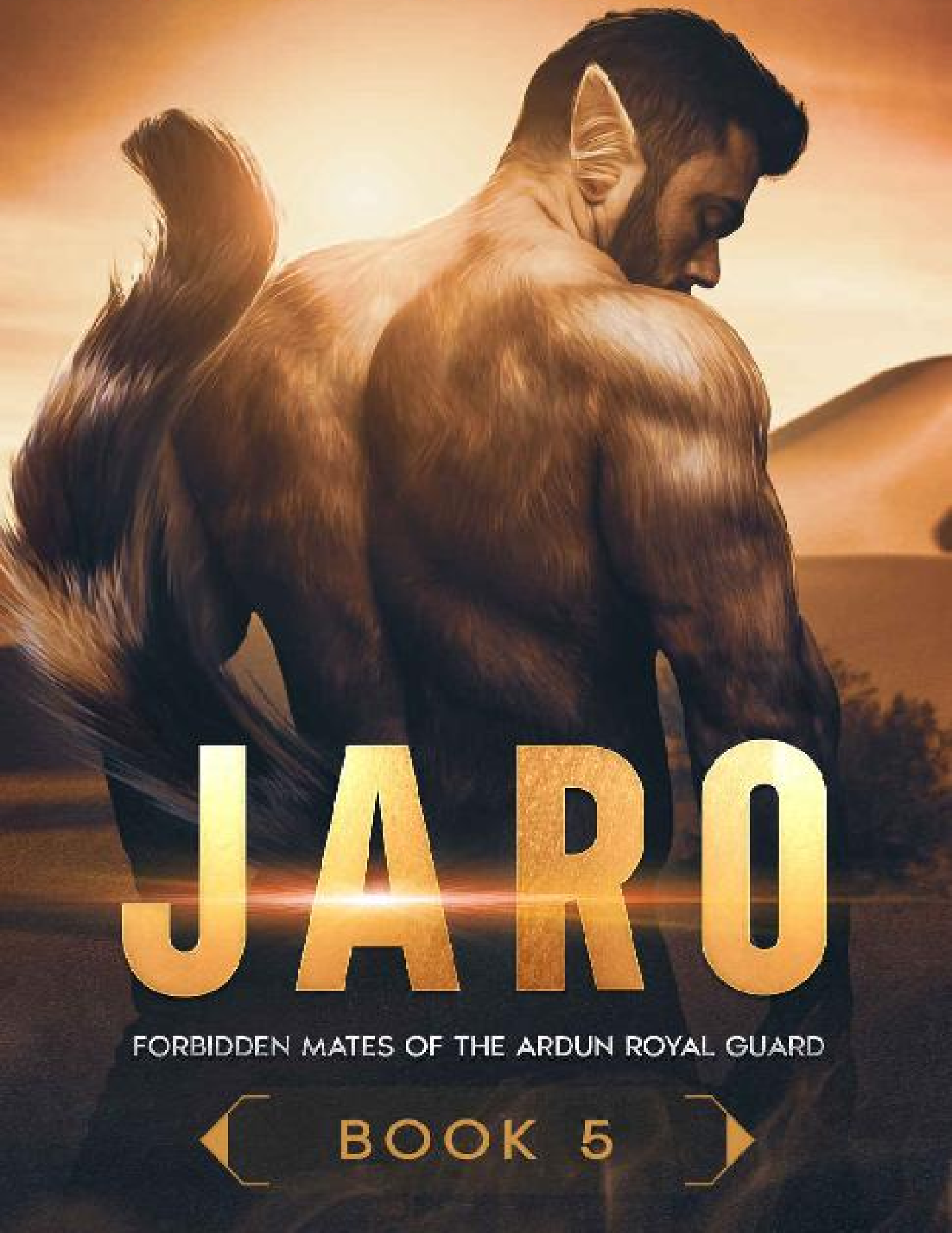


AMI WRIGHT



JARO

FORBIDDEN MATES OF THE ARDUN ROYAL GUARD

◀ BOOK 5 ▶

Jaro

Ami Wright

Ami Wright

Copyright © 2022

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[BLURB](#)

[ONE](#)

[TWO](#)

[THREE](#)

[FOUR](#)

[FIVE](#)

[SIX](#)

[SEVEN](#)

[EIGHT](#)

[NINE](#)

[TEN](#)

[ELEVEN](#)

[TWELVE](#)

[THIRTEEN](#)

[FOURTEEN](#)

[FIFTEEN](#)

[SIXTEEN](#)

[SEVENTEEN](#)

[EIGHTEEN](#)

[NINETEEN](#)

[TWENTY](#)

[TWENTY ONE](#)

[TWENTY TWO](#)

[TWENTY THREE](#)

[TWENTY FOUR](#)

[PREVIEW: IKKAD](#)

[MORE BY AMI WRIGHT](#)

BLURB

ALL HIS PAIN, UNDONE by the scent of her heat.

He's been in love before and had his heart broken. So he dedicates himself to the Shahra's royal guards, giving up on ever finding his true mate.

But the human female makes him doubt his vow. She's brave, loyal, caring. Everything he'd want his mate to be.

Working together on an undercover mission means faking a mate claim with a bite. She's put him in the friend zone and he has already taken a vow. He can't claim her.

So when the lines between real and fake start to blur how does he deal with his forbidden desire for her?

He longs to taste every inch of her.

Rut her.

Make her his!

If she's not his true mate, her heat won't trigger his rut. So why is her scent all he can think about?

Jaro is a full length romance with a guaranteed HEA and no cliffhangers. It can be read as a stand alone. If you like feline aliens who are big pussy cats for their ladies, this series is for you. Please check content warnings on my website.

ONE

JARO LEANED BACK IN his chair laughing at the joke Ceyan had made. The jovial male slapped his hand on the table chuckling at his own humor. With a nod of thanks, Jaro accepted a bowl of synth curry as it was passed to him even though he'd already eaten. One bowl of noodles hardly counted, and he always had room for a little more.

He was just about to swallow his first bite of the fragrant dish when Tobis said, "And then Her Majesty said it could be my job to clean the mold off the potted plants in the Garden Room if I didn't stop staring at Soraya." He grinned. "But I can't help it, guys. She's the hottest fucking thing I've ever seen. I bet there's a little wildcat under that cold exterior."

Jaro nearly snorted his curry back into the bowl. Soraya, the royal companion, was icy, completely vicious, and very much off limits to the likes of these guys. She'd probably had an aristocratic match lined up with a minister or something. Whoever the guy was, he'd have to be quite a male to meet those exacting standards!

"You better watch yourself," he said to Tobis laughingly. "I heard she cut off the balls of the last guy who said that about her."

"Yeah, fried them up and ate them for dinner as well, I bet," another officer said with a smirk.

Jaro just shook his head. He sat in the officers' mess with five of the civil corrections officers he'd befriended since arriving at the royal residence in the capital, Grevista Gardens. He was no officer. He was somewhere between civilian and royal guard. He finished the annual gladiator games in a champion's position, but had not yet sworn in to Her Majesty's service. Frankly, the holdup was a little unnerving.

Unnerving and lonely.

Hanging around the officer's mess beat sitting around in his room by himself. It sure beat spending another lonely Friday night alone in his apartment, missing Desi and Riya

like a star-damned hole in his heart. No, he'd promised himself no more moping around the home they used to share, remembering a life that wasn't his anymore. The weekends he got to spend with Desi every month were never enough to fill the hole, but he and Riya had agreed it was best for the kit to have a stable family life, complete with two loving parents and a happy home. It just fucking stung that he was no longer really part of that equation.

Jaro took another large bite of spicy curry to mask the way his eyes had gone misty at his black thoughts. No one wanted to be around a Moaning Memhid.

Suddenly there was a strange lull in the conversation, and then Tobis let out a long "Ooooooh!"

Jaro looked up to find them all staring at him. Then his eyes drifted to the wall panel on the opposite wall. *Jaro, report to the throne room immediately.*

"What'd you do?" Ceyan asked.

Jaro shrugged. "Guess I'll go find out." Scooping up his bowl and the empty bowl of the officer next to him, Jaro stacked them in the dish bot and then brushed a hand over his fluffy orange and brown tail. "Wish me luck."

The officers called out encouragement as he turned and walked out of the mess hall. He had no reason to worry though. What could he possibly have done? It was likely just some official business before the ceremony.

When he arrived at the throne room minutes later, the officer outside let him through with a nod of acknowledgment. Inside, Shahra Fareeda sat on the elaborately carved wooden throne at the center of the room. The hall was empty save for her and Soraya. The tall, lithe female with pure white fur stood rigidly by the side of the throne. Her cool blue gaze followed him as Jaro made his way across the room to kneel at Shahra Fareeda's feet.

The shahra gave him a smile and gestured for him to get up. "Jaro. Thank you for coming so quickly."

“Of course.” He couldn’t read much from her expression, but she didn’t look angry, so that was something.

“I asked to speak with you because I have something to tell you which may affect your decision to take your vow tomorrow.”

Jaro’s head snapped up and he stared straight into the yellow eyes of the monarch for a beat too long before he remembered to drop his gaze. “You do? I mean, you have, Your Majesty?”

“I’m sure you’re aware of the details of the arrangements I made with Amir after he found his true mate.”

Jaro ducked his head lower to hide the grimace that crossed his face at the use of the term. Many Ardun referred to a biologically compatible mate as a true mate—a mate whose pheromones were so perfectly paired with your own that it would send the female into heat. He had always thought it sounded like a romantic dream. Something to aspire to. These days the words tasted bitter in his mouth.

“I am.”

Shahra Fareeda was typically served by a group of royal guards, bodyguards who also formed a part of her harem. These males were chosen from the ranks of the champion gladiators at the end of each year’s annual games. Since Fareeda was in the second year of her rule, she still had a whole harem to fill and this year’s games had been particularly popular. Some previous monarchs had continued to take ex-gladiators into their harem well into their reign.

“Then you know that I have offered him a position as a guard without the additional duties of the harem.”

Jaro nodded.

“I also offered Hesam a similar arrangement, but he declined. And since Malik neither wished for a position, nor qualified after the scandal, I’m left with one guard who is incapacitated for the moment due to injury, one guard who is currently unavailable, and two gladiators who have yet to take their vows.”

Jaro held his expression firm. It wasn't his place to ask about Ikkad's suspension from the royal guards, but that didn't change the fact that he itched to do so. He felt bad for Malik who seemed to have been caught up in a false accusation, but seemed genuinely devoted to his new human mate. It *had* surprised him when Amir had claimed a human mate. Even more when surly, reserved Hesam had too. Both of them true mates who had sent their males into rut. Because apparently everyone other male had a true mate.

He pressed his eyes closed for a moment, willing down the bitter thoughts. Riya hadn't done it on purpose. She had never meant to hurt him. He should be happy for Amir, Hesam, and Malik. He wanted to be happy for them.

When he returned his gaze to the Shahra, she was watching him with a soft smile on her face and the tip of her jet black tail twitching against the leg of the throne.

"In here it's only us, and if you're going to take up the position of royal guard, you'll be privy to things that I'll be trusting you to keep secret. And in return I'll expect to hear your honest thoughts."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"So you can let me know if there's something you'd like to say." She waited, still watching him.

Jaro shook his head. "No. It's not important." No one needed to listen to him griping, let alone the Shahra herself.

"Very well. As a result of the discussions I had with Amir and his mate, I've decided to give all my guards the option of serving without the additional duties of the harem. Should you choose to enter my harem, I should also let you know the duties would be purely ceremonial and... biological. There would be no requirement to fulfill the other, more traditional aspect of the role."

Jaro blinked up at her in confusion. "You mean you don't want...?" He waved his hand rather than say something crude in front of the monarch. Which was ridiculous, given that half an hour ago he had fully been expecting to go to bed with this

female. Yet even standing right in front of her, Shahra Fareeda still somehow felt untouchable.

“No. I don’t want that.”

Was it his imagination or did Shahra Fareeda sneak a glance to the side at Soraya? When he looked, the white queen’s face was as stony as ever.

“Um, okay.”

“Okay what, Jaro? Which is it? Do you wish to serve in the harem, or just the guards? I should let you know that if you decide to opt for the harem and feel the need for female companionship, that can be arranged as long as you are discreet. But you could never take a mate.”

No. He would never take a mate again. He’d given up on finding his true mate. Anything else was too painful to consider. The situation had led him to enter the games in the hopes of joining the harem. Female companionship and affection without the threat of being rejected again. Not that the chances of it happening twice to the same male were very high, but then the chances of finding a true mate were so slim you didn’t expect that to happen either, particularly after you’d already mated and had a kitten.

He shook his head. “I’m sorry. No mate. Understood.”

Shahra Fareeda gave him a long look, those yellow eyes seeming to see more than what he’d said, but she only gave him a polite smile. “Then you’ll serve? In both?”

He shrugged. “I came to serve in whatever capacity you need me. That hasn’t changed.”

“Thank you, Jaro. I very much appreciate your loyalty.”

When the audience was over, he left the throne room, stepping out of the elevator onto the floor housing the guest suites. A dull heaviness settled in his chest. It wasn’t that he was disappointed about the change to the harem or the guards. More that it stung not to be wanted. Again. Not to be good enough. Of course it wasn’t personal. It hadn’t been when Riya found her true mate either. Didn’t stop the wound from bleeding from time to time.

The worst of it was that he was jealous. Not of Karim, Riya's new mate. Not anymore. More he was jealous she'd found something so right. She glowed with happiness whenever he saw her. It was the sort of fulfillment she'd never found in their mating. Too bad for him, he'd never find his.

Jaro nearly bumped into the short sturdy frame of Selia as he turned the corner. She was the woman he'd escorted from the riot at the disrupted closing ceremony of the games and who he'd been charged with protecting until they made it safely to Grevista Gardens. Of course, she was more than capable of looking after herself, so that job had been an easy one.

"Hey, Jaro." Selia's full lips cracked into a wide smile, lifting the dark beauty mark on her chin a little and making her brown eyes crinkle at the corners. Then she frowned. "Something up?"

He shook his head. "Nah. I'm okay. Where are you off to in such a rush?" He tried to force a smile to put her at ease. She only looked at him for a moment longer.

"Girls' night in Nat's room, now that Sattar finally got her here." She paused, still searching his face. "Listen, I know Charlise and Zara and Rosa. There's no way it's going to be a late night. They're all too wrapped up in the honeymoon phase with their new mates. Can I come by your room after? Maybe we can watch a vid or just hang out for a bit?"

He should have said no. After all, he was about to swear into the royal harem tomorrow. Nothing good could come of the way he was always tempted to lean closer and draw in more of Selia's renthi flower scent whenever they were this close. She would be on a flight home to Earth any day now. Experience told him that the heartbreak of having something, only to have it torn away, wasn't worth the risk.

Even so, he grinned, and the pressure in his chest lightened. "Yeah. I'd like that."

TWO

NATLEA OPENED THE DOOR of her suite with a bright smile for Selia when she knocked. That bright smile stayed firmly in place as Selia pulled back from the firm hug she'd wrapped her friend in and searched Natlea's face. Whatever had happened between Natlea and Sattar between getting from the stadium six days ago and arriving safely at the royal residence, Natlea clearly wasn't ready to talk about it. Maybe she could get some time one on one with her later. Or maybe Natlea would talk to Charlise. The two of them had always been close. Selia shelved her worry and tried to relax. It would only heighten Natlea's unhappiness if Selia seemed anxious.

She gave her friend's hand a little squeeze and followed her into the living area of her suite where Charlise and Zara were waiting.

"Seels!" Zara and Charli jumped up from where they'd been sitting on cushions around the low table in the center of the room. They bounded into a big group hug, even though they'd already seen each other earlier that day.

"Where's Anya?" Natlea frowned.

"Said she's not feeling well. She must have eaten something funny at the ball yesterday." Selia shrugged. It wasn't like Anya to let anything stop her having a fun night. She must be really ill.

"What are you drinking?" Zara asked, holding up her own brightly colored cocktail. "Get Nat to make you one of whatever this is. She's outdone herself."

Natlea smiled. "I added tium to the peach fizz cocktails I normally make. You know that new spice I got at the markets? It's my new favorite thing. I've been adding it to everything!"

"It's amazing." Charlise gestured with her own drink, sloshing a little over the side as she did. She scrambled for a napkin.

Selia gave her a knowing look. "How long have you all been drinking without me?"

Charlise snorted. “I know I’m a lightweight, but I promise this is my first. I just... I’m so relaxed. Feels like walking around tipsy all the time.”

Zara gave her a little nudge and a wink. “I know, right? Why would you ever look at a human guy again?”

Selia sat on the spare cushion at the table and crossed her legs under her. Then she leaned forward, elbows on the table, and forced a grin. She told herself she absolutely was not feeling weird about the fact that her friends were deliriously happy and she was... not.

“Okay, okay. You two have got to stop passing knowing smirks and give us all the goss, right, Nat?” She glanced to see Natlea standing at the kitchen bot stirring something into a cocktail glass. Natlea brushed a bright green lock of hair back from her face, tucking it behind her ear, without looking up. “Oh, sure. We need to know what we’re missing out on.”

Okay, that definitely did not sound like a woman who had nothing to hide. She was almost certain something was going on between Nat and Sattar. Only she couldn’t imagine the haughty, hostile veneer of that arrogant male ever softening even a little. So what was her sweet, tenderhearted friend doing caught up with a guy like that? It made her protective instincts go into overdrive, but she took a deep breath and forced herself to direct her attention back to Zara and Charlise for the moment.

“...their barbs! Oh, my goddess. If you had told me about it before I would have freaked out, but now I know, I’m kinda excited for next month, you know?” Charlise covered her blushing face in her hands and Zara grinned.

“I know. And in the meantime, it’s like Amir can’t get enough of going down on me. Like I actually think it’s me who has to tell him to stop most times when I can’t take anymore.”

Natlea handed Selia a drink and she took a big gulp to overcome the way her mouth had gone dry. A guy that keen to eat pussy? Her friends had to be joking.

Only, she already knew from the pink flush on Charlise's pale cheeks that they weren't.

Shit. Why couldn't it have been her? Why couldn't she be the one with the hot Ardun boyfriend—no, mate! A guy that wanted her so much he had to bite and claim her. Bite, claim, and apparently go down on her for hours.

Nope. Not going there. No point dreaming about what might have been. Besides, if Selia had a boyfriend who wanted to eat her out for hours, it would only be a cause for tension. Inevitably she'd end up faking yet another orgasm just so another guy didn't get his feelings hurt when she couldn't come. How would that work with a long-term boyfriend?

No. That was why Selia didn't do boyfriends. Too awkward. If only she could stop the image of broad-shouldered, smiling Jaro from sneaking into her thoughts while her girlfriends kept talking about how Ardun culture had evolved around the idea of pleasing the female. About how Ardun males took pride in decoratively capping the claws of one hand to please their females.

Goddess! Her pussy did a traitorous little flutter. She needed to stop trying to remember if Jaro had any of his claws capped or not. She couldn't stop thinking about it though. Then she remembered. The answer was no.

Interesting that he hadn't had them capped to please the shahra. Perhaps he would.

Ugh! The guy clearly was not interested in her. He was just the kinda guy who was warm and friendly with everyone. Even Sattar! She needed to quit being stupid. Taking another large swallow of her cocktail, she refocused on the conversation.

