to worry about whether or not I should get an arm cannon after all.

Because every good bounty hunter or corsair needs a reliable getaway driver, and it's a role I'm happy to fulfill. Just the thought of being so important to our triad makes me giddy. I want to be integral. I want them to rely on me. I want Bethiah's eyes to shine with approval and for Jamef to tell me that he's impressed with me.

I need that more than I need air.

I change into a bland-colored tunic with a hood attached to it. Here on the ship I like to wear something pretty and girly, but if we're going down planetside, I want to blend in and look as inconspicuous as possible. It'll be easier given that this planet is seemingly chock-full of humans, but you can't be too cautious. I still haven't had the clone markers removed in my blood.

A shiver moves through me at the thought.

Just before Zakoar and Tessa had left Jerrok's junk station, Zakoar had pulled me aside. He explained that there was a way for my blood to be modified. Right now, I show my own personal DNA, but the way it's laid out automatically flags it as artificial or something. He told me all about it but my eyes glazed over. There's a way to mask my cloning markers.

Zakoar has a modifier that's full of nanobots. They're invisible to all law enforcement readings of my genetic material and will automatically mask my information. If someone scans my DNA, instead of me reading as a human clone, it'll come across as unreadable. Which means tampered.

These sorts of masks are usually only used by criminals, Zakoar explained, and so law enforcement would automatically assume that I've got something to hide. But on the other hand, they won't assume that it's that I'm a clone. It's a risk I can take if I choose, and he left the vial of nanobots with me. I can't take them yet, because the nanobots working through my system will make me feel under the weather for a few weeks before I acclimate, and so I've held off.

I'm pretty sure I want to do it, but I need to talk to Jamef and Bethiah about it first. I don't want to put us in even more danger by flagging myself as a criminal. I left the vial back at Jerrok's station and I'll talk to them about it when we return. There's no rush, and I want to make sure we're all in the right frame of mind before we discuss it.

And that means getting rid of Rhonda.

This day cannot come quickly enough.

I belt my tunic and slip on a pair of shoes, then head down the hall and knock at Simone's door.

She opens up, her expression tense. "Have we arrived?"

"Yup. Bethiah and Jamef are talking with the port authorities and declaring cargo, so I wanted to change and come and get you. We can go down soon. Are you ready to be planetside again?" I grin at her. "The weather is sunny and beautiful."

Simone grimaces. "Do I sound like an idiot if I say I'm nervous?"

"Not at all."

"Oh good, because I'm really fucking nervous." She presses her hands to her cheeks. "I'm flop-sweating." She retreats a few steps and heads back to her bunk, picking up her



satchel. Her room is packed and her bed made. She's been preparing for this moment.

I feel a little twinge of guilt that I'm not anxious. Bethiah and Jamef aren't leaving me here. "You know, if you want to stay, you're welcome to. We're heading back to Jerrok's to stay for a bit longer after this."

But Simone sits on the edge of the bed and picks up her pack, hugging it to her chest. "No, I'm just in the way. The best thing for me is to come here, if it really is a human refuge, and get my life back on a track. The power balance amongst the aliens is a little too skewed in their favor and I'll never be an equal. I don't want to be anyone's burden, and if I stay, I'll feel like a burden. Or worse, a pet."

Ouch. I try not to flinch at that.

She notices my expression and immediately grows contrite. "Oh, I didn't mean you, Dora. Your situation is totally different. Bethiah loves you. Jamef loves you. You have a place with them. They'll always look out for you. Me, I've got to look out for myself. And there's nowhere that's particularly safe for humans except this place. I won't be able to have a profession or even be my own person outside of Risda. And without an alien spouse to stick up for me, I'm kinda fucked. So this is absolutely the right choice. I'm just...terrified of change."

"That I totally understand," I tell her, moving to her side. I sit on the bed next to her and offer my hand, and she clasps her sweaty palm against mine. "But if this isn't the right place for you, you know you can always reach out to us, right? We'd come and get you. And I was told the guy that owns this planet has a human wife and he absolutely dotes on her. So he's going to make sure everyone treats humans fairly."

"I hope so." She holds my hand tightly and then gestures at her pack. "You want your stuff back? It's all your stuff anyhow. I didn't have anything of my own."

"Not at all. You keep it." I nudge her arm because she looks so nervous she's going to vomit. "Bethiah says she has

friends here that have kids. Maybe we can introduce you and you can have a couple of buddies on planet.”

“You mean other than Rhonda?” Her smile turns wry.

Oh god. No wonder she’s nervous. We’re about to drop her on a foreign planet with Rhonda of all people. “Other than Rhonda, yes.”

Because Rhonda is not happy about the whole Risa situation in the slightest. Or the fact that we stole her shit to pay Zakoar. Or that we’ve kept her in the brig for weeks now. Basically she’s a whole mess of feelings, all of them angry ones.

It’s just...that’s what you get when you try shady stuff against your ex-girlfriend, and that ex-girlfriend happens to be Bethiah. I don’t even feel bad about the situation, because she tried to blackmail Bethiah and hid listening devices all over the damn ship.

“Should we go get Rhonda?” Simone asks me. “At this point it doesn’t matter if she’s locked up or not. She’s got nowhere to go.”

I’m not entirely sure that Rhonda isn’t above some sort of sabotage, but Simone is right. This was a one-way ticket for Rhonda, and she can complain all she wants, but she’s not leaving this planet. At least, not with us. “Maybe we should. Ugh.”



Simone goes with me when I approach Rhonda’s cell. She carries her pack with her, as if afraid to let it out of her sight, but at least she doesn’t look quite so nervous. I pause outside of the prisoner hold as Rhonda immediately starts hammering on the door, no doubt having heard the door open on the far end.

“Should we get weapons, you think?” I ask Simone.

“Against poor Rhonda? No.” Simone shakes her head, her gaze fixed on the door. “She’s just trying to watch out for

herself. She doesn't want to actually hurt anyone. She gets by with her beauty and her helplessness. I feel bad for her, because those two things aren't going to get her very far on this planet, if what you told me is true. She's going to hate it here."