"You're quiet tonight, Nat," Charlise said after a while. "Anything the matter?"

Natlea looked down at her drink, swirling the last of the liquid in her glass. "I'm thinking about heading home tomorrow," she said suddenly, without looking up.

Okay, what the fuck had this guy done?

Selia couldn't hold back the angry huff that welled up in her chest. Natlea looked up and Selia realized she must be scowling, because Nat's face crumpled.

"Oh, Nat." Selia pulled her in, and then they all crowded in to give her a hug while she sobbed against Selia's shoulder. "I can't do it anymore. I thought I could be brave, but I'm not. I'm just a mess and I'm just hurting him more by sticking around hoping for something he can't give me."

Selia stroked Natlea's hair and Charlise got up to get a tissue from somewhere. Zara held Natlea's hand. "Hurting who, Nat?" Zara asked softly.

"Sattar," Natlea said, sniffing. "We kinda slept together before we got to Grevista Gardens. And by kinda I mean we did. A lot. And it was amazing." She dissolved into a fresh wave of tears. Selia glanced at Zara over Natlea's head. Really? She was crying over that asshole? That was absolutely the last straw.

Arms tensing around Natlea, Selia said through gritted teeth, "What did he promise you? Did he say you could be together? And now he's going back on his word? Why on Earth would you go for a guy that treated you like shit?"

Natlea pulled back, shaking her head. "No, it's not like that. He's not like that. Not really. Underneath there's this really protective, caring guy. It's just that he's got so much pressure on him all the time."

"That's no excuse for being an asshole to you."

"He isn't. Well, he was a bit at first, but it turns out that's because I was going into heat. Or, um, ovulating, or whatever. And he was trying to resist."

"Oh!" Zara's eyes went wide. "Oh, really? Then you...?"

Natlea nodded. "Yeah. We did. And then after I wasn't in heat anymore he still wanted to. And he got all growly and protective and offered to help me get Blissful Bites Bakery back from Zavyr and—"

"Well, I'm not sad about Zavyr. That guy's a dick. Pure and simple," Selia said.

“You knew about that?”

Selia shrugged. “Anya.”

Natlea snorted. “Figures. I guess I’m grateful she told everyone though. I don’t want to dredge all that back up again. It’s just that it felt nice to be with a guy who was so crazy about me he couldn’t keep his hands off me. It’s been so long since things were like that with Zavyr. Who am I kidding? They were never like that. And Sattar has this really sweet side. It’s just that no one gets to see it.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it,” Selia said dryly.

“But, hun, he’s still joining the harem tomorrow, right?” Zara asked.

Natlea nodded. “He has to.” She bit her lip and glanced down at her drink again.

“Well, he doesn’t actually,” Charlise said, sounding hesitant.

“But that’s just it. Your mates all definitely made the right call not to. Don’t get me wrong. But Sattar has family responsibilities as well as a duty to the Shahra. And he’s worried that since Hesam and Malik both turned down their positions, the monarchy’s in serious trouble if any more gladiators turn down the Shahra. Makes her look bad.”

Charlise twisted a tissue round and round in her hands until Natlea covered them with hers. “And it’s not like he could have chosen me anyway. His mother would never have approved of the match. She’d cut him off. So don’t feel bad because Malik didn’t want to be a royal guard.”

“Do you care about his mother though? Really?” Selia asked before she could stop herself.

“No. Not really. But he does. He’s wanted her approval all his life. How can I be the thing stopping him from achieving that? How can I be the thing he has to give up everything for? I can’t ask that of him.”

“You deserve it though.”

Zara and Charlise were nodding too. Natlea brushed away another tear. “I do. And I won’t wait around here if he doesn’t see that. So I’m booking a ticket home tomorrow.”

In the hushed pause, Selia raised her glass. “Well, good for you, Nat. You do deserve it. I’m so pleased that you’re putting your foot down about it.”

“Cheers to that,” Zara said, lifting her glass. “I think we all need another drink. You’re going to go get that bakery back from Zavyr and create a catering empire, right?”

Natlea nodded. “Yup. Sure am.”

The others started talking about the long trip home and their plans about whether to return to Earth or not. Selia sighed, twisting the stem of her glass between her fingers. She should really book her own ticket home. Her leave had been due to end this week, but she’d called in to extend it, unwilling to return to Earth when things felt so unsettled here.

The project she had been working on, tracking down companies using legal loopholes to produce shock collars that could fit around a human neck, had wrapped before she left for her vacation, and her boss hadn’t allocated her to a new task yet.

Besides, most of her friends were still here. Going home only meant she’d be dumped with the responsibility for her aging father, her grown-up brothers all far too happy to leave her with the lion’s share of the work. It had been nice being almost unreachable while on vacation, honestly. She wasn’t sure she could face going back quite yet.

She definitely wasn’t lingering for any other reason. Any last ditch hope she, too, might ovulate and somehow snag an amazing guy who’d treat her like a princess and give her all the things she’d never allowed herself to hope for. Okay, not just any guy. One guy in particular. Which was stupid. Had she been taking her hormone suppressants like the embassy stipulated? Nope. Did she feel bad about it? A little, but a desperate girl could dream, right? Besides, not like her cycle was ever regular anyway. It was like her body was already set up to fail.

She sighed. She'd stay a little longer, whatever the reason.

Selia really admired the steely resolve in Natlea's clenched jaw and the way she refused to give in to the wobble in her bottom lip when Charlise and Zara started talking about purring. Whatever there had been between Sattar and Natlea, it was good to see her friend being assertive for once. Natlea was all too likely to just roll over and let other people walk all over her. Well, not if Selia could help it.

"You're serious about this?" she asked Natlea.

"I am. I've decided."

Folding her arms over her chest, she said, "Then have you wiped his ID off your com?"

Natlea flushed. "Not yet."

She held out her hand. "Give it over. We're not having another drink if that ID is still in your com. Not a chance. There will be no drunken messages late in the night, begging him to come for a booty call.

Natlea groaned. "You're right. Good call." Flicking up her holoscreen, she deleted his ID. "There. Done. Moving on."

Several drinks and a lot of ranting about idiot exes later, Charlise leaned closer to Natlea and said in a very serious tone. "You should let Mal talk to him. I bet he could convince Sattar to stop being an idiot ex. I mean not-quite-ex... oh, you know."

Natlea shook her head. "No. I don't want that." Then she caught her bottom lip between her teeth. "But do you think he'd give Sattar a message? You know, the really old-fashioned printed type? I won't send it on my com, but just a note to say goodbye and why I left?"

"Of course!" Charlise brought up her own holoscreen and the two of them put their heads together, composing and printing the message.

Glancing at her own wrist-com, Selia saw it was later than she'd thought. Would Jaro still be waiting for her? Would he

still have that unbearably sad look on his face he'd had earlier this evening when she'd bumped into him in the hall?

Her tummy gave a little twist at the thought of him sitting alone in his room so sad and wistful, in contrast to his normally cheerful happy-go-lucky self. What on Earth had gotten him so down?

Since the day of the closing ceremony when their girls vacation had turned into a chaotic escape from attempted abduction and a tense few days of worrying for all her friends, Jaro had been her rock. He was so solid and dependable. Always there with a kind word. Never pushy or demanding. He always knew when to listen quietly and when she needed someone to bounce ideas off.

Throwing back the rest of her drink, she got to her feet, a little unsteady. Did she have five or six cocktails? What time had they started drinking anyway?

"I'm going to call it a night," she announced.

"Yeah, me too." Zara got to her feet. "I'm going to go check on the invalid."

Charlise snorted. "You mean, go see if he's still awake so you can go screw his brains out." Giggling, she lifted a hand to her mouth. "I really have had too many drinks."

It shouldn't make Selia's tummy do another little twist hearing Charlise so happy and relaxed. She couldn't seem to squash down the little germ of jealousy that had infected the whole night. Why couldn't she just be happy for her friends?

Zara only laughed at Charlise's teasing. "Can I just remind you that our rooms share a wall, Charli. Don't pretend you and Malik aren't just as bad."

"You can hear?" Charlise squeaked and covered her whole face.

"Probably only half the time." The two of them stumbled toward the door giggling. As Selia went to follow, she caught Natlea's eye. Immediately she felt bad for indulging in her own little pity party while poor Nat was still so clearly hurting. She slipped her arm around Natlea's waist and gave her a

squeeze. “You just let me know if you change your mind and you want me to hand him his ass, okay?”

Nat shook her head. “No. Thanks, Seels. I’m just going to try to move on.”

When they opened the door, they found Charlise’s mate, Malik, waiting in the corridor, leaning back against the wall. He sprang into motion as soon as he spotted Charlise, going straight to her. He pulled her against his side with an arm around her shoulders. Leaning in he pressed a kiss to her neck that made her giggle.

“What have you ladies been up to? You look delightfully flushed and tipsy. Does this mean you’re going to let me take advantage?”

She slapped at his chest playfully. “You’re very bad for waiting around out here like a stalker, you know.”

He only grinned. “How else could I be sure you’re all safe and be ready at just the right time to walk you all back to your rooms?”

“Yep, he’s a keeper,” Zara said.

Malik hooked an arm through Zara’s and turned back to look over his shoulder at Selia. “How about you, Selia? You coming?”

She waved her hand in front of her, trying to bite down on her smile and fix it in place. Goddess, why had she had that fifth drink? Or was it sixth? She always got a bit weepy when she was drunk. That’s all this was.

“Nah, I’m good. My room’s just a few doors down this way. You all go ahead.”

“You sure?” Malik’s brow furrowed and his tail flicked, but he had both arms full and Charlise and Zara were already giggling about something else.

“Sure. Don’t worry about me, okay?”

“I can walk you,” Natlea said, from the door of her suite.

“Don’t be silly.” Selia waved them all away. “I’m literally a few doors down. And we’re inside the royal residence. What would happen?”

Why was she so reluctant to admit she actually intended to drop by Jaro’s room before turning in? She was a grown woman. She could choose who to be friends with. And who to moon over hopelessly.

Rolling her eyes at herself, Selia hurried down the hall, before anyone could follow and question where she was going.

THREE

JARO'S FOOLISH HEART gave a little jump when a knock at his door broke the awful silence of that lonely time, too early for bed, but too late to call a friend. The time that should be filled with a mate to cuddle up with and share quiet moments that didn't need words.

He launched himself to his feet and rushed to the door, unable to keep the grin from his face when it opened to reveal Selia. He needed to be more careful or he was only going to wind up getting hurt again.

She was still dressed in the form-fitting active wear she preferred. It showed off her toned and muscular figure, but left half her defined midriff bare. Dragging his eyes away from that enticing expanse of skin, Jaro forced himself to focus on her face—not difficult, since it was equally appealing. Selia's strong chin and broad features were offset by the biggest, deepest brown eyes framed with heavy, dark lashes. Her beauty mark was a dark spot on her smooth bronze skin that drew his eyes to her full lips.

“You came.” Mentally he groaned. He should not sound so much like an eager kid at the prospect of a friend coming by to hang out.

“Of course!” She waved a hand dramatically in the air to emphasize her words and he caught the sweet scent of alcohol on her breath. Quite the girls' night then. He stepped back, inviting her in. She entered his room, striding with all of her usual confidence, but she used just a little more swagger than normal, making her hips sway. He turned away to close the door.

“You want to watch the game? I held off watching it live in case you wanted to.” Safe territory. Sports were safe territory. It would definitely not read as a date night if they stuck to sports. He could keep telling himself they were just friends.

“Yeah. That sounds great actually. Hey, have you got anything to drink? I could use another drink right about now.”

He frowned. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

Her scowl was exaggerated. Selia poked the air between them with a finger. “Hey. You think I’m some dainty little lady who can’t hold her alcohol? I’ll show you, buddy.”

Buddy. A timely reminder not to be ridiculous.

“Nothing like it!” He held out his hands defensively.

“Yeah. That’s right. Nothing dainty about me!” Selia flexed one muscled arm, making him smile. He’d always liked her strength. Made him feel like he didn’t have to be so damn careful around her. Selia marched to the fridge and got out two beers, handing one to Jaro and taking the other herself. “Come on. Have a drink with me. And what about this game, huh?”

Bringing up his holoscreen, he gestured to the sofa. “Make yourself comfortable. I’m putting it on.”

Hoverball was the second most popular sport on Ardun, right behind the annual gladiator games, of course. It was a mix between the old-Earth sports of soccer and basketball, with the brutality of ice hockey thrown in for good measure. He’d introduced Selia to it during the first few days of lockdown when the Shahra had called the curfew. She had quickly become an avid fan, picking up much of the strategy and tactics and the nuances of team rivalries and fan code. Tonight, rather than boisterously cheering for his favorite team the Sand Scorpions, Selia tucked her feet up on the sofa next to him and sat quietly drinking her beer.

They watched for a while in silence. It would usually be a comfortable silence between them. Selia wasn’t the sort to leave him in any doubt if something was on her mind. Usually. Tonight, something about her silence and the way she was tucked into herself made the fur on the back of his neck rise.

Out of the blue, she leaned forward, putting her beer down on the coffee table and turned to him. “Have you ever thought about what it really means to be in love?”

Jaro nearly choked on the mouthful he’d just taken. He’d done nothing but think about that for far too long now. He still

wasn't sure he had a good answer. Thankfully, Selia went on before he had to reply.

“I mean, if you're in love—really in love—you'd give up everything for that person, wouldn't you?”

Jaro's tail swatted the sofa, his heart thudding in his chest. Did she know? Had someone told her? But who? He didn't think anyone except maybe Malik knew about Riya. It wasn't exactly something he usually opened up about. It was humiliating. He'd hate for this gorgeous human to know he hadn't been male enough for his mate.

Selia's thoughtful expression turned angry and she stabbed the air with that finger again. “He's just an arrogant jerk who doesn't even see what's right in front of him.”

“Who?” Hells! A brief stab of jealousy spiked in his chest to think that maybe she was trying to talk to him about her feelings for another male.

“Sattar.”

He gaped.

Selia went on. “Natlea's the sweetest godsdamn person in the five systems and he's just going to throw that all away. For what? Because he's too used to having money? Because he's too proud to admit that he wants a human?”

Jaro had to stop himself from grinning. She was talking about her friend. Getting very animated too. Selia was worked up, gesturing wildly with both hands. Then suddenly she was crying, a fat tear trickling over her cheek and more welling in those beautiful eyes.

Fuck. He should have remembered this about females. He sat next to her, hands itching with the urge to hold her, but he was torn. Already he skirted the bounds of what was appropriate, given he was swearing into the Shahra's service tomorrow and tonight he and Selia were alone in his room.

A long shuddering sob decided him.

Jaro raised his arm and scooted closer, close enough he could feel the heat from Selia's body all up his side through

the thin tunic he wore. She crumpled against him, burying her face against the patch of fur at the opening of the garment and he had to suppress a shudder at just how good that felt.

Mythic hells, it felt good just to hold a female in his arms again and have her snuggle against him like she belonged there. Even the warm tears cooling on his fur felt good because it was what she needed in that moment. *He* was what she needed.

Selia wept into his chest and Jaro held her. He petted her hair and tried not to breathe in her sweet scent too deeply. He was on dangerous ground as it was.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled into his fur. “I don’t know why I’m crying really. Okay I do, but it’s so dumb. This isn’t even really about Nat.”

“It isn’t?” His tail started twitching again.

“No, not really. How selfish is that? My friend’s hurting and all I can think about is how lonely I am and it makes me angry. I’m angry that she found him and he still can’t see. Because if I found someone who wanted me like that, I’d never give up on it.”

Carefully Jaro teased his claws through her long hair. He was so used to seeing it tied back. For a little while, she just rested against him and he was completely distracted by the way the dark strands played over his fingers.

Eventually she settled. She still wasn’t talking. She wasn’t exactly crying anymore, but he could still taste the thick scent of her sadness on his tongue.

“Maybe he doesn’t have to give up everything,” he said when he couldn’t think of anything else to say. He still didn’t really know what was bothering her. Couldn’t make sense of it. If she meant Sattar had gone into a rut for her friend, he could understand that. So he clung to what he could understand and said the words he wanted to believe. The words he told himself everyday so he didn’t look back and regret his decision. “If they’re true mates, then nothing will keep them apart anyway. It’s like fighting gravity.”

Then he had to reach out and take a swig of his beer just to wash the dust of disappointment from his throat at saying them out loud.

Selia pulled back and reached for her own drink. Gently he took it from her before she could take another sip. "I'm not sure this is what you need."

She sighed but nodded and relinquished the beer. One of her arms was still tucked around his middle and when he tried to disengage, she tightened her grip. "Wait. Can you just keep holding me for a minute? It doesn't have to be weird, right? It just feels so good to be held."

Wasn't that the truth? He tried to relax back against the sofa, wriggling a little to get comfortable. She sighed again. "I can't remember the last time anyone gave me a cuddle. A guy, I mean. And you smell so good." She drew in a deep breath as if to emphasize her words.

This was a bad idea.

Drunk Selia was even sweeter than sober Selia, who seemed to hold on to the injustices done to everyone around her like some kind of shield. But, if her heart was this tender beneath the armor of being strong, no wonder. Drunk, she let her guard down and it turned out she was not only sweet but soft too. She needed someone who could take care of her while she took care of everyone else.

He couldn't help putting his nose to the top of her head and breathing in her scent. Sweet and rich like renthi cactus blossom. It made him smile. He'd always thought Selia was like the cactus. Tough on the outside but with a secret sweetness beneath the surface. Anyone who'd ever been out in deserts beyond Ashad knew in a pinch you could drink the liquid from the renthi to stay hydrated. But to do so, you had to break through the prickly exterior.

"Hmm. You smell so good." She rubbed the tip of her nose through his fur, distracting him from his thoughts.

He groaned and pulled back. "Okay, time for bed. Let's get you back to your room."

She blinked up at him, but now her eyes were filling with tears again. “Yeah, you’re right. Only...” She looked down, those long lashes fluttering against her cheeks. “I don’t want to go back there by myself, you know? I don’t want to be alone.”

Oh, he knew.

That ache was far too familiar. “Come on. You can sleep on my bed. I’ll take the sofa,” he said quickly, just to be clear.

“You’re so lovely,” she told him, as he half-lifted her into a standing position. Though standing, Selia just went all floppy, slumping against him. Her firm rounded breasts pressed against his arm in a way that felt far too good and not good enough all at once. “So lovely. And you smell so good. And you’re so strong too.”

He lifted her off her feet, hating the way he loved it when she put her arms around his neck and let him.

“So strong. And handsome and perfect.”

By the Wolf Star, she was going to regret this in the morning. Then there would be this weirdness between them, when things had only ever been easy and comfortable.

Ignoring the distracting way her breath ruffled his fur and her scent made his heart leap, Jaro concentrated on cradling her tighter against his chest and carried her toward his bedroom.

To tuck her in. Just to tuck her in.

When he reached the bed, he set her down carefully, pulling off her shoes and setting them next to the nightstand. He pulled back the covers and Selia slipped under, immediately turning her head into his pillow with another soft little smile. She breathed in deeply and his core tightened at the little sigh of pleasure she made.

Tucking the blanket over her, he sat on the edge of the bed, reluctant to leave until he knew she was settled. Her eyes were closed, hands curled up to tuck beneath the side of the pillow.

“You know you’re a really sweet guy, Jaro. You’d be such a catch. If you weren’t joining the harem, that is.”