I kinda don't care if she does.

Rhonda hammers on the door again, and this time she makes a pitiful sound to go along with her banging. "Please, please let me out! I know the ship has landed! I heard it!"

She's excellent at preying upon people's feelings. I almost feel a twinge of remorse at hearing her voice. Almost. "Do you promise to be good?" I ask, like she's five instead of forty-something. "Because if you're bad we're leaving you in there."

"Of course! I will be the picture of good behavior!"

Well now she's just overselling it. But we have to let her out at some point, and I don't think Jamef or Bethiah will mind. So I tap the code into the panel, hitting squiggly alien character after squiggly alien character, and the door chimes and slides open.

Rhonda straightens her dress and gives us a wounded look, dropping her hand. "Finally."

"You're welcome."

She tosses her tangled hair back from her face and eyes both me and Simone. "What took you so long? And where are the aliens?"

"Talking with the port authorities," I tell her, not that we owe an explanation. She knows why she was kept in there. "They're making sure that the welcome wagon gets rolled out for the two of you."

Rhonda sniffs. "So you're dumping us here like stray cats? Expecting us to find an alley to live in? Can you believe this, Simone?"

"It's not like that," Simone says gently. "We can't stay here and it's not safe for us anywhere else. Here we'll be with a

bunch of other humans and we'll be able to be independent."

"I don't want to be independent," Rhonda grits out, finger-combing a snarl out of her hair. "I want my Lord Nerit back \_\_\_"

"Oh please. He tried to have you killed, Rhonda. Bumped off or sold away. You were a problem he wanted solved, remember? Lord Nerit doesn't want *you* back, so give it up." I'm tired of her rewriting history. "If you really, really don't want to be here, we can arrange for someone to drop your ass at the nearest station. You want that?"

Rhonda pauses and then gives me a sulky look. "Not without my riches. Someone robbed me, you know. Stole all my clothes and valuables."

"That's the cost of doing business with corsairs," I tell her cheerily.

She touches her cheek, a worried look on her face. "Did you keep my lotions at least? My skin is so dry and I'm going to look haggard in natural sunlight."

I shrug.

Simone gives her an odd look. "They're probably around here somewhere? In the lavatory in my room, probably, since I didn't touch anything I didn't recognize. Why are you more concerned about your skin than the fact that we're about to set off for life on an alien planet?"

"Because if I don't have beauty, I don't have anything." She pushes past us with an imperial wave of her hand. "Make way. I'm not going anywhere until I've done my skincare regimen. My pores have suffered long enough."

Simone just rolls her eyes. "Glad to see we've got our priorities all straightened out."

## JAMEF

It's a warm, sunny day on Risda III's surface. The air smells fresh and has a hint of greenery on the wind, and compared to the hustle and bustle of a station, Port itself is practically silent. There's the occasional air sled that moves overhead, and a few people walking down the main paved street, but now that we've left the port docks themselves, all is quiet.

It's eerie to me, given that I'm station born and bred. But I can see how a human might like it. A bug buzzes near my horns and I wave it away, trying to concentrate on the expressions of the humans as we're given a tour.

There's a big, friendly mesakkah named Khex who looks too high-caste for a backwater job like this one, but he seems cheerful enough. He meets us at the port docks and from there, gives us a tour of the tiny "town" itself. Port is more of a single street than a town, but I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that it's small. Everyone here has their own farms, after all. Even Lord va'Rin who owns this planet has a pastoral estate surrounded by huge gardens.

"While living in Port won't be the most exciting of locations," Khex is saying as he leads us down the street, "you'll find that it's very safe. Initially things were a little tumultuous, but now that the custodians have arrived, we've worked with Lord va'Rin to ensure that no one is taking advantage of the humans."

Rhonda runs her fingers over the cleavage of her tunic. "No one's taking advantage at all? What a pity." And she practically bats her lashes at him and steps closer, linking her arm with his. "I think you're wrong, though. Port seems exciting enough to me."

Khex takes it all in good stride. He pats Rhonda's hand that's clinging to his arm. "I'm mated, and you don't have to perform for us here. You're safe."

“I don’t care if you’re mated, and who’s performing?” She gives him a sweet smile and leans even closer.

He grins over at us even as he detangles himself from Rhonda’s grasp. “You brought us a fun one, huh?”

“The funnest,” Bethiah says in a flat voice. “And she’s now all yours.”

“Risda will take good care of her,” he declares, emphasizing the *Risda* part. “Now, let me show you the lodgings where you’ll be staying until you’re assigned your farm.”

Bethiah keeps her tail twined with mine as we walk, her casual expression hiding the tension I can feel in her body. It’s evident in the way her tail clamps down on mine. She’s watching Dora carefully—as am I—to see how she reacts to Port and Risda itself. Every little smile that Dora makes at the sight of the medic in town, or the general store, or even the custodial office makes me worry that Dora’s going to change her mind about staying with us. That she doesn’t want to be in space after all. She doesn’t want to travel. That she wants to stay right here with the smell of grass and the annoying flies. I flick at the one buzzing around my head again, irritated.

Because if Dora wants to stay here, how can we refuse her? It’s simple. We can’t. This would be the safest place for a human, and so if she wants to stay, Bethiah and I will stay with her. We haven’t discussed it aloud, but I can tell from the tension in Bethiah’s tail that we’re thinking the same thing.

“Oh look, it’s a cow,” Dora says brightly, pointing at an animal coming down the street. “How neat! I haven’t seen one of those in, ah, forever.” She casts a glance over to us.

“It looks sick.” Rhonda sounds disgusted, moving to the far side of the street as one of the locals leads the animal down the street.

“I would imagine that’s why it’s in town,” Simone says with an amused look at the creature. She watches as the woman walks it past, her smile growing broader. “I thought

there were just crops here. There's animals, too? Do we get to pick which one we want to do?"

"When you get a farm, if your land permits it, you can have meat-stock, yes. Some of our farmers elect to only grow vegetables, or flowers, if meat-stock offends their sensibilities. We try to give you all the tools you'll need," Khex says. "It's important to Lord va'Rin and to us that you're comfortable with your home. My mate," he continues, and pries Rhonda's hand off his sleeve again without missing a beat, "grows flowers every other year and has a large herd of meat-stock."

"How thrilling," Rhonda murmurs, a look of distaste on her face as the creature bleats when it passes by.

"What about cats? Or dogs? I would love a pet." Simone's eyes sparkle with enthusiasm.

"Nothing yet, unfortunately." When Simone's look immediately turns crestfallen, Khex is quick to add, "We have to be cautious that we're not introducing a lot of animals that could be an invasive species."

Simone nods, but it's clear to see that she's disappointed. Dora turns and looks at us meaningfully, but I can't tell what she's asking.

"Here we are," Khex says as our group strolls toward an otherwise unremarkable building. He turns to Simone and Rhonda. "This is the custodial office for Port. You can come here any time of day or night, and someone will be here to assist you. For now, we'll go inside and get the authorizations filed and get you settled."

Simone immediately looks panicky, turning toward Dora. I watch my mate's face, but she gives Simone a nod of reassurance and reaches out to squeeze her arm. "You've got this," she whispers. "We'll come and check on you before we leave, I promise."

With a nod, Simone turns to Khex, who gives her a reassuring smile and gestures that she should go inside. "Once we've updated your records, I'll introduce you to Bee. She helps all the humans that come in get settled."

Rhonda doesn't look back. With an elegant toss of her hair, she saunters inside the building as if she owns it. Simone trails after her, giving us an awkward wave goodbye.

Khex pauses again, watching Dora and then myself and Bethiah. "Just the two?"

I hold my breath.

"Just the two," Dora says. "We can visit, right?"

"Of course. They're not prisoners." Khex grins. "I'll make sure you get a copy of their contact information before you head out. Do you have any questions for me?"

"Yeah," Bethiah says, speaking up for the first time in a while. "Can you get Rhonda a farm far, far away from everyone else? Is there a deserted island you could stick her on, possibly?"

He chuckles. "Can't promise anything."

"That's on you, then," Bethiah replies. "Good luck with her."

Dora is quiet as Khex turns and leaves, her face full of tension. She's silent as the doors to the custodial office slide shut, and through the glass, we can see Simone and Rhonda led inside, where another uniformed mesakkah meets them. Dora watches this, and then sags, bursting into tears. She turns and spreads her arms, burying her face between myself and Bethiah as she hugs both of us.

Bethiah strokes Dora's hair with a worried look over at me. "Damn, if you wanted to keep Rhonda, just say so," she teases. "I'm sure we could work something out."

"I don't want to keep Rhonda," Dora immediately retorts, lifting her head and wiping at her eyes. "I just feel like I sent my kids off for their first day of school. Simone's so nervous. Rhonda too, even though she's trying to hide it."

I reach out and stroke Dora's cheek with my thumb. "We'll stay for a few days, sweetheart. If they're nervous or don't like it here, we won't leave them behind. I promise."



And I want her to have enough time to decide if she wishes to stay or not. I don't want her to feel rushed.

"Hey," Bethiah says. "Remember we promised to take Dora to a fancy dinner on station and show her off? We can't do that now, what with the bounties and all, but we can have dinner here. There's a little cantina that has the best fried leaves."

Dora groans, rolling her eyes. "You and your fried leaves."

But I can see the hint of a smile on her face. "Is that a no, then? I'm sure if you ask, they'll make something that humans enjoy."

"A dinner date sounds nice," Dora admits, moving to my side and taking my hand. She laces her fingers with mine and leans against my arm, clearly drained with all the activity of the day. Perhaps Simone and Rhonda's delivery has weighed upon her more than we originally thought. I exchange a worried look with Bethiah but say nothing.

This all has to be Dora's decision.

## DORA

My mood is all over the place as we enter the cantina in Port. I'm feeling anxious for Simone, who's likely scared and worried, and I even feel a bit of sympathy for Rhonda, who was pouring on the charm the moment we arrived. That's the Rhonda version of defense-mode, as if she's trying to secure her safety in any way she can. I'm feeling a bit guilty, too, because I'm standing here with two loving mates and walking away with them instead of being shipped off to a human refugee planet.

And I shouldn't be happy that I'm going out for a dinner with my mates and yet...I am. We don't get to sit down together for every meal, so all three of us at the same table is a treat. A date is a treat. We're finally rid of Rhonda and can move on to the next step of our lives.

We step into the cantina itself and I have to bite back the giggles. Somehow I'd expected it to be a bit more like an Old West sort of bar, with wood everywhere and creaky floors and round tables with card players or something. Bethiah has mentioned that she's taken a lot of odd jobs here in Port from some of the colonists that don't trust asking for official help, so I had this whole "gunslinger" motif in my brain.

It looks like a dumpy fast-food joint, though. Not a speck of Wild West vibes to be found. There's a lot of gray inside—gray walls, gray floor, gray tables—and there are grease stains on just about every surface. The screen that displays the menu, complete with pictures, is covered in fingerprints and has a crack going across the surface. Everyone's eating out of little baskets that remind me of burger joints back home. The smell of fried food is overwhelming.

And this is my big date night.

I can't stop giggling. I put a hand over my mouth as Bethiah heads up to the counter and orders one of each fried

item, along with three local brews for us. Jamef's mouth twitches as I keep snickering, and he casually wraps an arm around me and drags me against him, burying my face in his tunic. He leans in, his voice a low whisper. "You're going to make people nervous."

"Sorry. This just reminds me of a place back home." Or rather, a place I would have avoided back home.

He squeezes the back of my neck, his hand lingering there possessively, and my giggles die away, leaving a pleasant ache behind. I hope Simone finds amusement here. I think about what she said about pets and wish she could have a dog of some kind. An animal to keep her company. I know she gets lonely and a little worried when she's by herself. Maybe I should go back and point that out to Khex.