Jaro fought down the familiar twist of misery. She didn't know.

"You'd make such a great dad."

He froze, his whole body going tense except his tail, thudding against the blanket. His throat was too choked with emotion to answer.

Selia blinked open her eyes and frowned up at him. "Shit. Did I say the wrong thing? You might still be a father, right? In the harem?"

He shook his head, mouth working, but no words came out. Eventually he croaked. "I am."

"Huh?"

"I am a father."

"Oh, that's what I thought you said. I must be dreaming though, because you don't have a mate, do you?"

"No." He could already see her eyes drifting closed again. She probably wouldn't even remember this conversation in the morning. Suddenly it felt like the words tumbled out, eager to be heard. It lanced the vile bitterness gathered like pus around his heart.

"I had a mate. Once. But it didn't work out."

Selia made a low noise in her throat. A noise of pain and sympathy that twisted the dagger deeper into his guts.

"You sound like you need a hug more than me."

He only huffed out a bitter laugh.

She scooted back, pulling back the blanket. Then she patted the bed in front of her. "Come on. I'll even be big spoon."

Jaro hesitated. He really shouldn't. Selia still had on her tights and stretchy top and all his clothing was on too. It wasn't really so bad. With a sigh, he gave in to it, tucking himself back against her and letting his head gingerly down onto the pillow. She murmured something against his back as she snuggled closer and threw an arm over his waist.

He would just lie here for a little while until she fell asleep. He'd just make sure this sweet human didn't have to face a night with the same gnawing loneliness he tucked himself into bed with each night.

The longer he lay, the longer he thought about her tears and her worries. The more Jaro noticed the way her breath slowed against his back, her chest rising and falling softly. The way her hand tightened its grip on the fabric of his tunic as if afraid he'd slip away while she was sleeping. Which had been exactly his intention.

So instead, Jaro rolled carefully to his back. Selia fit against him comfortably as if she'd been sleeping there for years. Then, of course, he started noticing her scent again, the sweet and tart aroma no longer masked by sadness. He noticed the way her brows creased slightly in the middle as she slept and the way her full lips parted as if waiting for a kiss. A kiss he could never give her. Not unless fate intervened.

It was ridiculous to hope for. How many years had he dreamed of finding his true mate? Of finally finding the one female he could lavish with attention and love. The female who would be his to protect and care for.

He had dreamed of it throughout his youth until he finally gave up, telling himself he could have those things without a true mate. He'd told himself he'd found them in Riya. For a while he'd had them too. And he told himself the true mate thing didn't matter.

Then Jaro had discovered how much it mattered when his universe shattered and everything turned to sand and ashes in his mouth.

No. The only female he would give himself to now, was a female who could accept his duty and reward him with praise, if not her heart. A vow to the harem was permanent, and the Shahra would never reject him, even if she could never really love him. Because his heart couldn't face another rejection. Jaro had seen with his own eyes how that was never guaranteed unless you found your true mate.

FOUR

SELIA CRACKED OPEN her eyes and squinted at the room. Not her bedroom. Not even the suite she'd been assigned by the Shahra while she was staying at Grevista Gardens. No, that's right, this was Jaro's room.

A wave of nausea made her pull the covers over her head and try to drown it in blackness. It didn't work. Her head pounded from the lack of air.

She groaned when a heavy weight dipped the mattress beside her and the nausea rose again, making her skin prickle with heat.

"How are you feeling?" Jaro's deep voice was muffled by the blanket.

"I think I'm going to—" She couldn't finish the sentence. Throwing back the covers, she dashed to the bathroom, making it just in time to vomit into the toilet. Moments later, gentle hands pulled her hair back and held it out of the way as another belly-clenching wretch emptied her stomach into the bowl.

Oh Goddess, if there had ever been even a remote chance of Jaro seeing her in any romantic way, she'd just blown it. Was there anything less attractive than watching someone puke up their guts?

He didn't complain, only held her hair. Eventually he grabbed a cool towel and wiped her face. Selia winced and looked up at him, expecting to see revulsion on his face. He only looked down at her, brows furrowed a little. "Feel better?"

She nodded, not wanting to blast him with post-vomit morning breath on top of everything else. He turned and filled a glass with water and then handed it to her. She accepted it gratefully. When it was empty, she set it down on the floor. She tucked her knees into her chest, putting her head down with a long groan. "What did I do?"

Jaro chuckled. “Had one too many drinks, I’d guess. Big night with the girls?”

She tried to think. She hadn’t had that many. She also hadn’t eaten either. She’d lost her appetite when Nat started talking about that ass, Sattar. Then when she’d felt like eating again it had been too late. Mistake. Her stomach clenched again, but it had nothing left for her body to reject.

Hazy memories of saying stupid things and Jaro telling her something serious were intermingled with sadness for Nat and frustration at Sattar’s dickish behaviour. That and crazy, irrational jealousy of Zara, Charlise and Rosa.

She groaned again.

A warm hand stroked her hair and down her back. “I’m going to make us some breakfast. Unless you think that will make you sick again?”

Selia’s stomach rumbled this time, suggesting it might like something greasy and stodgy. She made what she hoped was an appreciative noise. His hand left her hair and to her shame she actually whimpered.

When she finally dragged herself off the bathroom floor and made her way toward the kitchen. The savory smell of bacon led her to where Jaro stood. Wearing only sweatpants, he looked more delicious than the breakfast. Which was saying something, because bacon.

He assembled a greasy sandwich, then added it to a plate piled with sandwiches. She shook her head and smiled despite her throbbing head. He could eat. When she staggered up and flopped onto a stool at the counter, he pushed the plate toward her. A steaming mug of black coffee followed, just the way she liked it.

Godsdamn, this guy was too good to be true.

Selia took a sandwich and after a few big bites and a sip of coffee, she was feeling almost human again.

“Thank you.” She looked down at her coffee, a little afraid of seeing Jaro’s face right now. “I’m sure I embarrassed

myself last night and you've been awfully nice not to rub it in."

"Not at all."

She brushed hair back from her face with the back of one greasy hand, shuddering to think how she must look. "I'm pretty sure I pushed you into letting me stay here and I think I ugly cried too. It's okay. You don't have to lie to protect me."

He chuckled. "No. I don't remember anything like that."

When Selia dared to look up, she found him watching her with an odd expression. Soft. Almost wistful.

"It was actually nice to have someone else here. Although I probably shouldn't have. With the ceremony today and everything."

She winced. Damn. She was such a bad friend. "Will you get in trouble?"

He shrugged. "I guess, maybe. But you know with everything that's been going on with the other gladiators, I can't imagine Her Majesty will be too bothered. She just seemed keen to have me take the vow, to be honest."

Selia nodded. "She's in a difficult position. I feel bad for her. I'd hate to make it worse." She took another bite of her sandwich and thought for a moment. "Maybe we just don't tell anyone, yeah? I'll go back to my room in a moment and no one has to know. Not like there's actually anything going on, right?"

"Right." Jaro's tone was flat. He turned to the dish bot, putting in the frypan and the other things he'd used for cooking. When he turned back though, he was smiling again. "Heard from your dad recently?"

Selia rolled her eyes. "Yeah, he was messaging me yesterday complaining that my brothers don't cook for him. They only ever order takeout. I swear that man is laying it on thick. Anyone would think he was completely useless the way he carries on."

Jaro chuckled. "But he's not that old, right?"

“No! He’s only ninety-four. At this rate he’ll probably live until he’s two hundred! I mean, he could do a lot more for himself, he just won’t. I guess I spoil him.”

“Of course you do.”

“My brothers are always telling me to ignore his griping.” She sighed. “It’s what they do. I suppose I’ve always felt a bit snarky with them for leaving me to do everything, but maybe they’re right.”

Jaro leaned forward, resting his elbows on the counter across from her. “They don’t do much, do they?”

She nodded. “I guess they’re all busy with work and family stuff. And I’m single, so I get to take care of Dad. I should say something, but I just hate the arguments, you know? It’s funny, ’cause if this was someone else, I’d go in all blasters blazing, but when it’s me... doesn’t seem right to make a fuss.”

Jaro was quiet for a while. He had this way of listening and leaving space for her to say as much as she wanted without jumping in to offer advice. It was refreshing.

She glanced down at her wrist-com. “Hey, what time’s the ceremony?”

He sighed, straightening and putting his mug in the dish bot. “Soon. Guess I’d better get ready.”

Was it her imagination, or did he sound less than enthusiastic? She quickly shut down the hope threatening to blossom in her chest.

Getting up from the stool, she hovered awkwardly by the counter. “Well, good luck today. You must be excited.”

He turned, his expression unreadable. “Thanks.” Another pause. “You’ll be there?”

She smiled. “Of course. Wouldn’t miss it.”

She would bite back her feelings of disappointment and go support her friend. No doubt he was feeling nervous about speaking in front of the crowd and getting the words of his vow right. Stars knew Selia would be. She remembered her

own graduation, a much less grand affair. She'd still been anxious about tripping up the stairs and bungling her oath of allegiance. At least she hadn't had to do it in front of royalty! She'd never thought of herself as pro-monarchy. She had always taken for granted Earth's more democratic system of government. Having met the Ardun shahra and witnessed her in action, she had to admit something in her presence made Fareeda feel every inch as regal as her title.

Why on Earth would Jaro even look twice at a stocky, plain girl like her, when he was about to be invited to Her Majesty's bed?

Goddess, she was an idiot for even thinking about it.

••••

She didn't see anyone in the corridor coming out of Jaro's room. Really it wasn't like she was doing an actual walk of shame anyway. No matter how much she wished she was.

After showering and brushing her teeth, she felt a lot better. When it came time to dress for the ceremony, she took far too long standing in front of the mirror, trying to find something in her hovercase that didn't make her look like a hobbit. Finally she selected the frilly floral dress Anya had convinced her to buy when they started their holiday. Then Selia pulled on her dressy sandals—flats of course, because she couldn't do heels no matter how many times she tried—and went to Natlea's room to see if her friend was ready.

She knocked on the door several times and got no answer. After one last try, she flicked on her holoscreen and opened a vid-call to Charli.

Charlise answered after only a few moments. "Hi, Seels, what's up?"

"Hey, Charli. I'm just at Nat's room. Is she with you? She's not answering."

Charlise frowned. "Her ship left this morning. I thought you knew. She said she couldn't stand waiting for the ceremony today."

Selia's chest tightened. Nat had left and she hadn't been there to support her. "Did she go to the space port alone?"

On cam, Charli nodded solemnly. "She insisted. I was going to go with her, but she said she just wanted to be by herself, and she would call me once she was all settled in her room." She glanced down and then her frown deepened. "That should have been a while ago, though. And she still hasn't called. I'm going to call her."

Selia nodded. She closed the call to let Charli contact Nat. A knot of guilt rose in her stomach at the thought of poor Nat obviously hurting. That Sattar was a total ass. It was going to be very hard not to chew him out today if she saw him after the ceremony. What a dick!

Clenching her jaw, she tried some slow, calming breaths. Nat had said she didn't want her to say anything and she should respect her friend's wishes. She would definitely try very hard to do just that. Turning toward the elevator, she walked to the throne room. Her mind twisted around the situation with Nat and Sattar, despite telling herself to let it go.

Charlise and Malik weren't allowed to attend the ceremony and Zara was caring for Amir who was still recovering from the serious injury he had sustained during the assassination attempt on the Shahra. Rosa and Hesam had already left Ardun for Babylon Space Station. Anya was still feeling ill. That just left Selia. Alone again.

The throne room was already packed when she arrived. Two smartly dressed civil corrections officers stood, one on each side of the open double doors. As she walked past, the younger male gave her a smile which Selia returned. Inside, the large hall was full of people—mostly Ardun—standing around the empty central throne. A passageway had been left clear leading to a smaller door at the other side of the room. An area in front of the throne had been sectioned off with red rope fixed to golden pillars. Jaro and Sattar stood there at attention, dressed in fancy tunics and long trousers and looking smart.

Selia tried to catch Jaro's eye as she entered, but his gaze was fixed on the empty throne and his posture was stiff.

Making her way to the back of the crowd, she stood on tiptoes trying to see, but as usual, everyone was taller than she was, and she couldn't make out much.

A tall Ardun queen with long red hair turned and glared at Selia when her hand brushed the other female's tail. She stepped back, folding her arms over her chest. *Shouldn't wave your tail around in other people's space if you don't want it touched.*

A burst of music sounded through the speakers and the crowd all stood straighter. She figured that must be the signal for the shahra to enter, but she could only catch glimpses of black fur and an elegant black tunic as Shahra Fareeda made her way to the throne.

The music stopped.

"Welcome. I'm delighted to finally swear in the last of my new royal guards today," Shahra Fareeda said. "It's my great privilege to have such fine males joining my harem and serving the throne, and I know they'll bring honor to the crown and to our people."

One fine male was joining today. And Sattar.

"Jaro, please step forward and accept your winner's medal. It's been a long time coming, I know. And you have waited patiently." Silence fell, presumably Fareeda was slipping the medallion over Jaro's head. Selia wished she could see his face and see how proud he must be feeling today, finally being awarded the prize he had worked so hard for.

"Jaro, will you swear to serve me and the planet in any way the crown might require?"

"I will." Selia finally glimpsed Jaro's splotchy brown and orange ears as he dipped his head in a bow and straightened again.

"Thank you, Jaro. Sattar, will you swear to serve me and the planet in any way the crown might require?"

This pause was longer. Selia stretched, but the queen in front of her was doing the same, tail lashing behind her, and Selia couldn't see. The pause dragged on. A murmuring started up and spread through the room.

“Sattar?” Her Majesty repeated.

“I... uh, I'm sorry... I have to go.”

What? Surely not!

Gasps and growls filled the hall and Selia heard Shahra Fareeda asking for calm. She turned toward the large doors just in time to see Sattar jog out of the room. She was jostled as others in the crowd turned to look too late. He was already gone.

Was it possible Natlea was about to get her man?

Selia hurried out into the corridor, already bringing up her holoscreen. When she entered Nat's ID, there was no answer. She called again. Nothing. Bringing up Charlise's ID, she tried her. Finally, after the eighth attempt, Charlise answered. “Did you see?” her friend asked straight away, without preamble.

“Sattar? Is he too late?”

“I don't know. I tried calling but I can't get onto Nat. He's changed his mind, Seels. He didn't swear in!”

“I know. He just ran out of the ceremony!” Unbelievable. The one guy who she'd never thought would reject the royal position had possibly given up everything by slighting the Shahra publicly at the last minute. Without even an explanation!

She ended the call, mind spinning, walking without really knowing where she was going. Hitting the panel for the elevator, she thought about going back to her room, but the space felt too small to contain her whirling feelings.

She should be happy for her friend. Surely everything would work out now. She was happy.

Yet a darker, more selfish part of her couldn't shake the bitter feeling of jealousy that yet another friend had what she felt like she would never find. Now Jaro had sworn in as a

royal guard and he was even more untouchable than he had been before. After last night, her heart felt even more sore at the realization that he would never, ever be hers.

FIVE

JARO STARED STUPIDLY around as the throne room emptied of people. Since Shahra Fareeda had dismissed the audience, people were filing out, shuffling and trying to get ahead in the line. Murmurings filled the space. To his right someone hissed. He stood frozen, unsure whether to leave like everyone else or to stay, awaiting some instruction from Her Majesty.

Under all the noise and the shock, his heart pounded in a steady, angry rhythm, *what if, what if?*

It was too late. He'd made his choice. Sattar's choice solidified his vow beyond breaking. Irretrievably. Had he just made the biggest mistake of his life?

The female he was actually interested in couldn't be his. She hadn't gone into heat and he hadn't responded. She wasn't even Ardun! Without the bond true mates shared, anything else was too fragile. Worthless when push came to shove.

"Another one." Jaro turned back to see Soraya smirking, leaning close to Shahra Fareeda. The corner of Fareeda's mouth twitched up and she shook her head. "You were right about him." She grew serious and turned to Jaro. "It seems to be catching, but I'm glad I can rely on your support."

He ducked his head so she wouldn't see the way he struggled to control his expression.

"I'm afraid I'm already going to ask you for a big favor and you may not like it."

He looked up, surprised.

"I have a very sensitive mission and I need someone I can trust. Amir is still recovering or I might send him, and Ikkad is... unavailable."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Jaro, the position of royal guard is special. While we're in private, you're welcome to call me Fareeda."

“Yes, Your Majesty—I mean, Fareeda.”

She smiled. “I realize it might take some adjusting. Anyway, the mission I need you for will be time-consuming and it will take you out of Ardunspace. I wish it was something I could trust the CC with, but at the moment I’m not sure who was in Minister Taqi and Minister Jaessa’s pockets, so it’s best if I send someone I know I can rely on.”

Jaro frowned. Minister Jaessa! That was Sattar’s mother. If she was being mentioned in the same breath as the rebel leader Minister Taqi that must mean she had been outed as a member of the anti-human, anti-monarchist rebels as well.

“I was hoping I’d be able to give this task to Sattar, but it seems he’s currently unavailable.” Her expression, rather than angry, was soft, wry even.

“Then he’s not affiliated with the rebels?” Jaro hadn’t thought so. As hostile as Sattar seemed toward the human women they’d been tasked with protecting, he was usually that icy with everyone, so it didn’t seem to be an anti-human thing.

“Not as far as we can tell. And given that he’s run off to claim a human mate, it seems unlikely, wouldn’t you say?”

“Ah, yes. I suppose so.”

She lifted a brow. “I hope you’re not an anti-humanist, Jaro.”

“What? No!” Hells, if only that were the reason he couldn’t school his features into a calm expression.

“That’s good, because I’m going to be sending you to retrieve Minister Jaessa and bring her back to Ardun for trial. And I suspect it will involve travel into Earthspace.”

His brows lifted. Usually ministers had always been treated as above the law, but the announcement of a very public trial for Minister Taqi set for two days from now had met with plenty of support. Shahra Fareeda clearly knew what she was doing. He supposed that set the precedent.

“It’s very important that the Earth government doesn’t get wind of what you’re doing. So I’ll need you to be discreet. I

want her retrieved so I can hand her over as a gesture of goodwill, but that will be null and void if they catch you and arrest her before I can get my hands on her.”

Jaro nodded. So it was a move calculated to win favor with Earth’s government. She must be more worried about interstellar war than he had thought. “I won’t let you down.” The promise came to his lips easily. It felt good to be important, needed, if only for this. How would he do it?

“Forgive me, Your—Fareeda, but can I get into Earthspace? I thought there was a travel ban.”

She smiled. “There is. So we will need to be clever. There is an exception to the ban. An Ardun mated to a human can travel with their mate.”

Jaro blinked. Mate? A human? He wiped sweaty palms on his trousers and tried not to let his tail twitch.

“Zara assures me one of her friends would probably be willing to help out, but you’d have to be comfortable with the pretense.”

Pretense. Of course she didn’t mean for him to really mate a human. What a bitter joke. The one thing he wanted more than anything and he would have it, but it would be fake.

Sand and ashes!

Still, there was no question about who to ask. He forced his mouth to form the words. “Selia will help. I’m sure.” All the while, he commanded his stupid heart to stop thrashing about in his throat and forced his claws to retract.

She would be perfect actually. He could rely on Selia to keep things friendly. Hadn’t she done that the whole time they’d been together during all the chaos after the closing ceremony and the riots? Since she wasn’t interested, he wouldn’t have to worry about her feelings being hurt.