But I don't, because I've got to let them live their lives. Simone is an adult and can handle herself. She doesn't need a much-younger clone fretting over her. So I remain in Jamef's embrace, snuggled up against him as he rubs my neck and Bethiah waits at the bar for our food. She looks comfortable here, and it reminds me that she's been to Risda a bunch of times. Jamef, too. Maybe we'll be in and out more often than I realized—once we're clear to travel again, that is. The idea makes me rather happy. I wouldn't mind getting to visit Simone on the regular.

Rhonda...eh.

Bethiah returns to us with her eyes bright, a tray of steaming baskets held in her hands. "Breathe in that deliciousness. Are you ready to taste the best fried leaves on this side of the system?"

"Those might be the only fried leaves on this side of the system," Jamef murmurs.

"Hush, you. You hate everything that is good and delicious." She winks at me. "Come on. Let's grab a seat."

We grab a booth in the corner, wiping down the grease left from the last customer with a plas-napkin. I slip into the booth next to Jamef while Bethiah sits across and spreads the baskets

out in front of us. She looks utterly delighted at this fried feast, and if she's noticed my slightly melancholy mood, she doesn't comment on it. Jamef's picked up on it, though, and puts a protective hand on my thigh, his tail curling around me. It's like he knows I need a little extra love at the moment.

I don't know why I'm so moody over dropping off Simone and Rhonda. Maybe because it could have been me? Maybe because I haven't met that many people in my clone life and I feel attached to them even if I want to throw Rhonda out an airlock? Do I have abandonment issues? I have no idea.

It helps to see Bethiah so excited, though. She shoves a basket towards us. "Okay, now try these leaves first. They're made with a spicy local flavoring and it will absolutely destroy your taste buds, but in a good way."

"In a good way, eh?" Jamef takes one and pops the entire thing into his mouth, and then coughs.

I bite back a chuckle and nibble on one of the leaves. They're a weird texture—like a hard, crunchy lettuce that's been coated in something thick and pasty and deep-fried. It's not unpleasant, though, and the spice reminds me a bit of buffalo sauce from back home. "This is really good. We had something like it on Earth. You'd put it on chicken wings and then dip them in a cool sauce to add contrast."

"Chicken?" Jamef asks.

"Birds."

"You had me at the cool sauce and lost me at the bird wings," Bethiah says. She tosses another into her mouth and washes it down with brew, closing her eyes in bliss. "Food that is terrible for you is the best kind of food."

I take a sip of the brew and it's a bit like watery beer from back home. Not my favorite, but I could learn to like it. It's icy cold and rather refreshing, though. I take another sip and then point at the next basket. "What's this one?"

"That is a veg-ball! Deep fried, of course, because all good things are." Bethiah nudges the basket toward me. "Eat up."

We make our way through the smorgasbord of deep-fried junk, and it's clear that Bethiah is delighting in our reactions, good or bad. If Jamef has eaten here before, he's not giving much of an indication, because he's just as surprised at the taste of each food as I am. It ends up being a lot of fun and by the time we're done with the food and licking our greasy fingers, my mood has settled into just a pleasant happiness at sharing this moment with my mates.

"I love you guys," I say softly as I hold my brew close.

"Uh oh. She might have drank too much," Bethiah warns. "Should I get her water?"

"I'm not drunk. Just happy to be here with you two." I mean it, too. There's no place in the universe I'd rather be than in this crappy booth eating crappy food and drinking watery beer than with Bethiah and Jamef. "You guys are the best."

"Well I would hope so considering you mated us." Bethiah tilts one of the empty baskets and picks at the crumbs.

Jamef sees right through my effusiveness, though. He puts his hand on the back of my neck again, and it's as good as a hug. "Are you anxious, Dora? Because we're here?"

"Not really anxious. Just feeling a little weird. It's strange to drop off others and realize I'm not going to have the same fate. That I'm lucky enough to get loved by two people who will take care of me. I feel rather bad for Simone and Rhonda. They don't have anyone."

Jamef studies me intently as Bethiah picks through the remnants of food. "What do you think of this planet? Is it somewhere you'd want to stay, sweetheart? Is farming something you'd want to do?"

"Why are you asking?" I furrow my brows at him. "We're space pirates, aren't we?"

"Of course not," Bethiah says, laughing falsely and loudly as she glances around the busy cantina. She kicks me under the table with a meaningful look. "You say the craziest things when drunk."

Oh, oops. “Space travelers,” I amend. “Freighters. Shippers —”

“Drop it,” Bethiah says, picking up her beer.

Right. Any way you look at it, they’re not the domesticated type, either of them. “You wouldn’t want to farm, would you?”

“I guess it depends,” Jamef says when I look over at him. “Do you need it to be happy? This planet has humans. You’d have your own land. You’d have rights to a certain degree. You’d have a stable home and could make credits without our assistance.”

“Riiiiight?” I eye them both. “You’d want to farm?”

“If it’s what you need to feel safe? To be content?” Jamef glances over at Bethiah, who shrugs. “We’d try it.”

“Basically we’re saying you pick.” Bethiah reaches her hand across the table for mine. “We’ve got some free time, right? I guess I could always try milking the stock or some shit.”

I bite my lip to keep from laughing in her face. “I think they’re for eating, not for milking.”

“Oh. You don’t milk the edible ones? Shows how much I know.” She shrugs. “But we’re telling you that it’s your call. If you want to go back out—all three of us—we’re probably going to be staying with my cousin Jerrok for a while. Or visiting Kaatir.”

So we’ll be crashing on everyone’s couches until the bounties are lifted on their heads. I slip my hand into her strong one. “And we could just as easily farm? Is that what you’re telling me?”

“Something like that.”

I look back and forth between the two of them, and I can tell they’re serious. They want to leave this up to me. I could say I want to farm and they’d put on overalls and try to milk things right alongside me and the thought is so funny and yet

fills me with so much love that I can't even laugh. I could burst with joy.