Nevermind about his feelings.

This mission might very well break the last tiny fragment of his soul that hadn’t shattered when Riya left him. Would he

give up the chance to sink his teeth into that fragrant flesh, even if it was a sham?

Not a chance!

Wolf Star take him, he was the greatest fool in the five systems because he was already imagining Selia's little indrawn breath as his fangs pierced smooth bronze skin and catching the salty flavor of it on his tongue. He was already clutching at all the extra stolen moments he could possibly snatch before destiny dragged him back into despair again.

••••

Selia was still pacing in the rooftop garden when the CC officer found her. "Ms. Raharui?"

She turned, surprised at having her thoughts interrupted. "Yes?"

"Her Majesty has requested you attend her in the small meeting room. May I show you there?"

"She has?"

The young officer with long blonde hair, a neatly pressed uniform and a shy smile, nodded. "Yes. Will you come?"

"Of course. Do you know what it's about?"

"I'm afraid not." The queen gave a little shrug. "Top secret! Sounds exciting."

Selia followed the Ardun back to the elevator and down to level three. A suite of smaller spaces connected to the main throne room for meetings and official business. One of these rooms was open as they approached. Inside Shahra Fareeda sat on an enormous pile of colorful cushions beside a small table. Next to her, Selia saw her friend, Zara, who had been appointed the royal human advisor. Next to the door, Jaro stood stiffly.

When she passed, Selia tried to give him her warmest smile. He must be excited to be on duty already. Maybe even a little nervous. It was his first day after all. As she entered the room, Jaro closed the door behind her and joined her when she sat at the Shahra's invitation.

Selia looked between the Shahra, Zara and Jaro. “Is there something you wanted my help with, Your Majesty?”

Shahra Fareeda smiled. “There certainly is, Ms. Raharuhi. Thank you for jumping straight to the point. I know I can trust you to keep what we discuss just between us. Zara says you work in law enforcement back on Earth, so please stop me if any part of my request makes you uncomfortable. I would hate to put you in a position where you might feel there is a conflict of interest.”

Selia raised her brows but folded her hands in her lap, eager to hear the rest.

“I’ve asked Jaro to undertake a highly important mission but, for reasons of interstellar diplomacy, the mission must be a secret from the Earth government in the short term. It’s my plan to take action to resolve the tension between Ardun and Earth, but in order to do that, there is a need for a little finesse.” The Shahra watched Selia with her bright yellow gaze, clearly waiting for a response.

Selia nodded. “Okay. So this mission involves me somehow and you’re asking if I could keep what you’ve got planned a secret from my own government, ma’am?”

“Essentially.”

Selia chewed her lip. She technically owed her allegiance to Earth’s government. She should probably turn down the Shahra and decline the secret information since she was probably obliged to report it, rather than keep the secret. One of her best friends had made her home here on Ardun. If there was a war, it could be years before she would see Zara again. Her other friends had Ardun mates now, and extended family all over the planet. She wouldn’t want any of them to be cut off if it came to that.

If it was all ultimately to avoid a war and find a diplomatic solution to the tension still building, ethically Selia was all in favor.

“I’d like to help,” she admitted slowly. “But I feel I should tell you that depending on the request, I might have to report

it. If I felt it posed a threat to Earth security or autonomy.” She gave a little nod, more secure in her decision now that she had spoken her reasoning aloud.

Fareeda dipped her head. “I understand and applaud the sentiment behind your decision. I’m going to take the risk of telling you, since I’m in a difficult position and I need your help. I can’t think of anyone better placed to help Jaro on this mission.”

Selia’s breath caught in her throat. Help Jaro? Would she ask her to accompany him? That should not make her chest feel lighter than it had all day.

“I’ve asked Jaro to find and apprehend Minister Jaessa who, I believe, has been leading a plot involving the abduction and enslavement of hundreds of humans. It’s possible that he will have to travel into Earthspace to do it.”

Selia’s light mood vanished. Slavery? Hundreds of humans? All done by a Minister in the Ardun government. If this got back to the Earth government was there any other way the issue could end other than in war?

“I believe the Earth government is already aware of at least part of her crimes. She’ll be in hiding. We have reason to believe she has allies in the far reaches of Earthspace and my best guess is that’s where she’s headed. What I would like to do is apprehend her, bring her back into Ardunspace, and formally put her on trial before handing her over in a diplomatic move that I hope will resolve much of the tension.”

Selia nodded. “That could work. But how will Jaro get into Earthspace? I thought the borders were closed?” Her eyes widened. “Except to mates of humans!”

Shahra Fareeda smiled and nodded. “That’s right. And that’s where you come in. But you would have to be prepared to lie to border control and claim he is your mate.”

Selia struggled to keep her face neutral while she processed her feelings. She couldn’t help the way her eyes slid to Jaro, seated beside her. His hands lay together in his lap. Only the tip of his tail twitched against the cushion.

What was he thinking? She would have liked to have a moment alone to ask if it was what he really wanted. It would be intimate. No question. They'd spent days alone in lockdown with no problems though. Surely a few weeks traveling together wouldn't feel any different. Except that her feelings seemed to grow bigger every day and she wasn't sure how much longer she could keep them hidden.

Then there was the claim. She knew from listening to Zara and Charlise talking that it involved a bite. Rather than being off-putting, her body prickled with awareness and her pussy flooded with moisture at the thought of Jaro's teeth on her neck, his lips and mouth on her skin.

Jaro's nostrils flared and his head snapped toward her. His look was piercing, but if there was an unspoken message in his expression, she couldn't make out whatever he was trying to tell her. Perhaps he was angry about being forced to undertake this mission after only just swearing in. Surely he had been looking forward to the other aspect of his duties as a royal guard. Those within the royal harem...

"We'll do it." Jaro's voice was so raw and gravelly she hardly recognized it.

Forcing her eyes away from his face, Selia saw Shahra Fareeda's brows lift and her yellow eyes turned on her. "Do you agree, Selia? It's illegal for a male to bite any female without her consent. This situation is no different, although of course the bite does not represent any lasting commitment. And as the female, you have the right to refuse at any time."

Selia nodded. "I understand. Thank you, Your Majesty. I'll do it."

Beside her, Jaro let out an audible breath. Selia was as attuned to his movements as if they'd been touching. She noted when his body lost some of its stiffness and he seemed to slump, shoulders hunching forward. When she glanced again, he had turned his face away.

Shahra Fareeda smiled. "Thank you, Selia and Jaro. It's a great weight off my shoulders to know I can entrust this mission to you. I know you won't let me down."

Selia went through the motions of closing the conversation, listening with half an ear to the more detailed instructions about the mission. Shahra Fareeda would be comm-ing them all to Jaro and her later. What she couldn't work out was what Jaro was thinking. Since his outburst, he had refused to look at her. She imagined him silently stewing on a decision he wasn't happy with. Then why had he jumped in so forcefully?

She'd have to ask him about it when the audience was over.

"You alright, Seels?" Zara leaned over and squeezed her knee when the Shahra dismissed them.

She nodded. "Yeah. Just honored, I guess. It's a big deal."

"It is." Her friend didn't say anything else, but Zara held her gaze for a beat longer, then gave her leg another squeeze. "It is. You can always back out if it's too much."

Selia shook her head. "No way. I know how much this means to everyone. I've got this."

SIX

JARO RAN A HAND OVER his tail, still hating the way the clipped fur felt under his palm. Cutting and dying his fur to help disguise his identity hadn't been a decision he'd taken lightly. He would have happily accepted the indignity of modifying his tail if only for the chance to serve the Shahra faithfully, but to his shame the fact that it gave him the stolen weeks of intimacy with Selia was forefront in his mind.

He was already in way too deep though. It was too late to look back.

All he could do was try to remind himself each time he caught his tail drifting toward Selia that she wasn't really his. He had imagined the growing scent of her arousal when the Shahra had mentioned the bite. Each time he lay awake in his room on the star cruiser, picturing the moment when he would bite her to fool the Earth gate border guards, he told himself it wasn't real. That didn't stop his heart from picking up speed, driving all the blood to a cock that wouldn't listen to reason. Instead of just fisting his erection and jerking it to the image of Selia, he tried to ignore it, refusing to give in. If he did, surely it would only worsen the way he'd been feeling for days.

The cruiser's engine cut out as they docked at the anchor point. It still felt strange under his feet after three days of constant travel. This was their first stop, Babylon Space Station. Still within Ardunspace, they were following a lead from Minister Jaessa's private message archive. Sattar had taken an archive chip from her study at their family's estate and handed it over before heading out of Ashad to do a full investigation of his mother's dealings with the rebels.

Jaro suspected he was also taking the opportunity to enjoy having his new human mate all to himself. While he burned with jealousy, he could hardly blame Sattar for doing what any male would do under the circumstances.

Selia rushed to join him at the door of the cruiser, bending over to adjust the fastener on her shoe and he had to turn away

when her movement stretched the elasticized fabric of her tights over her rounded ass.

His claws flexed and his tail twitched at the sight. She straightened and he composed his face into an expression that was hopefully closer to neutral.

Selia gave him a bright smile. “I can’t wait to get off this ship for a while and get out, even if it’s only a walk around the space station. Doesn’t matter how many workouts I do in the gym, space travel always makes me restless. You?”

He nodded. He’d only ever been on one other long-distance trip in his life and he didn’t recall feeling anything other than relaxed. Right now, though, he was full of pent up energy and it would be good to be doing something—anything—rather than sitting around.

“Gravity and oxygen stabilizing. Please wait for the door to release,” the AI said.

When it beeped again, Selia pressed a palm over the door panel and stepped out as soon as the door opened, shooting Jaro a broad smile over her shoulder. He followed quickly. As they walked through the busy thoroughfare of the space port, weaving between Ardun with hovercases and shopping bots, she turned to him. “I guess you’re probably hoping we find a good lead here and catch up with Jaessa. You must be keen to get back to Ashad and really begin your duties as royal guard.”

He shrugged.

“Will you be very disappointed if we have to keep going into Earthspace?”

Disappointed at the need to mark her and claim her as his? At the need to hold her close and sink teeth into that soft skin? He choked down the growl that rose in his throat. “No. Not disappointed.”

Selia smiled. “I guess you’re expecting it. From what Shahra Fareeda said, it seems like we probably will.”

They walked in silence for a while, passing an enormous fountain with a statue of the first Shahra and a place where the tunnels to other sections of the space port diverged from a

central point. Babylon Station was one of the oldest continuously used stations in the five systems. The original had been a small port, created to stash supplies and fuel to help the early travelers coming through the newly constructed Earth gate into Ardunspace. It had grown over the years, each new section being added on until bulbous domes jutted out in every direction from the hub of the space port, often surrounded with their own interconnected sections.

The tunnel they took was small and crowded, leading to the oldest part of the station. At the end, they stepped out into the dome, with a circular balcony that ran the circumference of the space. Tiered balconies jutted out from the edges above and beneath them, each crowded with little shops and the barricaded doors of minuscule apartments for cheap rent.

The air was thick and humid, the rattle from the filtration system a constant hum in the background. Even the lighting was dim, and everything looked dingy and used. A flashing sign with lewd holo-images of scantily clad humans led them to a divey-looking bar with short stools scattered outside. The interior was even dingier. A thin, pale-skinned human woman loaded empty glasses onto a tray—a job which a bot could easily have been tasked with. Above the door a sign read “Gates of Earth.” The letters flashed between the image of a pair of spread thighs.

Real fucking classy.

Though Babylon had visitors from all three humanoid species, most people around them were Ardun, making Selia’s smooth skin on her bare arms and her small rounded ears stand out. Jaro wanted to pull off his shirt and drape it over her head to cover more of her from undeserving eyes. A few customers gave her curious looks as they approached and Jaro stepped closer, placing a large hand protectively at her waist.

Her smaller hand reached out and closed over his for a moment, giving it a squeeze before she let him go.

The owner and the establishment had been on a list of Jaessa’s contacts that Sattar had sent through with their first mission file. Along with an unknown destination, Spectre

Station. It had been Selia's idea to visit and try to ask some of the human employees about their boss. To do that, they'd need to arrange a meeting after hours. So the plan was to get chatting to their waitress and see if they could do just that.

As they lowered themselves onto the small stools at the sticky table, Jaro looked around for the menu-panel but found nothing. The thin human approached, her tray now empty. Dark hair cut in wispy tendrils curled around her ears, and her white shirt was tied in a knot just under her breasts, leaving her stomach bare and exposing a torso so scrawny Jaro could practically count her ribs. The dark circles beneath the woman's eyes and the way her gaze flicked back toward the bar made a sick feeling twist in his guts.

Directing her smile at him, the woman stopped at their table. "What can I get for you, today?"

"I'll take a beer, please." He looked over at Selia.

"Same for me."

The waitress nodded before turning away. Selia raised her voice before she could. "Hey, um we've never been to Babylon before. Don't suppose you've got any recommendations for a good human tailor? I need a few new outfits."

The woman paused, giving Selia a tight smile. "I'm sorry. I don't really get much time off for shopping."

"Did you catch the gladiator games this year?" Selia asked quickly.

The waitress lingered, chewing on her lip. She shrugged. "Sure. Didn't everyone?"

"Sure did," Selia said. "Who was your favorite?"

The woman's eyes flicked to the bar again where a male with a cut-off vest and a ring through his ear leaned back against the counter, the end of his tail flicking against his leg. "Jaro," she said quietly.

"Me too," Selia responded. He knew she was probably only playing along, trying to put the woman at ease. Yet it

didn't stop the little patch of warmth spreading through his chest at her words. "Did you know I got his autograph and a vid? Let me find it, I'll show it to you when you bring the drinks if you like."

The woman's voice trembled when she replied. "S-sure. That'd be great."

She scurried off to fetch them and Jaro leaned closer to Selia to whisper, "I don't like it. That male at the bar is watching us."

She nodded, lacing her fingers with his and leaning even closer. It was all part of the pretense, but he couldn't help looking down at their joined hands for a beat too long, almost missing the first part of her hushed sentence.

"...been staring at me the whole time. Maybe just because I'm human."

He shook his head. "Feels like more than that. I wish we'd brought weapons."

"Too risky. We would have stood out and put this poor girl at risk. I already feel like she's putting herself in danger speaking to us and I hate it."

He hated it too. Hated the way all the too-thin staff reeked of fear and despair, despite the perfume they'd been doused with to hide it. Obviously the sort of clientele who frequented this place could not care less if the humans they came to ogle wanted to be here or not. As he watched, another male with tawny brown fur and an ugly sneer approached the male at the bar who had been watching them. The hackles rose on the back of his neck.

Jaro was glad of his disguise now. He'd hate to be caught out, recognized or filmed doing anything that suggested he was okay with any of this. It was his worst fucking nightmare that Desi would think he could ever condone this. The kit had a ridiculously soft heart and Jaro intended to fight tooth and claw to keep it that way.

He was still struggling with what to say when the waitress returned, their drinks balanced on her tray and a haunted look

on her face. When Jaro glanced back at the bar, the imposing male was gone, but as soon as the human had put down their drinks, she turned to go.

“Hey, did you wanna see that vid?” Selia asked cheerily.

“Another time, maybe,” the woman mumbled. “Sorry. My boss’ll be mad if I waste time today. It’s a busy shift.”

Jaro could see a total of five other customers in the bar and at least one other staff member wore the same skimpy outfit the dark-haired woman was wearing. Selia caught his eye, probably thinking the same thing.

Her voice was bright, easy as she said, “Sure. No problem. I’ll leave my ID for you if you change your mind, yeah? We could always meet up after your shift.”

“Maybe.” The woman hurried away without saying anything else. Selia printed out a tiny note with her ID and tucked it beneath the bottom of the glass of her untouched drink.

They lingered for a while longer. A sign flashed up on the table screen advertising a free show for any customers who had purchased a drink and he had to look away from the images of a human woman on her knees, gag tied around her mouth while an Ardun male stood over her, dumping cups of water over her until her white shirt turned see-through.

Jaro tried to force down at least part of the drink just to avoid drawing attention, but it was hard to stomach after what they’d witnessed. “Let’s get out of here,” he mumbled and Selia nodded.

Twenty minutes later they left the tunnel and stepped back into the open space in front of the fountain at the space port. Relieved, Jaro sank down on the edge of the fountain, trying to shake the urge to plunge in just to wash the filth of that place from his fur. “If I didn’t know slavery was illegal in all the five systems, I’d swear those humans were slaves not staff. Not one of them smelled happy to be there.”

Selia shook her head with a grim smile. “There’s a lot that’s not called slavery that equates to pretty much the same

thing. What I don't get is why my government isn't doing anything about it. A few investigations into illegal shock collars and throwing money at non-government organizations doesn't cut it."

Leaning forward, he rested his arms on his legs and stared glumly at his feet. "Same. Why isn't the Shahra stamping down on Ardun participating in this stuff more forcefully? It's shameful."

They sat in silence for a while, lost in thought.

"I hate just leaving her there when she's clearly scared as hells," Jaro said eventually. A soft hand rested on his shoulder and he looked up to see Selia frowning in sympathy. "I know. But we have no idea what's going on for her or what the dangers are. Even going back there could end up causing more problems than it fixes."

He nodded. "I know. Still hate it."

"Nothing to do but wait and hope she dares to contact us."

••••

They spent the next few hours wandering the station, waiting to see if the woman from the bar would contact them. Jaro had almost given up hope when the message came through.

Selia held out her wrist so he could see her holoscreen.

Hey it's Celethe, We met at Gates of Earth earlier today. If you still want to meet up, I'm nearly done with my shift and could meet you at dome 32oi8yf, I'll send the location.

She glanced up at him, a question in her raised brow. Jaro pursed his lips. He didn't like it, but it was what they had come here to do. His instincts screamed at him to ask Selia to wait for him at their cruiser while he met up with the contact alone, but he knew she wouldn't appreciate being left out. Intellectually he knew she could fight, could take care of herself in exactly this type of scenario. Didn't stop the male in him from wanting to beat his chest and get protective though. He gave her a tight nod and she sent the reply confirming the rendezvous.

An hour later, Jaro gripped the balustrade on the top ring balcony in dome 32oi8yf. His tail lashed behind him and his ears flicked at every new sound. In front of him a twelve story drop through the center of the dome let him see people coming and going on the tiered balconies all the way to the ground floor. Steam wafted up from a little food stall selling fried dumplings and steamed buns from the smell. Beside him, Selia leaned back against the handhold and faced toward the shop behind Jaro. The faint smell of catnip from little bags at the front counter drifted to him, obviously not properly sealed. Probably a ploy to draw customers and make them more willing to throw marks away on poorly stored stale product.

Flicking up her holoscreen with a frown, Selia sighed. “It’s been nearly twenty minutes. How much longer do you think we wait?”

Jaro gripped the rail a little tighter. “It was always a long shot. She probably got cold feet.”

“Or something came up, or she’s running late. You never know.”

Across the far side of the balcony at their level, he glimpsed a face he thought he recognized, but as his head snapped around to take a closer look, the male vanished between two shops. He might have been mistaken anyway.

Selia made a little noise and he glanced around to see her bringing up a new message. “She’s on her way.” She smiled up at him and his claws retracted back into his fingertips just as he caught a blur of movement in his peripheral vision.