"She looks like she's going to vomit," Bethiah whispers to Jamef. "Might wanna back away."

"I'm not drunk!" Laughing, I release her hand.

"That's what all the drunks say," Jamef teases, giving my neck a squeeze. Then he shoots a look at Bethiah. "The other ones try to milk things."

"I'll milk you," she says, shaking a playful fist at him.

"That's what I'm hoping for."

Oh my god, Jamef made a joke. Now I've really died and gone to heaven. Is it possible for one person to contain so much happiness? Being here with the two of them, sharing this moment—I'm the luckiest. I can't hold back my joy. "I don't want to farm," I confess, beaming at the two of them. "I want to learn to drive the ship."

"Fly the ship." Jamef seeks out my gaze. "But you're sure?"

I nod. "I figure you need me to stay on the ship, right? And if I'm there, it's best if I know how to work the darn thing. I could fly it while you guys are doing bounties and swing around and pick you up. Like we're a team."

Bethiah gives me a look of approval. "I like that idea."

Jamef just nods.

"And I don't mind visiting Jerrok for a while. It'll give me a chance to learn the controls of the *Spot*. And I'd love to see Hazza again. None of that sounds bad to me. But I also want to stay here for a few days if that's all right. I want to make sure Simone is settled and happy...and we should probably make sure Rhonda isn't going to burn the place down."

"Pyromania isn't her thing," Bethiah comments. "Too messy. But it's probably not the worst idea to stay and make sure Simone's all right. I'm fond of that kid."

“I’ve got another suggestion.” I bite my lip, gauging their expressions to my outlandish idea. “Remember that pet Sophie has? The protector-kin?”

“The carinoux?” Bethiah nods. “Do I ever.”

“You want to give one to Simone,” Jamef guesses. He knows me too well.

“Is that bad? It would fulfill her need for a pet and she wouldn’t be lonely, and it’d also keep her safe if anyone tried to bother her.”

Bethiah just stares at me. “You do know how much those things cost, right?”

“I don’t, actually.” I wince at the stare she gives me. “Expensive?”

“Let’s just say I could buy a ship with one.”

“Ouch. I thought they were cute. If we didn’t live on a ship I’d have asked for one myself. I guess that’s out of the question.” I can’t imagine walking around with a pet that expensive at my side. Heck, I can’t imagine paying anything like that. Ships must cost a small fortune. The carinoux sure were pretty, though, and affectionate. “It was just an idea.”

Jamef places his hand on my thigh and pats it. “It’s a thoughtful one. And luckily Bethiah knows someone who has a female that just had kittens.” He eyes her across the table. “Alice is still looking for homes for them, right?”

“Rich keffing homes!” Bethiah stares at him as if he’s gone mad. “We’re not made of credits!”

“Yes, but they’re your friends and like any friend, she’s probably more interested in finding a good home instead of a pricey home. And Alice is human. I imagine she’d want to help a fellow human out.” Jamef shrugs.

“Did you miss the part where I said they were as expensive as a ship?” Bethiah leans in. “Should I speak slower? Enunciate?”

He gives her brow a teasing push. “All I’m saying is you can ask her if she’s found homes for them yet. Maybe we can



work something out. Go with them on a run or two. Offer to carry some cargo. Do some ship upgrades while we're at Jerrok's."

"All this for Simone?" Bethiah asks in a near-whisper. "Seriously? What next? Should we steal a shipment of gold for Rhonda just for funsies?"

I eye my mate. She sure is blustering a lot. "You don't think she's worth it? Because she's a human?"

Bethiah points at me. "I'm not answering that because that's a keffing trap."

She's not wrong. I just flutter my lashes at her, taking a page out of Rhonda's book. "What could it hurt to check with your friend?"

## BETHIAH

Keffing hells.

I'm going to have to contact Alice and Kaspar and see about their carinoux cubs. As we finished off our drinks and Dora and her small human bladder ran to the lavatory, Jamef pulled me aside and whispered in my ear. "I want a carinoux for Dora, too. She deserves the best."

And he's right. She does deserve the best. It's just that the "best" is so keffing expensive. Mentally I go through my list of things to sweet-talk Alice with as we head back to the ship. I stand with an arm around Dora's shoulders as Jamef makes longer-term arrangements for ship docking. We'll stay here a week, like Dora wants...but I'm going to make them eat fried leaves every day of the keffing week that we're here, because no one makes them better than Port's little cantina.

And as we wait, Dora slides her hand over my backside. She caresses my tail base, a subtle invitation for bed play. Well now. Get a couple of brews into a human and they turn all frisky. I'd forgotten that part.

She turns a dreamy smile up at me, her face round and pretty and so sweet that it fills me with emotion. "Tonight was really nice."

"It wasn't a fancy cantina," I grumble. "You deserved better than that. When I initially proposed it, I thought we'd give you a chance to get dressed up really pretty and we could get a nice table someplace with music. We'd drink fine wines and eat roasted spores from seven different systems. Instead, you got fried leaves and crappy local brew."

Dora chuckles, sliding both arms around my waist. "It was wonderful and I had an incredible time. I just wake up every day and feel lucky to have both of you."

I never know what to say to her effusive affection. Nothing that comes to mind seems to be enough to encompass how I

feel. I pat her shoulder. “Yeah, yeah. I love you, too.”

Jamef looks over at us hugging and a small smile curves his hard mouth. That makes me feel all kinds of things, too. Kef me. I’m just turning into a blubbering ball of feelings, aren’t I? This is what happens when you get two mates, isn’t it? You get all soft and spout about love and end up buying expensive pets for people you gave a ride to, all because it makes your mates happy.

We stroll back to the ship, the three of us, my tail curling with Jamef’s and Dora between us. Jamef’s tail is rubbing against mine in a meaningful way, and by the time we get back to our quarters, Dora’s casting sultry looks in both of our directions.