Acting on instinct he flung his hand out in front of Selia just as she looked up from her holoscreen with a little gasp. He caught the blade of their attacker right in the palm.

It hurt like a bitch.

The male who had thrown it was already drawing another knife and rushing toward them. With a grunt, Jaro grit his teeth and pulled the blade from his left palm. Motherfucker!

Selia stepped in front of him, sweeping a kick to their attacker’s knife arm that he was forced to dodge. Thankfully

she was quick and avoided the blade of the familiar-looking male. Jaro was sure the Ardun, with a tawny brown coat and sweat-soaked clothes, had been sitting at a table in the bar earlier. The stranger hissed and again lunged at Selia.

Selia dodged and Jaro was about to launch his own attack when a fist collided with his face and he spun to face another attacker. Here was the male with the pierced ear who had been lounging on the bar. Jaro hadn't seen either attack coming. Channeling his frustration into focus, Jaro dodged another blow. He had the knife the first male had thrown, but he hesitated to use it before he knew who these males were and what they wanted. There were still penalties for killing another person, even at Babylon, though the CC was notoriously slow to act outside Ardun. There were sure to be security bots here any moment.

There were scuffles beside him as Selia grappled with her attacker. He couldn't help her, too busy fending off his own.

Focus, focus. She's fine.

Landing a blow in his enemy's gut, he took a precious moment to glance behind to make sure Selia was okay. What he saw turned his guts. The tawny furred Ardun was lunging at an unarmed Selia with his second knife. She was holding her own, but it was never a fair fight when one attacker was armed and the other was not.

Black played around the edges of his vision for a moment and he was too slow to block another hit to the face. He staggered. The punch made his vision spin. Dropping low, he yelled, "Selia!" He had a second to slide her the knife before he had to roll away from his attacker once more. When he got to his feet, he saw Selia snatch up the knife and dart back, missing a swipe from the other male.

The pierced male growled. "You should learn to mind your own fucking business. Sniffing around in things that don't concern you never did anyone no good."

So that's what this was about. No wonder the human female hadn't turned up. He could only hope she hadn't

suffered too badly when whoever was holding her had discovered the contact.

The pierced male lunged toward him again and Jaro spun, using his momentum to get behind his attacker. He slammed the male belly first against the balustrade and held him there with a rough hand at the other Ardun's neck. His opponent struggled, but Jaro was stronger.

All the hairs at his nape stood on end when a hiss from his right froze him. "Let him go, or the human dies. I'm sure you know humans are pretty disposable this side of the five systems. I'd hate to damage valuable merchandise, but I'll do it."

He turned his head to see the tawny male holding Selia by her long ponytail, his blade at her throat. The knife he had slid to her had dropped to the ground out of her reach, but her expression was hardened, not betraying the acrid fear he could scent rising to cover her natural sweetness.

A low growl spread through Jaro's chest and his claws dug into the flesh of his opponent. As Jaro fought the instinct to just give in straight away, trying to consider if the attackers would actually release Selia, two things happened. The pierced male lurched backward, jerking out of his grasp.

Selia used the momentary distraction to slam her fist back into the tawny male's face. Jaro was so relieved to see the male drop the knife that he missed his own attacker who whirled on him and pushed him over the edge of the balustrade.

Selia shrieked. Jaro twisted, clutching at the rail. At the last moment, he closed one hand over the top of the handhold and stopped his fall. He slammed around against the clear glass, clinging with all his might. Where were the damn security bots? Surely there were some on this star-blighted station.

Steam and heat from below ruffled his fur and made the handhold slippery. He was losing his grip. Finally the flashing lights and blaring of sirens signaled incoming bots. The two Ardun males slipped away into the crowd and Selia rushed to

the balustrade, just as Jaro swung his injured hand up to grip the rail. He was still bleeding. The blood and the steam made it difficult to find purchase and his hand was weak and aching. He cursed as he slipped and scabbled to cling on.

Selia tugged at his wrist, but she'd never be able to pull him up. He was too heavy. His shoes and the smooth surface of the balustrade made a foothold impossible.

“Below you!” Selia jerked her head down. He looked. On the floor below, a large vat of waste oil from the food stall hung out into the open space. If he swung, he might make it.

Giving her a nod, Jaro twisted his body and swung out to his right, then back to the left. Once more he repeated the motion and as his body swept to the left, he let go. His tail spun. For half a second his stomach lurched and then he hit the edge of the oil vat, dislodging the cover. One foot and his tail slipped into the oil—thankfully cold and ready for disposal. A queen screamed. Someone pointed.

He was greasy and bloody, but alive and able to crawl over the balustrade and onto the balcony below.

SEVEN

SELIA SHRIEKED AS JARO'S attacker thrust him over the edge of the balustrade. Twisting away from the blade of the tawny male who had been holding her, she threw her elbow into his stomach. She left him doubled over in pain, dashing toward where Jaro clung to the handrail. His attacker turned toward her just as a wailing siren cut through the quiet of the dome. People who had been coming and going on their level had disappeared out of sight as soon as the fight began, unwilling or unable to step in.

The male with the pierced ear, who Selia assumed was the leader, called to his crony. "Security. Let's go. We've sent our message." They ran off before the flashing lights of the bots got close. More sirens in the distance suggested there were more coming.

Reaching the edge, Selia grabbed Jaro's wrist, though she already knew she'd never be able to help him back over the edge. What else could she do? He was slipping and she had nothing to help him with. Below them she spotted a container full of oil suspended from the edge of the balustrade. It was his best chance. She could hardly watch as he dropped, but thankfully he was able to land awkwardly on the level below. Blood from his wounded hand had smeared across the handrail where he had tried to pull himself up and she winced, hating to think how much the stab would have hurt.

When she made her way to him she found him bleeding and covered in grunge all up one leg and his tail. Sludgy brown oil dripped all over the tiles as he stood. He had already removed his tunic and torn it to create a makeshift bandage.

She stepped close, took the bandage from his hand, and helped him tie it firmly over the wound. He gave her a pained smile.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"I've been better, but I'll live. What about you? You're not hurt?"

She shook her head. A bit bruised and she had a nick on her throat from the blade of the tawny male, but it was nothing compared to Jaro's injury. "Let's get you back to the cruiser and get the med bot on that hand."

They returned to the cruiser as quickly as Jaro could move. Though he must have been hurting, he didn't complain. The thing that seemed to impede his progress the most was the slick oil coating his left foot.

As soon as they boarded, she ushered him to the bathroom and instructed the ship's computer to activate the boxy little med bot. Moments later it whirred into the room and began scanning Jaro for injuries.

"Shall I get the AI to reconfig you a stool? Do you need to sit?"

"No. I'm fine. I just want to get this stuff off my tail." He shuddered and his tail flicked sticky oil against the tiled wall as it lashed from side to side.

"Hand first." Selia frowned down at where the gray of his tunic was turning blackish-red from the blood still seeping from the wound. "We need to get this off you and clean it."

The med bot beeped as soon as she got the fabric off his hand. "Severe puncture wound to the flexor tendon with moderate bleeding. Recommend immediate treatment."

"Go ahead." Jaro's voice was gruff, but when the bot sprayed him with sterilizer, he only grunted. His tail flicked more violently behind him, but he kept the rest of his body still. Selia knew it would have stung like a motherfucker, but Jaro didn't even curse.

"Injecting painkiller. Please remain still." A hiss sounded when the bot's syringe arm extended and injected the shot into Jaro's palm. Then the bot got to work on repairing the tissue.

"Can I get you anything?" she asked him, wishing there was more she could do.

He shook his head. "I just want to get in the shower. Though that could be tricky with this bot still working on my hand. I guess I'll have to wait until it's finished." He sighed.

Selia shrugged, trying to keep her movements casual. Inside though, her belly was flipping and her mind raced with the thought that had just occurred to her.

“I could help. If you don’t want to wait, I mean.” It wouldn’t have to be weird. She’d just be playing nurse. No funny business. Nevermind that the thought of stripping him off and helping him wash was far too exciting for something that would be purely platonic.

Jaro’s tail stilled. He opened his mouth, closed it again, and then he looked away for a moment. Was he blushing? He cleared his throat. “That’s okay. You don’t have to do that.”

“I don’t mind,” she said too quickly.

If he noticed her eagerness, he didn’t comment. He seemed to debate with himself for another moment. Then his tail flicked and thick black oil splattered against the tiles. He smiled. “Thanks. I think I’d better take you up on the offer before I crawl outta my skin. There’s nothing worse than a dirty tail.”

Suddenly all her bold ideas fled and her mouth went dry. He’d actually said yes! She stepped around him, switching on the shower while she considered how to do it without being painfully awkward. The bot hovered near his hand, a tiny laser fusing the skin together as it worked.

She glanced down at his trousers, coated in grime from the oil vat. He was still wearing shoes too. Well that was easy enough. Getting down on her knees, she unfastened his shoes and helped him to step out, putting aside the oil-covered shoe for deep cleaning. She looked up to where the fastening of his trousers sat just below his navel. Right above his crotch. She swallowed. Jaro reached down with his good hand, fumbling with the fastening. “You don’t have to—”

“Don’t be silly.” She brushed his hand away and got to work, cursing herself for making this weird. “It’s not like I haven’t seen a naked man before.”

“I could probably leave my briefs on,” Jaro said quietly.

“Oh! Of course. I didn’t mean...” Didn’t she? With another silent curse, Selia slipped his trousers over his hips, carefully sliding the back of the material over his tail and letting them fall to the floor with a squelch. She couldn’t stop staring at the muscled thighs and the mouthwatering bulge in the front of the navy briefs he wore. The bulge grew noticeably as she looked.

Jaro reached down and turned away to adjust himself. The shower was running. By now the steam and warmth had filled the room. It wasn’t the humid heat that flooded her cheeks with deep color and left her feeling like she wanted to strip off all her own clothes.

“I guess I’ll get under the water then. Thank you.” He still wasn’t looking at her.

She’d been staring. It couldn’t be her he was responding to. Just a normal biological response. Stars help her, she had to stop picturing that bulge.

The med bot beeped. “Please do not wet the affected area until the procedure is complete.”

He scowled. “Yeah, right.” Holding his hand out of the shower, he stepped under the hot water. He closed his eyes and sighed as it sluiced over his hair and body.

Selia hovered nearby, unsure whether to leave or stay. She was just about to go when Jaro stretched his good hand to reach for the soap at the other side of the shower. It was too far away.

Leaping to her feet, she strode forward. “Let me get that.” Before he could protest, she kicked off her shoes and stepped under the water fully clothed. She lathered her hands. “Can I?”

His throat bobbed as he swallowed, “Selia, you don’t have to do that.”

“Come on. You just took a stab wound for me. It’s the least I could do.” She scoffed at herself. *Yeah, play it off like you’re not dying to put your hands on him.*

He hesitated a moment longer then nodded. She didn’t waste any time. Stepping close, Selia lathered the soap into the

fur on his shoulders and chest. Jaro went so still under her touch she had to look up just to check he was still breathing. He gave her a tight smile. But he wasn't telling her to stop. She should stop. It was just...

Jaro was still holding his right hand out of the water. His shoulders were so broad and his pecs so defined it made her squirm a little as she rubbed over them one more time, although they weren't even the part of him that needed cleaning. He lifted his other arm out to the side and she rubbed the soap into the fur on his sides and over his belly.

Jaro wasn't as slim as the other gladiators. He didn't have the tall, athletic build of Malik or Sattar, but to her he was all the more attractive with his slightly rounded belly, thick thighs, and broad shoulders. Jaro made Selia feel dainty and feminine. She'd never before felt either of those things in her life, but he treated her like she might be delicate, instead of the short, solid woman who had always been a little jealous of Natlea's soft curves or Charlise's petite figure.

As she ran her hands over his belly, the muscles jumped under her touch. Stepping behind him, she gathered more soap and lathered his back and then over his shoulders. Neither of them spoke as she worked. Selia was too nervous to break the spell of the moment. She couldn't tell what Jaro was thinking.

The water soaked into her clothes and her hair, making her ponytail stick to her back and neck. She hardly noticed though, too aware of other parts of her body and their reaction to his nearness.

She lathered his tail and Jaro sucked in a breath.

"Is this okay?" she asked, afraid he would stop her.

"It... it's fine. Thank you." His voice was rough and full of an emotion Selia couldn't identify without seeing his face. Jaro held still and let her rub soap into his tail and wash it away. When she still wasn't satisfied, she repeated the process with shampoo, combing through the shorn fur with her fingers until the lather washed away to reveal no more grease and grime.

Slipping around to his front again, she dropped to her knees, rubbing soap up each calf, continuing until she reached his thighs. She risked a look up to see Jaro watching her with such an intense expression it brought the heat back to her cheeks and a restless tingle to her sex.

His good hand flexed by his side as if he wanted to reach for her and as she continued to massage his thighs, she was suddenly aware of a low rumble. Her eyes widened. She stared up at Jaro. Was he purring? For her? Didn't that mean...?

The bulge was back, tenting the front of his briefs. As she stared, it twitched and he tensed.

“Jaro, do you—”

Her question was cut off with an elongated beep from the med bot. “Procedure complete. Thank you for your patience.”

His purr cut off as he coughed. He stepped back and dropped his gaze. “I should probably take care of the rest myself. Thank you.”

The spell was broken. He lowered his hand and angled his body away from her. She knew she'd made things awkward. For what? It was just an erection. It might have been a normal biological reaction and nothing more, but the purr! Surely that had to mean something. Had he been interested all along and she'd been too shy and too stupid to let him know she felt the same? Now it was too late. *Don't let it be too late!*

She struggled to her feet, moving toward him. “Jaro, are you—”

Goddess it sounded so stupid, even in her head: are you actually attracted to me? Do you want to bend me over in this shower and make hot steamy love to me until I can't remember my own name? Okay, not that, but her muddled brain couldn't come up with anything better. She stepped closer still and reached up with a hand toward his cheek.

He stopped her. “I can't. Sorry, Selia. I should never have asked you to do that.”

She dropped her hand and stepped back. “You didn't. I'm sorry. It's my fault. I overstepped. I'll just...” She let the

words trail off as she turned to go, gathering a towel and trying not to slip on the trail of puddles she left as she hurried from the bathroom.

EIGHT

JARO GROANED AS HE pressed his palm down over the inappropriate erection that wouldn't subside. He'd hurt Selia's feelings. He'd seen that in her face and her tense shoulders when she turned to go. Still, all he could think about was her hands working over his body, caressing and touching him in a way he had longed for, had missed. She'd looked up at him with an expression nothing short of wistful. She'd touched his tail. He'd let her. He had *wanted* her to.

She hadn't just helped him wash. Her touch had been more than that. To him at least. Her touch had made him feel cared for, perhaps even—but, no. If he put *that* word to it, he'd never recover.

Already he'd shamed himself by letting her get on her knees in front of him. The sight had made him purr. A fact she hadn't missed. What was wrong with him?

He had purred before. For another female he hadn't been able to keep. A female who hadn't really been his. It was as if he was desperate to sling his heart at any likely target, cast himself at the feet of any female who would take him.

He sighed. He hadn't missed the way Selia had fled from the bathroom. He'd hurt her and she deserved an explanation. It wasn't Selia's fault he was broken.

Switching off the water, he grabbed a towel and slung it around his hips, using another to dry the fur on his chest and arms. He walked toward Selia's room, paused at the door, and then he thought better of it. Taking a few extra minutes to dress, he tried to compose his thoughts to tell her why he was the way he was. He hadn't talked about it—really talked about it—with any other person. Not the whole story, anyway. His brothers and his parents knew the story. They'd been there to help pick up the pieces after Riya left. He hadn't needed to explain to them. Not like this.

Rubbing a hand over his face, he returned to Selia's door and knocked. "Can I come in?"

It was silent for so long he thought perhaps she'd gone to sleep. That, or she was so angry or upset she didn't want to talk to him. He couldn't really blame her. He should have told her when they first set out, cleared the air and been open with her.

Eventually he heard her sigh. A moment later, the door opened and there she was. She had taken down her long dark hair and it fell in soft damp waves over her shoulders instead of straight and pinned back like usual. So beautiful. His fingers itched to run through it.

Gone was the tight-fitting active wear. Instead she wore a baggy t-shirt and shorts. He should have been grateful less of her figure was on display, but she looked so adorably tousled, so much like she was ready for bed that his mind immediately pictured her snuggled up against him in his. Or beneath him as he rolled on top of her and—

Jaro gave himself a little shake. As he opened his mouth to speak, Selia jumped in first.

“Listen, I'm sorry about before. We don't need to talk about it. Really. I get it. I didn't want to make things awkward.”

He longed to pull her into his arms and smooth the little frown line between her brows with a kiss. Instead he clenched his fist. “No, I'm the one who should be sorry. There's something I should have told you before now, but I was avoiding it because I'm a coward. It's only fair I tell you. Will you hear me out?”

Her eyes widened and she met his gaze. “Sure. You want to come in?”

He followed her into the bedroom, sitting beside her on the bed. For a long moment he looked down at his hands in his lap and fought for the courage to begin. Of course Selia came to his rescue.

“So it's about more than the royal guards, isn't it? Because I thought you could have... you know... discreet female companionship.”

Throat tight he could only nod. Finally he managed, “You’re right.”

She didn’t say anything more, just waited for him to continue. So he forced himself to choke the words out. “I had a mate once.”

Selia nodded, but she pressed her lips together, still waiting.

“She’s the mother of my kit.” He sighed, leaning forward to run a hand through his cropped hair. “Her name is Riya.”

“What happened?” Selia’s tone was soft, but her expression wasn’t pity. Not yet. He was grateful for that small mercy.

“We weren’t true mates. I never sent her into heat. I told her it didn’t matter. To me it didn’t. And things were good for a while. But she’d been working with this male in pretty close quarters. She’s a scientist. Very clever. He’s her lab partner. He transferred to Ashad from Isa, and a few weeks later...” He broke off. He’d seen the signs a couple of days before. Smelled her growing riper. He’d even dared to hope something had changed. That she’d somehow responded to him.

Though she’d smelled amazing, it hadn’t driven him mad with lust. Then she’d come home that day and confessed. She’d cried and begged his forgiveness as if it had been her fault. Everyone knew a female in heat had needs. Needs that had to be tended by the right male.

“I wasn’t what she needed.” By the Wolf Star, he hated how raw his voice sounded, like laser-brushed stone. He pushed on anyway, Selia’s silent presence beside him somehow felt comforting.

“I wasn’t enough and the heat had hit her hard. It was only natural for them to soothe the ache together.”

His tail thumped the bed and the palm of his hand hurt where the flesh had only just been knitted back together. He clenched around the phantom stab, wincing. Selia’s small hand slid over his, working its way until her fingers threaded through his, kneading at the sore spot until it eased.

“The worst part was my reaction.” He hung his head, afraid to look across at Selia. “I’m not proud of how I acted when she told me. I can look back now and I know what the right thing to do was. But at the time...” He took a long pause while he swallowed around thick disgust. “At the time I wasn’t so calm. I wasn’t myself. I shouted at her. Wolf Star knows I cursed her and broke apart half the furniture in our house. Until I heard my son crying. He was only two. Desi didn’t understand what was happening. He only saw me destroying everything I could reach and screaming at his mother. When I —” A sob rose in his throat. He pressed on. “Hells, when I saw him standing there with his ears pressed back, cowering from me, it nearly broke me.”