“Can I be the middle tonight?” She licks her pink lips and starts stripping off her clothing as the door shuts behind us. “I’d say we should use my strap-on but I’m sleepy.”

“I told you that you drank too much brew,” I tease, softening my voice to take the bite out of it. “Now you want us to do all the work, huh?”

“I’ll wake you both up with head,” she tells us, tearing off the last of her bodysuit and kicking it to the floor with her boots. Naked, she flings herself into bed and gives us a come-hither look.

Jamef gives me an amused glance. “She definitely drank too much.”

“Did not.” Dora runs a hand over her flank. “Is it wrong to want to be the meat in a mate-sandwich?”

I laugh at that, because Dora says the most ridiculous things sometimes, and it’s adorable. I love how cute she is right now, with her eyes slightly drooping from the alcohol, and her body warm and inviting. “I don’t know, she sold me with morning head,” I joke, stripping off my own clothing. I toss my boots down on the floor and give her a naughty wink. “And if our human is demanding some time with us, who am I to disappoint her?”

Jamef just huffs with amusement, but I notice he's getting undressed, too.

I'm naked first, and I move over to the bed, rolling Dora onto her back as I kiss her. She's all softness and eager hands, roaming them over my body and pinching my nipples. My tail strokes over her skin as I kiss her, nipping at her jaw and then teasing her neck with love-bites. A moment later, I feel Jamef's hand brushing over my backside and the bed sinks as he climbs in next to us.

I reach for him and grip the hard length of his cock, flicking my thumb over one of his piercings. He lets out a hiss between his teeth, but instead of touching me, he caresses Dora, plumping one of her breasts in his hand and then offering the nipple up to me. "Kiss her here."

Dora moans, and I travel down to her cleavage, kissing her skin as I make my way to her nipple. I capture the pink tip with my lips and then tease it with my tongue, sucking and nibbling in the way I know she likes. She writhes against me, arching. "Both of you," she pants. "I want both of you."

Jamef moves out of my grip and releases her breast. I take it in my hand, cupping one as I lavish attention on the other. He presses her back against his chest, tilting her on her side, and then parts her thighs. I lift my head to glance down and see he's rubbing his thick cock against her slick folds, and then dips the tip inside her. Oh kef, watching is as much fun as experiencing. I pause in my breast worship to watch as he slowly fucks her, pushing in deeper with every thrust and making her cry out. Her folds part, spread wide, and I can see the bead of her clit at the apex of her cunt, and I can't resist the silent invitation. Licking my paired fingers, I reach down and rub her clit for her even as I lean in to kiss her again.

Dora clings to me as Jamef drives into her, kissing me frantically as I work her with my fingers. She comes shortly after that, quaking and crying out, and I continue to kiss her as Jamef holds her tighter, thrusting into her towards his own climax. She reaches back and cups his face as we tongue each other, my need rising. He buries a hand in my hair and leans

in, his tongue grazing both of ours as he strains over the human, emptying his release into her.

It's quick and almost perfect, how well we know each other now. I love the little moan Dora makes as the two of them come down, her hands sliding over my body. I love watching the softness on Jamef's face as he gives one last thrust and then pulls out of her, and I slide my questing fingers deeper into her cunt, stroking through his release and rubbing it all over her. No matter who's in the middle, it's always good for all three of us.

"Bethiah still needs to come," Dora whispers, rolling me onto my back. She kisses me again and then detangles from our embrace, getting out of the bed. Jamef immediately closes the distance between us, kissing me with lazy, sensual kisses that speak of just how good he feels. I moan and twine my hands into his hair, hungry for my own release.

And a moment later, when Dora pushes my thighs apart and drags the phallus of the strap-on against my cunt, I know they're going to see to me. She gives me a mischievous look and takes the thick rod of it and drags it between her thighs, wetting it with Jamef's seed and her own release, and then strokes the slickness up and down the shaft with her fingers.

"You are a filthy, filthy human," I pant, aroused at the sight.

"The filthiest," she agrees, and puts on the belt. "Keep kissing her until she comes, Jamef."

And he does, his tongue toying and teasing with mine. Dora fucks me slow and thorough, making sure I come, her grip tight on the base of my tail even as she drives into me with the dildo. When I'm a panting, exhausted mess, she takes the belt off and collapses on top of me. Jamef pulls us both onto our sides and drags us against him, and wraps one long leg around both of our tangled ones, his tail reaching for mine.

Dora was right. Tonight was great.

# DORA

## *WEEKS LATER*

I set plates in the dining area on Jerrok's ship, trying to figure out the best way to make the mismatched dinnerware look special. Sophie's agreed to keep Jerrok occupied and away from our end of the station while I have a private dinner with my mates. It's thoughtful of her, considering that we're the interlopers on their station, but Sophie is just an incredibly sweet person who aims to please. I nudge one of the plates to hide a dent on the edge of the metal, and then nudge it again.

Everything has to be perfect for our big conversation.

It's been a week since we got back to Jerrok's station. We spent well over a week on Risda III, soaking up sunshine, eating so many fried leaves I never want to see one again, and checking in on Simone. She's been assigned a little farm that's on the side of a hill, which isn't great for crops, but she got extra meat-stock DNA in exchange and she's thrilled. She can't wait for her first cows. She's loving farming and having her own house.

We checked in on Rhonda, too. Last I heard, she was cozying up to the avian family that runs the store. She does not yet have a farm, and wasn't in a hurry to get one. Bethiah thinks she'll have a husband or a new owner of some kind within the year. Kinda sad, but what can you do for someone that doesn't want to be independent?

Before we left, we even got to visit Bethiah's friends, Kim and Nassakth. He's a praxiiian and she's a human, and they have three adorable children that Bethiah swears are named after her (they are not). I got to visit their homestead and while it was lovely and the children were sweet, it just emphasized to me that I was making the right choice. I don't want to farm and settle down and have kids. I want to see the universe with my mates.

I was glad to leave Risda and its sunshine, and I think both Bethiah and Jamef breathed a sigh of relief when we left, too. They would have stayed to farm with me, but I wouldn't ask that of them. I just love that they offered.

After that, things felt like they were falling back into place. I've had a few lessons on flying the *Pleasure Spot* with Jamef. I've helped Sophie work in her terrarium and worked on my plants. I've practiced my blaster work with Bethiah. When we're not together, Bethiah works on upgrading a few systems on the ship to a more stable version, and Jamef helps Jerrok scrap to pay for our lodging.

It's nice. It's cozy. It's almost home, though I think I'd rather be traveling. I'm told we need to spend a few months hiding out and then Jamef and Bethiah will check on their bounties and see if the fees have come down enough that they can be paid off. If not, we'll pay a visit to Kaatir and my buddy Hazza.

Everything's great.

I gaze at the table I've set and then nudge one of the plates again. Tonight needs to be perfect, because there's just one last thing to discuss—the clone marker modifiers that Zakoar of the Broken Back gave me. I still want to take them and change my DNA so I don't read as a replica, but I need to make sure both Jamef and Bethiah are on board. So I'm making us a private dinner. We'll have a nice meal, flirt a little, soften my mates up, and then I'll lob the big bomb. I'm not sure how they'll take it. Jamef is against me getting any sort of body modification, and Bethiah said just the other day that she was glad I didn't get an arm cannon.

Granted, I was fingering her at the time, but still.

They might not like the idea, but if it keeps me safer than being marked as an illegal clone, I think we should consider it.

I set down a pot of noodles and veg just as Jamef enters the room. "Bethiah's going to be a little late," he tells me. "Sorry."

"Late? How is she going to be late? I told her about this earlier so she could finish her scrapping and clean up."

He shrugs, sitting down at one seat and reaching over to pick a bit of veg off the top of the noodles. He tosses it into his mouth and adds, “Jerrok got a delivery so she’s probably helping with that.”

I make a face. “Well, that timing sucks. I just made dinner.”

“She’ll eat it cold. You know she doesn’t care.” He picks at another bit of veg. “Tastes good.”

Mollified by the compliment, I serve him up a heaping portion and take the seat right next to him. We eat and talk about the nothings of the day, his tail idly curling around me from time to time. I watch him as we have dinner and his mood seems good, so perhaps it’s a smart idea to run the whole “modification” thing past them one at a time. “Can I talk to you about something?”

“Anything. You know that.” He sets down his eating sticks and clasps my hand, giving me his undivided attention. I love that about Jamef. He always makes me feel important and seen.

I try to think of the best way to approach it. “Zakoar gave me something before he left.”

To my surprise, he gets a weird look on his face and his tail twitches. “Is it...another bed toy?”

Oh. I giggle, because he’s probably still a little flustered given that Bethiah used the strap-on on him last night while he fucked me. It was really sexy and I make a mental note that I want to wear the strap-on tonight, just to see that awkward-yet-aroused look on his face again. “Not a bed toy. It’s a serum full of nanobots that will mask the clone markers in my blood. The downside is that it’ll show they’re masked and everyone will assume I’m hiding something, which usually means criminal. I wanted to talk to you and Bethiah about it because I want to make sure we’re all on board before I take them.”

He nods slowly and glances at the door. When there’s no Bethiah coming through, he gives my hand a firm squeeze. “If



it will make you feel more comfortable, I want you to do whatever you're happy with."

"I would do it to feel safe. To know no one's going to imprison me—or worse—just because I'm a clone. I already know how I feel about it, though. I want to know what *you* think."

"I personally think it's not a bad thing to hide the fact that you're a clone. But if you're worried about what the nanobots might entail, maybe wait and see what Bethiah brings first." His mouth curves in a tiny smile.

"Why?"

Before he can answer, the door slides open and Bethiah waddles in, hefting an enormous steel box in her arms. "Kef me, this shit is heavy."

We both jump to our feet. Jamef moves to her side and takes the other end of the box, and they set it on the end of the table together.

I move to Bethiah's side, unable to take my gaze off the box. "What is that? Ship parts?" That's the logical answer, but if so, why bring them to dinner? "You couldn't leave work alone?"

"Ha." She reaches down and grabs a handful of my hair, tilting my head back and plants a smacking kiss on my mouth. "You are gonna be so in love with me once you see what's inside."

"I'm already in love with you, dummy," I tell her, amused. Then her words sink in. "It's a present? For me?"

"It is. Kef, it's hard to keep a secret around here, too. I don't know how you manage, Jamef. I've been bursting for ages." Bethiah moves over to his side and slides an arm around his waist. They both look smugly pleased with themselves, watching me.

This feels a bit like Christmas. It takes all I have not to wriggle like an excited puppy. "You two conspired to get me a gift? What is it?"

“Expensive,” Bethiah blurts immediately.

Jamef nudges her with his elbow. He turns to me. “Just open it.”

I approach the box and it’s half the size I am, wider than it is tall. I don’t know how she managed to carry it, given that there’s all kinds of technological gobbledygook on the lid. They look like controls of some kind, but I do recognize one button for a “hatch” and press it. The moment I do, the lid hisses and a cool puff of air breezes out.

“They’re in hibernation so they could travel well,” Bethiah explains. “So don’t panic.”

They?

The misty smoke clears and the lid tilts all the way back, revealing two opalescent lizard-cat cubs curled around each other.

Oh.

*Ohhhhh.*

I burst into tears. “You got two carinoux babies?”

“Jamef was right,” Bethiah says. “Alice was looking for the right home for them and wasn’t interested in money. Well, *somewhat* interested in money, but I got a discount because we’re friendly. One’s for you so you’ll always have protection on the ship, and the other we need to drop to Risda for Simone. You get first pick of course.”

I cry buckets of happy tears as I reach in and pull one sleepy lizard-kitten out. The thing is long and has so many legs that it’s like trying to cradle a slinky, but I pull him (or her) against my chest anyhow. Immediately, it curls against my neck, burrowing its face against my warmth and starts to purr. “Oh my god,” I weep, beyond joy. “This one is mine. He’s so cute. And perfect.”