He drew in a long, shuddering breath. “I couldn’t face them for a while after that. I left. Stayed with my family for a week or two until they convinced me to speak to her. And star-blight me she came around every day trying to talk to me. She’s a good female. I wish I could have deserved her.”

Selia’s hand tightened around his and she made a low noise in her chest. An angry noise! “Don’t say it like that.”

He glanced up, surprised at the fire in her tone.

“Don’t say it like there’s something wrong with you,” Selia went on fiercely. “There isn’t.”

Still unable to really look at her, he held tight to her hand.

Eventually Selia shifted a little. Her tone was softer. “So what happened? After that?”

He shrugged. “I released her from our bond. What else could I do? I couldn’t hold her back from a true mate. She deserved someone better. So did Desi. That’s why I can’t... Why I could never have another mate.”

“So you signed up for the harem.” It wasn’t said as a question. Instead Selia spoke the words as if she was putting together a puzzle.

He grimaced. “Couldn’t handle being alone, so I thought at least if I know from the outset she can’t be mine that way, I’ll never have to feel like that again.”

“Oh, Jaro.”

When he sneaked a look at Selia, he didn't find disgust or fear in her expression. It should have been a relief. The pity he saw in her furrowed brow and eyes bright with tears was probably worse. In the shower, he'd been so sure for a moment the look he'd seen on her face had been hunger. In the station, when he'd taken the knife wound for her, she'd looked at him with affection, with awe. Now her view of him would always be tainted by what he'd told her.

It would poison every interaction between them until she never looked at him without seeing the beast he could become. The awful lack. His inability to be what his mate had needed.

Selia pulled her hand away and he released her, bracing himself for the rest. Instead she stood and began pacing, her body full of restless energy. His tail flicked against the bed as he watched her. His ears pressed back.

She rounded on him, jabbing her finger into the air. “You know what? That's bullshit! I get that you're trying to be noble about all this, but that's still a shitty thing to do. She shouldn't have done that to you.” It took him a moment to realize her anger wasn't actually directed at him. She resumed pacing. Long hair swishing behind her with her jerky movements. “I can't believe you feel bad about being angry. Stars! Anyone would be angry, hurt... I can't even imagine.”

“But I shouldn't have lashed out.”

“Did you hurt her? Did you hurt your son?” She folded her arms across her chest and waited.

Jaro shook his head. “Never.”

“See? You never did anything wrong. That doesn't make you a bad person. It's a shitty situation and you just lost control for a moment. Who could blame you?”

She stepped closer, placed a hand on each of his shoulders and looked down at him with such an earnest expression he was captured in it. His tail stilled.

“Listen, I can understand why you don't want to take another mate. I'd probably feel the same. But you shouldn't

keep telling yourself there's something wrong with you. Because there's not. You're honorable and caring and just so damn good. I don't think one in a million males would have been as reasonable as you've been about it all. So understanding. So I'm sorry. I'm sorry for coming onto you like that. It won't happen again. But I want you to know that I think you're amazing."

He stared at her, searching her face for anything but truth. Those big brown eyes framed with dark lashes and her gentle smile knitted a little part of his soul back together.

Placing his own hands over hers where they still rested on his shoulders, he held her there for a moment longer. He'd hammered home the point about not being able to have her. Clearly she'd received that message loud and clear. Too bad he'd done it right when she'd somehow coaxed a tiny spark of hope to warm that chilly place beneath his ribs numb for so long.

He'd take it. He'd take her looking at him with warmth and friendship. If he wished there could be more, what was new? They were right back where they'd started, but at least now he felt grateful to be here.

NINE

“I HAVE AN IDEA ABOUT how to help Celethe.” Selia said the next morning before she took a sip of the coffee Jaro handed her. “You remember the girl from the bar at Babylon?”

He sat across from her at the table and leaned forward on his elbows. He watched her carefully for a sign things would be awkward, but thankfully there didn't seem to be one. “That's great.”

“I used to work with a woman named Sadi. She moved into off-world crime and then got a job with a charity which deals with just this sort of thing. I know they have a rescue ship set up to do amnesty runs and retrieve trafficked human slaves from outside Earthspace. Trouble is, I don't know if they're operating at the moment since the borders are closed, or restricted, or whatever.”

Jaro smiled. “Good thinking though. Any chance that some of those humans get out of there is an improvement.” He shook his head. “It just sickens me.”

Selia nodded. “I know. I'm going to call her today and see if we can leave the information with her to follow up.”

“Good. What's next? I think we need more information about what the hells Spectre Station actually is. Which probably means going back to the dome we were at yesterday and visiting more dive bars and human strip joints.” He scowled.

Selia nodded. “I think you're right. Should have brought a sluttier dress. I'm not sure I've got anything that won't make me stick out like an orbit-rat on Mars.”

Jaro grit his teeth, telling himself not to picture what Selia would look like in a slutty dress. Then while he was determinedly not picturing what he'd do to any other male that got to look at her in said dress, she got up and stretched.

Had he been this aware of the way her tits pushed against the tight fabric of her top as she moved before the shower incident?

Fuck!

Why did he have to go and make things weird by obsessing over what he couldn't have?

••••

Of course, Selia was just as friendly and fun as always, ready with a joke and a smile for him as they got ready to enter Babylon Station again that evening. She leaned over and bumped his shoulder as they waited in the doorway for the gravity and oxygen to sync. "Hey, where do Ximians dance?"

He squinted down at her. "I dunno. Where?"

"At the snowball!" She chuckled. "Wanna hear another?"

He shrugged. "Not really."

She only laughed. "Why didn't the Ximian have a date to the snowball?"

He ran through all the snow puns he could think of and came up blank. "You've got me. Why?"

"He had *snowone* to go with!" Selia laughed until she snorted and flicked off her holoscreen as the door chimed to say it was ready.

Yep. Definitely way back in the friend zone.

Worse, he had to walk next to her through Babylon Station while she wore the tightest red dress ever printed. Had the bot malfunctioned halfway through and printed only half a dress?

Dragging his eyes from the way the dress inched up her thighs, Jaro stepped closer and slung his arm around Selia. At least this way he couldn't stare longingly at the hem, hoping it'd ride up and give him a view of whatever panties she wore beneath it.

Was she even wearing panties? The dress was so damn tight, maybe she wasn't.

He needed to think about something else. Immediately.

Thankfully, they reached the first place they'd meant to try that evening. The bar by the name of The Laundry Room was

located at the bottom of dome 23vu9df. Jaro had found reviews suggesting the humans who worked here had seemed scared, but it was little more than a hunch that led him to suggest they try it. The bar itself was apparently famous for one thing: human girls in lingerie dancing inside glass boxes in the main room. For a fee you could take home a pair of used panties from your favorite one. Some of the reviews also indicated there were private rooms out back where more extensive services could be purchased if you knew who to ask.

Jaro sincerely hoped he never found out. However, given the mission, he suspected he was about to have a fair idea.

They walked in and took a seat at the main bar. Selia slid onto a stool next to him while he tried not to watch the way the hem of that damn dress rode up indecently. At least in this place bots served the drinks and Jaro didn't have to smell the fear and distaste of the human staff, who were all behind glass.

He settled in to feign interest in the nearest gyrating human. The blonde woman had a curvy figure and the largest fake tits he'd seen outside a porn vid. She caught him looking, spun and bent over, pressing her ass against the glass and exposing just about everything except what a very small scrap of fabric hid. He forced himself not to openly sigh and look away.

The woman in the box turned and ran her hands over her waist to plump her breasts, moving her hips in time with whatever music played inside her cage. He almost growled when he caught the whiff of cloying sadness from his right. From Selia.

His eyes flicked to her as she sat watching the human in the box.

Was Selia comparing herself to that woman? Comparing her gorgeous strong shape to the fabricated plastic curves Jaro could easily overlook? Surely not. She was only sad, like he was, that this female was reduced to this.

He forced himself to focus back on the dancer.

A gruff voice from beside him said in a half-shout, "I'll pay double whatever you offer for her panties, so don't even waste your time."

Turning, he looked at a skinny older male who had settled beside him at the bar, his wiry arms crossed over his chest, tail flicking the leg of his stool.

Jaro smiled. "Her? She's not my type."

The other male scoffed. "Are you kidding? Look at those tits. She's everyone's type. And you wouldn't be saying that if you'd had a sniff of that pussy. But you won't get one, because she's mine. So forget it."

Jaro held up his hands in a gesture of conciliation. "Sure, sure. Listen, you sound like you could use a drink. What are you having?"

The male glared at him for another beat, then huffed a long sigh out and unfolded his arms. "Beer. Thanks."

Jaro leaned over the counter to the holomenu and ordered another beer, pushing it toward his new friend when the bot brought it over. Using the fake name he had come up with when they began the mission, he said, "I'm Barreth."

The skinny male took a sip of the beer and eyed him. "Yal." For a silent moment, they both watched each other, drinking their beer. He felt, rather than heard Selia shuffle a little closer, probably listening in.

"You ever sleep with a human then?" he asked. Internally he cringed at the part he had to play.

The other male's ears pricked up and he glanced over at Selia. Jaro leaned on the bar, blocking Yal's view.

Yal shrugged. "Yeah, a couple. I guess you have."

Jaro stretched his mouth into a grin he didn't feel.

"Why? You bored of yours?"

He just managed to hold onto the hiss that threatened to rise from his throat. "Someone dropped a name yesterday and

I'll admit, I'm very curious to find out more about it. The guy I was speaking to wouldn't elaborate."

"Oh yeah?"

"You wouldn't have heard of Spectre would you? Couldn't help a male out?"

Yal snorted. "Hey, I'm not into that real kinky shit, okay? I don't know what you think you know, but all the girls in this place are legal, yeah? Orna here might sell me her panties every day, but she won't go home with me no matter what I pay her. And that's her choice."

Jaro narrowed his eyes. "So you're talking slaves then? Not play, real slaves?"

Yal's tail flicked. "Listen. If I were you I'd quit asking. You do not want to get mixed up in that." He slid off his stool, grabbed his beer and stalked across to the other side of the bar.

Jaro didn't mourn the loss of his company for long.

After a few more moments, he signaled to Selia and they left the bar. When they made it back to the space port and he'd looked around to check they hadn't been followed, Jaro said, "You heard all that?"

"Some."

"Seems like Spectre is the lead we're looking for. Just need to do a bit more digging. But from the sounds of it, there is real slavery happening there."

She nodded. "Can we ask Sattar to look into it some more, see if he can get a location?"

"Sounds like a plan."

IT WAS LATE. JARO LINGERED in the common area, unwilling to go to his room even after Selia had yawned and stretched and bid him goodnight. He should have been feeling relaxed and content. They had a new lead about ex-Minister Jaessa. Sattar was sifting through all the archived documents at the family estate and he had already turned up more references to Spectre. The best information he had so far was that it was in Edgespace. A recently colonized star system in the Earthspace zone. So they had left Babylon on their way to Earthspace, a fact he couldn't ignore.

Earlier that day, Jaro'd had a vid-call with Desi.

The kit's eyes had lit up when he called and he had enthusiastically described a trip to the natural history museum, telling Jaro all about the immersive VR landscapes and the preserved animals from all the five systems. Then he and Selia had watched a vid and sat together on the couch just talking for hours. He should have been feeling content.

Yet Jaro wasn't ready to call it a night. If he went to his room now, he'd only be tempted to jerk his cock to the image of her. He'd promised himself he wouldn't do that. It didn't stop the tempting awareness from growing every hour he spent alone with her in the confines of the cruiser though. When he finally got up and walked down the corridor, he shouldn't have lingered at Selia's door. He certainly shouldn't have leaned close, hoping to hear something—anything to tell him she was still awake and might still want to talk to him.

What he did hear, as he pressed his ear against the door, was a noise that made his fur stand on end. A soft whimper carried through the silent ship to his straining ears. Followed by a louder moan.

Hells, was she in pain? Was she having a nightmare? He didn't even stop to consider. Pressing a palm down over the door panel, he even took two steps inside her room before he realized his mistake.

As soon as the door slid open, the sweetest scent he'd ever smelled coiled around his senses. It took half his brain cells and redirected them along with most of the blood in his body straight to his cock.

By the Wolf Star, she wasn't hurt or scared, she was aroused! She lay on top of the bed with her legs spread, wearing nothing but a baggy shirt rucked up to her stomach, hands between her legs.

When he entered, she froze and her bronze skin deepened in color with her blush. "Jaro!" She didn't even tell him off, just paused her hurried rubbing to stare at him, mouth parted in surprise.

His tail swatted the air. He was about to apologize, to step back and get himself to the other end of the cruiser where he might have half a chance of putting her delicious scent out of his mind. Then the aroma blossomed into something new, something *more*. His nostrils flared. She whimpered. His cock hardened further, extending completely from his body and pressing angrily against the seam of his trousers.

Before he could stop himself, he stalked to the bed and dropped to his knees. Leaning close he drew in a long breath until his head swam with it—with her.

"Jaro, I—"

Suddenly he teetered on a knife's edge of control, her strong, yet feminine body spread out before him. When he spoke, his voice was rough with a need he couldn't disguise. "Tell me. What were you thinking about while you touched yourself? Tell me."

Stars, he had no right to ask her that. No right to know what secret desires made those plump lower lips slick with dewy moisture.

He had a feeling he already knew.

But he had to be sure.

Her breath caught and now, she tried to tug at the blanket to cover herself. He clamped a hand down over her wrist,

stilling her. “Don’t. Don’t cover that beauty. That perfect scent. Please, Selia. Hells, were you thinking of me?”

His tail lashed while he waited for what seemed like an age for her to answer. Eventually Selia pressed her eyes closed and swallowed. “Yes. I’m sorry. I know what you said about not wanting me and—”

“I never said that!” The words were out before he could catch them and it was a relief. A shudder ran through him. He leaned closer until his elbows rested between her open thighs. Until he could inhale more of her perfume. He groaned. “You were thinking of me as you rubbed this pussy. This scent is for me. This cream belongs to me.” His voice was little more than a growl. Then her scent grew sweeter still.

“Yes.”

“And your need is mine to satisfy.”

“Yes.” Her head fell back against the cushion and her eyes closed, as if she couldn’t bear to watch.

That was permission, wasn’t it? Wolf Star blight him, he couldn’t wait any longer. He leaned in, unable to keep from tasting what he hadn’t truly earned. She was smooth, her hair clipped short over her mons and completely bald over the flushed lips she still held open with her fingers. Her pussy was salty, sweet perfection. He ran his tongue along one pretty fold and up to tease over her hand where it rested over her swollen nub of pleasure.

Ah hells, it was the best thing he’d ever tasted. She was the best thing he’d ever taste. Well, no. Her come would be the best thing he’d ever taste and there wasn’t a star-damned chance he was leaving this spot until she’d given it to him.

Selia gasped. She arched into his tongue. Stars, she was soaked already. She must have been so close to coming when he’d burst in on her like an imbecile.

He thrust his tongue inside and felt her clamp around him, searching for more, needing more. She needed him. Was there anything better than being needed so badly?

Then Selia reached down, fingers sliding into his hair.
“Jaro, yes. Please!”

He was so fucked. Or he would be. In every sense but the one he wanted.

••••

She could hardly believe this was real and she wasn't dreaming, caught up in a fantasy so vivid it had somehow materialized in front of her. Jaro nudged her thighs further apart with his broad shoulders and pressed into her, his entire face buried in her pussy.

His hair pulled tight in her fist and the prick of his claws as he grasped her hips felt real enough. The sensation of his hot breath, his wet, raspy tongue over her most sensitive areas was beyond real. Even better than she had dreamed.

Jaro groaned and pulled her closer still, his tongue dipping inside her, while his nose and lips and teeth added stimulation everywhere else. Goddess, he ate her pussy like he wanted to devour her. As if his life depended on it.

She really was dreaming.

Moving up he sucked hard over her clit and she moaned, arching her back at the pleasure coursing through her. It built, sweet and aching, reaching a peak that never quite slipped over the other side. She was wet. She'd been close to an orgasm before he had burst into her room and she'd frozen with a finger on either side of her swollen clit.

Jaro sucked and lapped at her and while it felt good, it didn't feel as good. Not now she'd started thinking too hard. He flexed his hand on her hip. He shifted position. His tail swatted the bed and she started tensing. Was he still enjoying himself? Was he down there wishing she would come already?

Jaro switched from sucking over her clit to lapping at her folds again and Selia let go of his hair, clutching the bedding instead. Maybe if she just angled her hips differently. Maybe she could find it again.

It was useless. She already knew it. This was what happened every time she had sex with a partner. She got all up

in her head and things just stalled.

She knew the feeling. Knew what it felt like to come when it was just her, alone in her room. Somehow it never felt quite the same with someone else to worry about. How do you tell someone they're not doing it for you? Especially when he was working so hard to please her. Rather than have that awkward conversation, she did what she always did.

When Jaro licked his way back up to her clit and swirled his tongue in quick circles around the little nub, she moaned. It did feel good. It just wasn't as amazing as she made it sound. She arched her back and moaned again until he sucked.

Clenching her inner muscles she let out a long, keening sound, then relaxed, waiting.

Jaro stopped. He looked up at her, a line forming between his brows even as he licked his glistening lips. "What's wrong?"

Her face heated. "Nothing."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I just... you know... came?"

"No. You didn't." His frown deepened. "Why would you pretend?"

Shit. She fumbled for the words. "Because I thought... I dunno. I thought it was taking too long and you might be getting sick of it?"

He growled. The sound vibrated against her pussy and chased back some of the pleasure. She kept staring down at him, searching his face to see what he was thinking. Was he angry with her?

Jaro looked up at her from where he remained, hovering right above her pussy. "Sick of it? Of the taste of you?" He sucked her labia into his mouth with a wet smacking noise. The end of his tail twitched as he closed his eyes for a moment. "I could never get enough. If you think you're doing me a favor by stopping me, think again. You think I'll ever be satisfied, no matter how many times you come on my

tongue?” He scoffed, giving her another long, slow lick. “Besides, you can’t fool me. I’ll know when you’ve come cause this snack will turn into dessert and reward me with the sweetest cream I’ve ever tasted. Now, can I keep going? Or do we need to talk about this some more?”

“Oh my goddess, Jaro! I don’t even know where to start. You can *taste* it?”

A grin. “Yep.”

“When I... when a woman comes?”

“Yeah. There’s nothing better.”

She flopped back onto the pillows, slinging an arm over her eyes and trying to pretend her cheeks weren’t burning. This male!

He didn’t wait any longer to dive back down, applying his tongue and lips to her pussy. Searching out new places, he hummed his approval every time she felt her cunt drip with fresh juices, or her thighs tightened around his ears. “Do I need to tell you how good you taste? How much I want to stay here, just savoring it?”

She gasped, his tongue found the place just beside her clit that made her body zing from her core to her toes. “You know how lucky I feel to be right here, right where I dreamed of being? Fuck, I’m a selfish prick, but I had to. I had to know.” He spoke with his mouth right over her folds, his lips grazing her sensitive flesh with each word.

“But don’t you want me to touch you too? Don’t you want me to get you off?”

“No. I don’t care about that. What I want—what I *need*—is to stay right here until you tell me to stop, because right now I’m just about ready to tell you all those mythic heavens were real after all.”

“What if I can’t come?”

“Then you tell me to stop when you’re good and ready, and not before.”

He dipped his head again, but this time it was more like a kiss. He sucked her gently into his mouth and teased her with his tongue until she relaxed, her knees flopping against the mattress.

“That’s it, sugar. I’ve got you.”

When he reached for her hand a moment later and guided it back to his hair, she gripped him gratefully, directing him right back to that perfect place. He went eagerly, pushing down with his tongue, sighing and groaning against her sex every time she made any noise of encouragement. Soon her worries were forgotten and she was edging closer and closer. Jaro never stopped. He licked and sucked her on and on, until she really believed he meant what he said.

When her climax hit her, it took her by surprise. She hadn’t really expected to come. But he had slipped a careful finger inside her, finding a place that made the sensation of his mouth over her clit turn up to a hundred. Suddenly her thighs were trembling, her stomach clenching and a dizzy spiral of pleasure circled outward from her clit through her whole body, leaving her breathing his name. “Jaro. Mmm, Jaro. Oh, that feels so good.”

His answering groan turned into a purr, the vibrations rumbling through her body, sending a fresh wave of sweetness through her.

“Oh, yes, yes. Oh, thank you.”

When her body stopped contracting, he gently withdrew his finger, and moved from between her thighs. She had expected him to come over her, to enter her, but he slid alongside her, pulling her into his arms. He stroked her hair and tucked her into his warm, furry chest. She snuggled against the patch where his shirt gaped open at the front.

“Don’t you want more? Don’t you want to come?”

“No, angel. This was only ever about you. Just let me hold you a while. Just until you fall asleep.”

“You’re not staying?”

“I don’t think that would be a very good idea.”

She wanted to ask him why it would be bad, wanted to ask him why he didn't want her to make him come. Then she could feel his cock, thick and hard against her hip. Sleep was already tugging her eyes closed. Each stroke of his claws through the strands of her hair and over her back shut them a fraction more until she couldn't possibly open them. They felt so heavy. The last thing she remembered was Jaro tucking the blanket around her and pressing a kiss to her temple.

ELEVEN

JARO WOKE WITH THE most perfect scent surrounding him. It had been too long since he'd woken to the smell of female satisfaction coating his face and hands, perfuming the air around him. He recognized it straightaway though.

He had to choke down a purr when he realized where he was. In Selia's bed, curled around her sleeping form as if she belonged to him. He'd had every good intention of creeping away once she had fallen asleep. He obviously hadn't managed it though. He'd told himself just one more minute. Just one more stolen moment, pressing his nose to her hair and feeling her long slow breaths expand and contract her body where her back was snuggled against his chest.

His damn cock was hard as nanodiamond, throbbing against the crack of her ass, surging with pressure every time he remembered the sweet sighs he had wrung from her or her perfect taste under his lips.

Reluctantly he disengaged his arm, rolled to his back, and then climbed softly from the bed. When he glanced at his wrist-com, it was still early. Selia would probably sleep a little longer. There'd be no more sleep for him though. Not now his mind was busy replaying the way she'd come with his name on her lips.

As much as he had wanted to give in to her suggestion of taking pleasure from her as well, he had managed to resist. Thank every mythic power! It was one thing to give her pleasure. To serve her the same way he'd devoted himself to serving his Shahra. It was another to sink himself into her, to hold her close as he plunged in and out of that tight sheath. As soon as he got inside her, that would be it for him. No way he could be that close to perfection and not claim it for himself—not sink teeth into her flesh as if he could somehow keep her.

Wasn't that what he was about to do, as soon as they neared Earthspace? They hadn't spoken about the bite since leaving Ardun. Awareness of it increasingly colored every moment he spent with Selia.

Was she thinking about it too?

Would she be nervous? It might hurt, particularly if he didn't prepare her properly. Jaro groaned and turned from the doorway of Selia's room where he was lingering. He pushed down his cock, which responded enthusiastically to the idea of eating that succulent little pussy again. Of driving into her, leaving her hovering on the edge of orgasm until he could sink his fangs into her flesh in time with one final thrust of his dick, bringing them both the bliss he longed for.

Dangerous ground.

He should shower. He didn't though. He couldn't deny wanting to spend the rest of the day smelling of what he'd given her.

He'd just sat down with a breakfast of steamed buns and a hot coffee, when a sound behind him made him look around. Selia stood in the doorway to the common area wearing only her t-shirt and some black panties. She froze when his gaze locked on her. He tried to force his expression into something that could pass as calm. In reality, his claws flexed, needing to leap up and grab her, to wrap his arms around her and squeeze that rounded ass which must be peeping halfway out of those small panties.

Deliberately he took a long breath in and out, searching for control. "Morning. Did you sleep well?"

She gave him a sheepish grin and came over, sliding in next to him on the bench seat at the table. "Yeah. Best sleep I've had in a long time."

His tail twitched. He forced himself to breathe normally. "That's good."

Selia's wrist-com buzzed with a new message. She glanced down, then held it out for him to read.

Sadi: I've been talking to some of the other humans here at the rescue center. Asking about Spectre. My best guess is it's an underground slave market for human slaves. Anyway, it fronts as an exclusive sex club. Reality is most of the people who are there are likely orbit-rats who sold themselves for a

ticket off Fortuna. Trouble is, to get in you have to get an invitation. I've never been able to get close.

Jaro put the half-finished bun back on his plate, stomach turning at the information in the message. More evidence of Ardun dealing with humans like they were inferior. Of course he'd seen the viral vids. He'd heard the stupid right-wing conspiracy theorists who claimed that Ardun and Ximian hybrids were the way of the future. That humans were destined to go extinct. Until now, he'd always written it off as the type of rubbish that gets spewed on the com, but that most people were too embarrassed to voice publicly. Certainly not the sort of thing people acted on. Once again, he'd underestimated how shitty people could be when given half a chance.

“Would this give Sattar enough to work with, do you think?” Selia asked.

He scratched his chin. “I don't think he'd be able to get an invite personally. I think his loyalty to the Shahra has been too widely publicized. But if he knows what he's asking about, he might be able to find someone who could get one.”

“That's what I was thinking. We should call him.”

“You're right.” He leaped eagerly from his seat, leaving his breakfast cooling on the table in front of him. Selia's quiet words stopped him in his tracks.

“So, are we going to talk about last night?”

He cringed a little, ears flicking back. Was she going to say it couldn't happen again? He already knew it, but it was a good reminder. With a sigh, he half turned to her, pushing aside his food. “Sure. You're right. We should talk about it.”

“Uh, yeah, we should talk about the fact that I still feel ridiculously grateful. You were amazing and I think I fell asleep before I said that.”

He gaped. “You don't—” He ran a hand through his hair. “Selia, you don't have to thank me. Fuck! I should be thanking *you*. I know I can't offer you anything more than what we shared last night and I'm sorry—”

“Are you kidding? I’ve never come with any other guy before, okay? So that was... amazing.”

Jaro forced down a growl, fighting against the rising pressure in his chest and the tightness in his throat. “Never?”

She shook her head. His hands shook with the need to reach over and pull her into his lap. To press his mouth over hers in a kiss like he hadn’t done last night. That sweetness was all his? No other male had ever tasted her pleasure, made her moan his name. Mythic hells! “Selia, you can’t say things like that to me. You don’t know what I’d—fuck! I’d like to sit you up here on this table and have you for breakfast just so I can taste it again. I’m the only one?”

“Yes.” Her voice was a breathy whimper and her arousal scent blossomed thick and drugging, penetrating easily through the thin fabric of her panties.

It was too much.

Twisting his body, he planted a hand on each side of her waist and lifted, placing her on the table in front of him. He pushed back the bench he had been sitting on until he could spread her thighs and lick all the way up the inside of one leg from her knee right over the cotton of her underwear. Beneath him, Selia shuddered, her panties damp from her juices and his saliva. His mouth was already watering for more.

Using his thumb, he pushed aside the black material, exposing that dark, glistening cunt for his enjoyment. He had just enough willpower to pause with his lips right over her quivering center. “Can I?”

“Oh, fuck, yes.” Her hand went straight to his hair, and he groaned as she pulled him in. “You think I wouldn’t stop you if this wasn’t exactly what I wanted too?” Of course she would. He should have more trust in her.

The first taste was just as good as he remembered and he lapped feverishly at her folds, eager to coat his tongue in her flavor. He spread her wider with his hand, delving deeper. “Sweet Shahra, you are so perfect. I’d like to be the only male that ever makes you feel this good.” It was crazy. He shouldn’t

even be thinking these things, let alone saying them to her, but he couldn't seem to stop.

She moaned and arched her back while he suckled at her clit. She'd liked that last night. He'd paid close attention. She had also liked when he circled her nub with the end of his tongue. He did it, purring with satisfaction when she gasped and tightened her grip on his hair.

“Oh fuck, oh Jaro. How do you do that? How do you make it feel so good?” Had he been purring before? It sounded like a rocket thruster now. The hum of it vibrated his chest and throat.

Slipping his arms beneath her thighs, he curled his hands to pull her tight against his hungry mouth as he devoured her. Yeah, his hips were humping air, his claws flexing to press into her smooth skin. His fangs ached—they fucking ached to sink into her.

She came moments later, gasping, crying his name, her thighs squeezed around his face as if he might stop in the middle of the best stars-damn part. Not a fucking chance. No faking this time. No fear or hesitation. She already believed in him that much. She trusted him to take care of her.

He wasn't done. Far from it. He needed more. He slipped two fingers very carefully into her pussy, relishing the way she clamped around him. It made him wish he'd kept his claw caps, but he'd had them removed after Riya. Shaking himself out of that black hole, he renewed his focus on Selia. He pressed up against her inner walls, curling and stroking to draw out her pleasure. The way she gripped him made him want to replace his fingers with his throbbing cock. What he wouldn't give to sink into that tight, hot heaven.

As soon as he thought it, plate, cutlery and cup went flying as he pushed them aside and came over her. His body acted on pure instinct. Selia spread her thighs wider, arms reaching for him, tugging him down into that sweet cleft. Her lips parted and her tongue darted out as he allowed himself a rocking grind of his hips against her soaked pussy. Fuck! He could already feel her juices dampening the fabric of his trousers

where it was the only thing separating them. Hells, he'd probably come in his pants if he kept this up, make a real mess of things. He didn't care at all.

He lifted the fingers he had used to please her, feeding them into her open mouth. His balls tightened as she sucked her own flavor from his hand. Then he just about lost his mind when she pulled him down to taste it on her lips.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

He had to stop. Had to remind himself she couldn't be his. He couldn't push into her perfect cunt, couldn't feed his hard dick into her body and watch her take every inch. He certainly couldn't bite and claim her the way he wanted. He had already gone too far, indulging that needy part of himself that had missed this. By the Wolf Star he had missed this.

That wasn't right.

The connection he felt just rocking against Selia's body, just tasting the orgasm he had given her in her kiss was better than anything he'd ever felt. He thought he'd known what it felt like to make love, but nothing had prepared him for the feeling of coming home. Feeling he belonged here. All while he indulged in the filthiest thoughts about plunging into her body and filling her so full of his come it dripped from her afterward.

It was nonsense. His brain playing tricks on him because he was horny as fuck and sleep-deprived and lonely. So damn lonely.

That didn't stop him kissing her desperately, laving his tongue into Selia's mouth like he could soak up enough of her for a lifetime. She kissed him back just as greedily, her hands clutching at his shirt and holding him against her. She wrapped her legs tight around him and he groaned at the feel of her damp pussy giving him friction against his shaft. He gave into the madness, broke away from the kiss and trailed his open mouth along her neck searching for the place. The spot that would be his.

"This silky skin needs my mark, doesn't it?"

She moaned and whispered something unintelligible. He kissed her, dragging the point of his fangs over her skin.

“Tell me you want it. Gonna give it to you. You want my teeth? My bite?”

Selia writhed. It took him a moment to notice her hands were pushing at his chest, not tugging him closer. He pulled back, giving her space.

“For real? Are we being real, Jaro?”

Hissing out a curse, he squeezed his eyes shut. What was he doing? He couldn't bite her for real. All he could offer her was this fake arrangement they'd lined up more than a week ago when he'd still been kidding himself he could do it. He must be the biggest fool in the five systems.

“Jaro! Tell me what you're thinking? Please.”

With a growl he tore away, ignoring Selia's cry as he turned his back. How could he tell her what he was thinking? It was shameful. Dishonorable. Worse, he was leaving her there on that table practically begging for more because he wasn't strong enough to just be what she needed without taking—*demanding*—everything from her. He was shaking, struggling for the words he needed.

“I'm sorry. I can't—” The words were thrown over his shoulder as he retreated like a coward. “Forgive me.” Not good enough for his Selia. His sweet human who always put everyone else first. Who was probably even now thinking about how she could take care of *his* needs.

Who was taking care of her, though?

TWELVE

JARO HID IN HIS ROOM for the next two days. Hid like a frightened kitten. On the second day, his wrist-com buzzed and he looked down to see the one caller he always answered. He'd never let Riya or Desi think he didn't care. Never wanted Riya to feel like she was doing it alone. With a sigh, he brought up his holoscreen and flicked to accept the call. "Hi, Riya, everything okay?"

"Yeah, everything's fine here. Are you okay? You look... tired."

He gave her what might have passed for a smile. "I'm fine." She didn't need to hear him moan. He wasn't her problem anymore, was he? "How's Karim?"

"He's good. Thanks for asking. I'm actually calling because Desi wanted to say hi. We haven't heard from you in a couple days."

Rubbing a hand over the stubble on his chin, he glanced away from her concerned expression. "Yeah. Sorry about that. Is he there now? Can I talk to him?"

Desi's small face popped into the corner of the screen almost instantly. "Daddy!" His little mouth was stretched wide in a big grin, his green eyes bright, ears pricked forward. Jaro wished he could look half as grateful as he felt for that happy smile right now. "Hey, buddy. Sorry I haven't called much lately. You know Daddy's been doing an important job, right? I didn't forget about you."

"I know." Desi leaned in closer, so his nose was almost pressed up against the cam. In the background he heard Riya laughing. "You're on a secret mission. But don't worry. I won't tell anyone."

"Yeah, that's right. So I'm sorry I'm going to miss our weekend this month. I'll make it up to you when I get back. We'll go someplace special, okay?"

"Can we get ice cream?"

He chuckled. “Sure, buddy. We’ll go get ice cream at the park. Anything else you want to do?”

“I want to go to the zoo! And the water park and the playground and—”

“Okay, alright. I think you might not have time to do all those things.” Riya pulled the cam back from Desi’s face. “I’m sure your dad has plans, but it’ll be something good.”

Desi recounted a long story about learning to write all the names of everyone in his family. “And I spelled Karim’s name wrong and I had to write it again.”

Jaro nodded, trying to keep the grimace from his face. It wasn’t fair to feel like his chest might implode because his son was writing down three names instead of two. He should feel grateful Desi had so many good people in his life who cared about him.

“And then I did it! And I got *your* name right first time! That’s because your name is better. It’s easy to spell like mine. Only four letters.”

“That’s great, buddy.”

When he hung up the vid-call, he was left with an even larger hole in his heart than he’d had there before, wondering what on Ardun he was doing with his life.

Why had he even signed up for the games in the first place? It was clear being in the harem would not replace the feeling of family he’d been trying to find ever since he released Riya from their bond. Now that he thought he might have found the one thing that could, he couldn’t have it—couldn’t have *her*.

He must be cursed.

The vid-call did make him realize it was time to step out into daylight and face the Wolf Star. When he checked the com, they had only two hours before they’d arrive at the Earth gate and the border between Ardunspace and Earthspace. Past time, then.

When he opened his door and walked out into the common area, he only dragged his feet a little. His tail lashed as he rounded the corner, but it froze along with the rest of him when he scented—then spotted—Selia sitting on the sofa, feet tucked beneath her, reading on her wrist-com.

He had only moments to stare at her before she looked up and saw him, eyes widening and whole body tensing. She jumped up from her spot and hurried toward him. “Jaro! I’m so sorry about the other day.”

He winced. Now she was apologizing to him? Unacceptable. “Selia, please don’t.”

She reached out quickly, her hand brushing tentatively at his forearm. “Wait, I don’t want things to be weird, okay?”

Swallowing thickly, he nodded. “I don’t want that either.”

As the awkward silence grew, Jaro fumbled for the words he needed. In the end they both spoke at once. “We’re getting close—”

“The Earth gate’s only—”

Shared laughter broke some of the tension.

“Come on.” Selia took his hand and dragged him over to the sofa. He sat stiffly beside her, willing his body to behave while her pretty scent teased his nostrils. “What are we going to do? The Earth government still hasn’t lifted the travel ban. Do you still want to go through with it? The bite, I mean?” Her color deepened and she glanced down at her hands as she brushed at the fabric of the tights she wore.

“What do you want to do?”

“I’d like to see this through.” She peeked up at him through impossibly dark lashes. Jaro held very still, forcing his heart down out of his throat. “I don’t want a war between our planets. I’d like to do whatever we can to avoid that. Nothing’s changed for me.”

If only he could say the same. He felt as if the ground had shifted beneath his feet. The scenery had changed around him and before he’d even realized it, he was in a completely

different location. One thing remained the same. He wanted the mission to be successful. It was a worthy cause. He didn't want Desi to grow up on a planet at war. He didn't want his son to come into contact with any of the vile anti-human sentiment that had been apparently growing like mold beneath the surface of Ardun society either.

So he set his jaw and gave her a tight nod. "Agreed."

She smiled. It wasn't her true, broad smile, the one that shifted the beauty mark on her chin. But it was something. "Then we're doing this?"

"Yes."

"Now?"

All the air was suddenly sucked out the airlock and he was left fighting to breathe normally. She was right, it had to be now. That's why he'd finally forced himself to face this. "How—" His voice was croaky. He cleared his throat. "How should we do it?"

She frowned. "What do you mean?" Her hand flitted to her neck and his eyes followed, staring at the path her fingertips trailed over the smooth skin. Was it his imagination or did her pulse jump just beneath the surface?

"It might hurt. Unless..."

She was completely still. Rather than shy away from him she might have even leaned forward. The end of his tail flicked against the sofa.

"Unless?"

"Unless I also make you ready—make you come or get you close at least."

Her lips parted on a shuddering breath and now he definitely saw her pulse jump in her throat. That beautiful bronzed throat that needed his mark.

He shook himself and dragged his eyes to hers. Oh, hells, that scent. Ripening around him, the aroma of her arousal drugged him with its sweetness. Hot and syrupy, and so thick in the surrounding air he could already taste it, like the liquor

made from the renthi cactus blossom that grew in the desert outside Ashad. She wanted it. Wanted him.

“Okay.” Selia’s whispered word nearly knocked him over as a surge of excitement spiked through him.

Biting back a groan, he licked dry lips. Forget Selia’s pulse. His own was suddenly racing. He patted his lap. “Come here and I’ll take care of you.”

She climbed onto him, straddling his legs. His hands found their way to her waist as if it was the most natural thing in the world. As if they belonged there. His eyes dipped to her neck, mentally marking the place he would bite. He could already see the marks of his teeth there, red at first, then pale and brown as the wound formed a scar.

But there would be no scar. He wouldn’t be able to bite her more than this once. There wouldn’t be time to deepen them with repeated bites to make sure he really left his mark.