“They’re both boys,” Bethiah says, casting a smug look of pride in my direction. “The males are more protective than the females and as long as we don’t get a female near them, we don’t have to worry about babies. That should work for

Simone, and for us, because by the time he's old enough to mount anything, we'll be out on the *Spot* again, and you'll be piloting our ship."

Hot tears slide down my cheeks as I rock the baby in my arms. "I love him," I choke. "Thank you so much. Both of you. Was it super expensive?"

Jamef immediately covers Bethiah's mouth before she can answer. "It doesn't matter," he says in a firm voice. "You're worth it. You're our mate and we want you to be safe and comfortable, even if we're off ship doing a job."

It's perfect. It's an amazing gift. I'm so humbled and so happy that words fail me. I love that they think of me at every turn, and they make me feel so important and so, so loved. The knot in my throat is formidable, and I run my hand down the leathery scales of the baby carinoux, petting it. The other in the box lets out a sleepy mew, and I reach in to take him, too.

"We'll absolutely have to visit Risda again," I point out as Bethiah helps me adjust the second sleepy kitten against my other side. My arms are full of both babies, but this might be one of the best moments in my life and I don't complain.

"You don't mind, do you?" Jamef asks, and his mouth is twitching, trying to hold back a smile. "I suspect Simone will be pleased."

"Simone is going to shit her pants," I agree with excitement.

"Kef, I sure hope not." Bethiah makes a face. "So you're happy with the gift?"

As if she doesn't know. "I love you both so much," I declare fiercely. "So keffing much."

"We love you, too," Jamef says, and gives me a meaningful look. "Did you want to bring up your question to Bethiah? About the serum?"

"It can wait." Something about this gift just makes me feel so safe. It's not that they bought me a pet attack-cat that will grow up to be an amazing protector. It's that they're thinking of me constantly, trying to determine the best way to not only

make me happy, but to ensure my safety. I'm important to them. Vital to them. And that makes me feel safer than any nanobots in the universe. I know that as long as we're together, Bethiah and Jamef will always look out for me and I'll always watch out for them.

We're more than a team. We're a triad. I don't care how corny that is. It's us and it works.

I kiss one baby lizard-cat head and just beam at my mates. "Did you pay for these or did you use Bethiah's rule number one?"

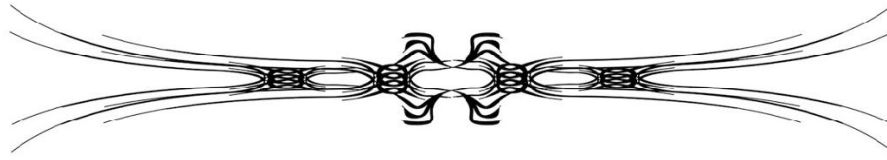
"My rule number one?" she asks, puzzled.

"Always take what you want," I remind her, laughing. "You forgot?" When she shrugs, I laugh even harder. "Is there even a rule number two?"

"I don't keffing know." Bethiah slides a hand into Jerrok's belt and puts her other on my shoulder. "I'm making this up as I go."

I should have known.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE



Hello there!

The moment Bethiah stepped on the page in *When She Purrs*, people wanted a book for her. There's just something about a completely random jerk of a character that makes my fans say "Yes, I want that book." I've been asked for a Bethiah book for a long time, and I finally decided to dip into that territory.

This was initially presented as a daily serial for people to follow along with on my website and via Facebook. The epilogue is all new, and along the way, typos have been corrected and minor continuity errors fixed.

It wasn't easy writing Bethiah's story - because I had to make sure that both Jamef and Dora felt like equal partners in the relationship. It can be tricky to write two love interests who are also in love with each other, because it feels like a push-pull and a three-way tug of war. Going into this, I knew I had to make it feel like all three of them were equally invested in this relationship and all three worked equally well together. If it felt too heavily slanted towards Bethiah and Dora as a couple with Jamef there to provide the occasional dicking, well, that wouldn't make me happy. Ditto if Bethiah and Jamef were 'together' and Dora was an afterthought, or Dora and Jamef had no chemistry. That might be why this book is really long and relationship focused more than anything. There's a touch of bounty hunting, but the majority of this book is them figuring out how to navigate a messy relationship and making it work for all three of them.

At the end of the day, I'm really happy with how it turned out and I feel like it's balanced between the three of them. I wanted it to feel as if you took one of them away, things wouldn't feel complete, and I hope you agree!

This is currently the last book in the Corsair Brothers series. Not only have we run out of corsair brothers, but we've more or less wrapped storylines and started new ones. Those of you looking for Straik's mom to get her comeuppance, I'm not done with this universe. Not by a long shot! Maybe now I'll finally be able to get around to the crew of the *Scarlet Gaze/Darkened Eye*.

Speaking of characters...there are a lot of cameos in this book by other characters in the Rubyverse. Some might be blink-and-you'll-miss-it and some are longer. I love adding people in just so you can see that they are indeed living their best lives post-book. In addition, Simone will someday get a Risdaverse of her own (and a lady love interest). Rhonda? Not necessarily gonna get her own book. You guys LOVE a chaotic asshole character and I've already been hit with requests for Rhonda to get her own book but not all people are ones you want to follow for 200 (or 600) pages. I'm just saying. :) Maybe I'll get hit with an idea for Rhonda Redemption, but right now I agree with the characters and want her to walk off a cliff.

I hope you enjoyed the book! This was my first foray as Ruby into women loving women loving men. Most triads in romance are two men loving one woman but I'd long ago established that Bethiah was bisexual and had a long history with a human woman that had broken her heart, and to go straight to dick and only dick would have felt like cheating the characters. Not every bisexual ends up in a triad, of course, but Bethiah is unconventional, so she gets an unconventional romance.

(Besides, I like to think she's more than just a single person can handle and keep their sanity.)

Thank you, as always, for reading! <3

— Ruby

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Enjoy!