As if reading his mind, Selia tucked her ponytail behind her shoulder, and he swallowed.

“Can we kiss?” As she said it, her tongue darted out to wet her full lips and his hands tightened reflexively at her waist. He’d been thinking about it since he’d let himself slip two days ago.

Moving one hand to the back of her neck, he pulled her in gently, not trusting himself with words. She sighed against his lips as his mouth joined with hers and he breathed her in. He licked and tasted, loving the way she moved her hips as he did. It only made him more determined to have all of her. Their lips moved, caressing and teasing, until he deepened the kiss and Selia moaned. She slid closer. Her pussy settled right over the swelling length of his cock now trapped between their bodies.

Wanting more, Jaro wrapped her ponytail around his fist. He drew her head to the side, trailing his kisses over her jaw and below her ear. Selia shuddered.

“Gonna bite you here.” He ran his mouth lower until he could kiss the spot where her neck and shoulder met. “Right here. This place is mine. Isn’t it?” Mythic hells, what was he

doing? He shouldn't be saying these things. Not to Selia. Not to the female he had no right to claim. As always in the heat of passion, his mouth ran away with him.

Selia seemed to like it though. Of course she did. Everything about this female was just so damn perfect. Her pleasure scent swelled and he drew it in hungrily.

“Yes. I'm ready.”

Pushing a hand into her tights, he delved two fingers into her folds. Damp, but she was nowhere near wet enough. “Not yet, sugar. I need you wetter. Need you soaked. Take off your clothes.”

In a hurry, she climbed off his lap and stripped. He might have chuckled at how fast she moved, but his own sense of urgency to have her back in his arms was equal to hers.

When she returned to him, he couldn't resist sliding his hands up her sides, cupping and palming her breasts and watching the wide brown nipples peak into firm buds. Then he had to taste them. First one and then the other, he laved them with his tongue, suckling them into his mouth until she gasped.

It was taking things too far. Pushing the bounds of what the paltry excuse he had for taking such liberties allowed him. He did it all the same, unable to help it.

The salt of her skin, the tart sweetness of her perfume, her gasps and cries as she grew more aroused, they all combined into one Selia-shaped fist that closed around his heart. His cock was harder than it had ever been. Selia rocked over him creating friction that already had his balls tightening and his breathing labored.

What would she be like when he got inside her?

He pressed his eyes closed on a growl. Not inside her. He mustn't do that. This was for her pleasure, for the mission. Not for him.

Selia cupped his cheeks and drew his eyes to her. “Is this okay? Are you okay?”

“Yes.” His voice was rough and thick, as if he really had tasted sand and ashes. He forged on regardless. She needed him to. “Relax, sweetheart. Let go. I don’t want you worrying about me. This is about you. Making this okay for you, alright?”

Her lips twisted into a reproachful smile and shook her head. “What about you, Jaro? Who’s looking after you?”

“Nevermind me.” Glancing away from her too-knowing expression, Jaro captured her hands. Twisting, he pinned her down on the sofa, wedging his body between those sweet thighs. His aching cock strained through his clothing against the cleft of her sex. He’d only meant to distract her. Meant to get his mouth on that hot little cunt. The feel of her under him stole his resolve and his reason. He groaned and pressed down harder. She whimpered in response.

It was all he could do not to tear his clothes off and sink into her. Instead, he rocked his hips, grinding and rubbing. He found the spot she liked, nudged the swollen head of his cock forward until it rested right against her little nub. Her eyes fluttered closed. Her head turned to the side. She was his.

He moved faster, grinding her down into the sofa, tormenting himself as he pleased her. Had he thought he couldn’t get any harder? His cock swelled impossibly. The end must be weeping by now.

He kept going. He couldn’t stop. Selia’s legs wrapped tight around his hips, her body moving with his. She clung to his shoulders, dragging her blunt little nails along his arms. Her eyes were still closed, her face tight, muscles clenched. “I’m close.”

She needed to come soon. He hadn’t even got his cock out of his pants and he wouldn’t last much longer.

He lowered one hand to her breast, and pinched and teased the nipple.

“Oh goddess, I’m close. Keep doing that.”

It was too indulgent. He was too far gone. Rutting on her like an animal, thrusting his hips, rubbing against her

mercilessly. Jaro used her body in a parody of what he longed to be doing.

Selia squealed beneath him, hips bucking off the sofa until he pressed her down again. “Jaro, I need more. Need to feel you.”

Mythic hells, he was undone. There was nothing he could do but satisfy her, please her. It was no longer a conscious choice. Tearing at his own clothing, he shredded it and freed his cock. He couldn't just plunge into her. He had been trying to hold something back. If he got inside her... if he got inside her—

Rational thought fled. He held his cock in one hand, rubbing it through her wetness and coating it. Then he slid up and back, bumping her clit with each thrust of his hips. The two of them groaned in unison each time he did. His whole world narrowed down to her slick folds and that swollen nub. The sounds of Selia climbing higher and higher toward the point where he needed her. He must not enter her. Must not, would not do it. *Hold back, Jaro.* Fuck! If only he could—

“Jaro I'm coming. I'm going to—”

With a roar of satisfaction, he planted his mouth over the place he'd dreamed about. He sank his teeth into willing flesh, tasted the tang of her blood.

Selia cried out. Her body jerked with her orgasm.

Pleasure shot up his spine and he bit down harder. *Mark her, claim her. Mine!*

He ground against her one final time then came. His entire soul seemed to leave his body, spurting with his come onto her sweet little pussy, coating it with his scent. A loud purr tore from him at the aroma of their juices mingled on her body.

Selia relaxed. Her legs slid from his hips to splay out on the sofa. Releasing her gently, he lapped over the place he'd marked, hoping by the Wolf Star he hadn't hurt her too badly.

Then he sat back on his haunches and looked down at her flushed and smiling features. On her neck, she wore his bite like jewelry and on her pussy and her belly, the white ropes of

come he'd spilled there. He couldn't help it. Reaching down, he drew his hand through the sticky mess, drawing it higher over her belly, up to her breasts. It wasn't a true claim. It couldn't be. He hadn't been able to sink barbs and fangs into her simultaneously. Since that dream would never be a reality for him, he'd take what he could get, lap up the tiny crumbs of satisfaction the universe saw fit to serve him. 'Cause right now they felt like a whole fucking meal.

THIRTEEN

“DID IT HURT A LOT?” Jaro frowned down at her, his hand still rubbing over her belly covered in his cooling come. It should have felt gross. Or at the very least a little weird. All she felt was relaxed and glowing. Beneath it all was a tiny spark of something tickling at her insides. Something that might be hope.

He was still waiting for an answer to his question. She didn't want him to worry, but she'd never been able to be less than honest with Jaro. “A little—”

He hissed. His hand stilled.

“Good hurt though,” she added quickly. “Good hurt. I can't really explain, except to say that I have no regrets.”

He relaxed a little but didn't lie back down, which she was sorry for. Instead, he got up and retrieved a cloth, but he hesitated in the act of cleaning her. His ears were pressed back and his tail lashed in a way that made her want to pull him back down into her arms again. He'd gone all tense and he wasn't quite meeting her eye.

“What is it?” She was cut off when a ping from the AI sounded and the computer's voice announced, “Approaching Earth gate. Incoming vid-call.”

Looking around at her scattered clothing, she laughed when she remembered Jaro shredding it with his claws and tearing it from her body. Goddess, the way he had torn their clothing off, as if he couldn't wait to get to her. She shivered as another aftershock ran through her body. Yet he hadn't entered her. He'd held that back. Why?

Jaro growled and stalked to a storage cabinet, retrieving two blankets and handing one to her. “Selia, I—”

“Shall I accept the incoming vid-call?” the computer asked again.

Sighing, Jaro wrapped his blanket around his hips over the ruined mess of his trousers. Shaking herself out of her musing,

Selia addressed the computer. “Accept the vid-call.” She was sitting on the sofa, facing the wall panel, when the call appeared, the cam showing a bored expression on the face of a man in his mid-forties. He had the sort of thick, over-perfect hair that spoke of hair replacement surgery, and he wore the navy jumpsuit that was the standard uniform of border control.

“You are approaching the Earth gate. Please be advised that due to the current political situation between Earth and Ardun, travelers are subject to extra processing and a face-to-face interview is required. There is currently a twenty minute wait time.”

Jaro had come to sit beside her. When the screen turned on, his hand went possessively to the back of her neck and his thumb caressed just above the spot he had bitten. It was tender, but all that did was remind Selia of what they’d just shared.

It sent shivers through her whole body. Was he only doing it for the cam? She hadn’t anticipated how much this arrangement was going to mess with her head.

“No problem.” She tried to keep her voice steady, but Jaro’s thumb rubbing against her skin was doing things to her. His tail curled around the back of her calves. She’d only just come, but she could easily go for round two. Shit, he could probably tell that too, given the sensitivity of his sense of smell. She tried to redirect her thoughts.

“Very well. Please enter the gate, docking at anchor port E of the processing station. Someone will be with you shortly. It will speed the process if you make sure you have all the necessary declarations filled out before you dock and any relevant documents ready.”

The screen went dark, but Jaro’s hand lingered at her neck. Then he pulled away. “I’ll check the documents. I guess we should get changed.” He brought up his wrist-com and looked down at the holoscreen instead of at her.

With a sigh, Selia got up and went to leave the room, but Jaro’s next statement stopped her in the doorway. “Is it too much to ask... Don’t shower. Please. It will help me get through this.”

She wanted to ask him what he meant, but now didn't feel like the right moment. She wanted to go back in time, somehow get him to fill her, to come inside her instead of spilling on her belly. Not that she minded the way he'd rubbed it into her skin as if he owned her. She rather liked the knowledge that she would spend the rest of the day smelling of him as well as wearing his mark on her neck. It would have been nice to cuddle afterwards. Something had seemed off right before the vid-call came through.

She went to the bedroom to get ready.

She paused in the act of lifting a new pair of panties from her drawer, hand drifting to feather over the perforated skin at her throat. His mark. She was so tempted to find a mirror, just to see it there. But it wasn't real. It was all for the mission. She couldn't let herself get carried away. She had to smother the tiny fluttering form which hope had already spawned inside her. Otherwise when this ended, she was going to be even more angry and bitter than she'd been when she'd started this, looking for an escape.

••••

They stepped through the doors into the cool, slightly stale air of the processing station. Only one other vehicle had been at the gate when they entered, so Selia didn't think they'd have to wait too long. At least they weren't coming through behind a huge cruise ship or a long queue of traffic.

The sterile surfaces of the corridor echoed a little with their footsteps as they walked down to the security scanner. Passing through, a thin woman with short gray hair ushered them into a waiting room.

The seats were firm and Selia shifted a little, trying to get comfortable. She couldn't stop noticing how slick and sensitive her pussy felt, particularly every time she snuck a glance at Jaro. A low rumble made her look round in surprise. Jaro's hand covered her thigh. He only squeezed her briefly, pulling away after a moment. Right, right. He could smell her. She needed to snap out of it.

Perhaps she should be nervous about the interview. Selia didn't truly think there was anything to worry about. The bite was a legal claim on Ardun and they had filled in the mating documents with witnesses before leaving the planet in anticipation of this deception.

Of course, the bite would look very fresh, but Ardun males often bit their mates to renew the claim. Particularly in the early days of being mated. She had made inquiries before they left Ashad. It should be nothing out of the ordinary.

An attractive man in his thirties with golden blond hair stepped through the door with a big smile for them both. Selia sat up straighter in her chair. He closed the door and held out his hand. "Hello there. Welcome to Earthspace. I'm Zand."

Selia reached for his hand, but froze when Jaro hissed.

Zand pulled back his hand with a look of shock. Jaro shifted his chair closer until it was right up against hers and their thighs touched. Then he draped an arm over the back and his hand returned to its place on her neck. She glanced over at him to see him tuck his other hand in his pocket, but she couldn't tell what he had inside.

Clearing his throat, Zand sat and brought up his holoscreen. "Well. Let's begin. I'm going to film this interview and you'll be provided with a copy for your own records. If you can bring up your documents and declarations, I'll check over them now."

Selia and Jaro transferred their files to Zand's wrist-com. They waited as he read over them.

After a few moments, Zand made a noise in his throat. "Hmm. Says here you've been on Ardun for just under a month, Selia. Is that correct?"

"Yes. That's right."

"Huh." There was a pause. "And you met Barreth during that time?"

She hesitated for just a beat too long, stumbling over Jaro's fake name like an idiot. She was too distracted. "Ah, yes. That's right. A whirlwind romance, I guess you'd say." She

needed to stop talking and blurting out the first thing that came into her head.

“Mmm.” Zand didn’t say anything else for another long moment. Then he turned to Jaro. “What about you, Barreth? What’s the purpose of your visit to Earthspace?”

“I’m going to meet my mate’s family. She has a job to return to on Earth, so I’m traveling with her while I search for work.”

Zand nodded. “And what does Selia do for work?”

“She works in law enforcement,” Jaro said confidently.

“What’s her designation?”

“Detective.”

“And which members of her family will you be meeting while you’re on Earth?”

He didn’t even hesitate. “Her brother, Liyam, and his wife, Teya, her father, Desmon, and if we have time, we’ll also visit her mother.” How easily he rattled off the names of all her relatives. She’d always known he was a great listener.

Zand smiled, nodding. “Great. And can you tell me a little bit about how you decided to become mates?”

Jaro’s hand slid down her neck, raising goose pimples along her skin to her shoulder which he gave a little squeeze. “I knew as soon as I saw her she was mine,” he said simply.

Selia held still, fighting down a rising tide of awareness as Jaro spoke, his voice a warm purr, his hand still possessively on her body. The mark on her neck tingled and her breath caught in her throat. It wasn’t real. It was only the part they had to play. She couldn’t let herself get carried away. If she was stupid enough to believe in the lies they’d cooked up, it was her own fault.

“You know, this woman spends her whole life looking after everyone around her. She deserves someone to take care of her too.”

To her mortification, when Zand turned and asked Selia to recount the reasons she'd mated Jaro, her voice had a tremor in it and her eyes were a little glassy with unshed tears. Why'd he have to turn out to be such a great liar?

"He's such a good guy," she said eventually. "And he was prepared to move, so I didn't have to give up my career. I've been on a lot of dates, but it's rare to find someone who really listens to you. Who isn't in a rush to do something else, or tell you what he thinks." There was no lie in what she was saying, so it came out easily. Too easily. "So I just knew, Barreth was a keeper."

Zand smiled at them both. "Thank you very much for your cooperation. I'm just going to finalize these immigration documents and you can be on your way."

He stood and went out of the room, leaving Selia and Jaro alone. She couldn't be sure they weren't still being filmed, so she didn't speak, though she had hundreds of questions running through her head. Time forced her to look at him, just to keep from going out of her mind. He still hadn't pulled his hand from her neck, his thumb tracing patterns on her skin. The look he returned was so heated that she squirmed in her seat all over again.

Jaro's nostrils flared, the tip of his tail twitched and his grip on her neck tightened ever so slightly, until the points of his claws pressed against the skin.

The door opened again and Zand returned, breaking the moment. His face was set into a firm line. "My apologies. I'll need to have a word with Selia alone before we can wrap this up. If you'll excuse us, Barreth. Selia, if you don't mind." He gestured to the door.

As Selia stood, Zand stepped between her and Jaro, placing a hand at her back to guide her out the door. It was a strange move. Old-fashioned. One she might expect from someone worried about Jaro's reaction. It took her a little by surprise. What surprised her even more was Jaro. She was already facing the door. She heard Jaro snarl. Then Zand was pushed aside as Jaro threw him against the wall, pressing an

arm across the blond man's chest. "Don't put your hands on my mate."

"J—Barreth!" *Shit!*

An alarm blared and the door opened to admit a security bot with a flashing red light and an activated blue shock stick. "Place your hands over your head and step back," it said in its tinny voice. "If you do not comply, necessary force will be used."

With a roar, Jaro stepped back, releasing Zand. Selia rushed to him, instincts telling her to put her arms around him, but the security bot beeped. "Stand back, ma'am. This male will be detained. Touching him puts you at risk of a shock in the event that the use of force is required."

She still would have gone to him, but Jaro shook his head, a pained sound tearing from his chest. "Don't! Don't. I'm fine." When the security bot led him away, he followed, hanging his head.

"Where are you taking him?"

Zand straightened the collar of his navy jumpsuit and brushed a hand down his front. "He'll be held until it's determined if he's a threat or not. Probably a formality, given that you're recently mated. Perhaps we can take a moment to discuss my questions now, if you're okay to continue?"

With a final glance at the doorway, Selia nodded shakily. She sat again, chewing at one short nail, worried for Jaro. "Sure. Whatever speeds up the process. What did you need to ask me?"

Zand sighed, placing his clasped hands on the table between them. "I'm sorry about that. I'm afraid it's part of the current immigration vetting procedure. I hope you can understand."

"You... you did that deliberately?" She shook her head. "I hope they pay you well for this job."

Zand gave a tense laugh. "Yeah. You'd think that, wouldn't you?"

After a pause, he sighed. “Are you alright? This mating was your choice? It’s just that with the current political climate, we’re taking extra precautions to make sure new relationships are genuine.”

The question stung. It shouldn’t. Of course the relationship wasn’t genuine. Selia managed to choke out a response to the question. “I’m fine. Just worried about my mate.”

Zand nodded. “Look, this is all just a formality really. I can see from the way you looked at each other and his reactions, you’re a love match. Congratulations.”

A love match?

She was still blinking at him, hoping her hot cheeks weren’t as deeply flushed as she felt, when Zand led her out of the small interview room, back to a lounge, and offered her a coffee. “If you wait here, I’ll return with some more information about how long your mate will need to remain in custody.”

FOURTEEN

JARO HUNG HIS HEAD and leaned forward, resting his arms on his knees. He didn't even recognize the male he'd turned into today. Well, that wasn't quite true. He'd glimpsed this male beneath the surface a few too many times. He sighed. Clutched in his fist was the pair of Selia's black panties he had scooped off the floor in their cruiser before they docked. He brought them to his face again and inhaled deeply. Not as good as the warm, living scent, but a damn sight better than the sterile metal room they'd placed him in.

He had known the bite would be dangerous for his mental state. He'd never expected to completely lose himself to the moment though. He'd barely been able to hold himself back. He'd smeared his come all over her body and told her not to wash it off and afterward he had sunk to stealing her underwear.

Thank every mythic power she hadn't washed. It was only the scent of him on her that had prevented him from completely losing his shit when the human had touched her. Hells, Zand hadn't even really touched Selia, just smiled too brightly at her and looked as if he might. And Jaro had attacked the poor guy who was only trying to do his job.

He was such a dog.

He had never felt like this. When he'd bitten Riya, they had been lovers for years before making the decision to mate. He hadn't felt anywhere near the same desperation to claim Riya as he'd felt at just the idea of sinking his fangs into Selia. Let alone the desire to sink his cock into her and have her fully.

He growled, clenching his fist around the panties. Selia wore his mark and he still hadn't been inside her. Maybe this wild urgency could be sated if he took that final step? Or was he just clutching at excuses to do exactly what he wanted?

Lifting the panties to his nose again, he drew in the weak traces of her scent as he thought. That scent had somehow

gotten under his skin, become ingrained in his being. It was necessary now. Being without it felt wrong.

It was stupid. He couldn't be responding to her pheromones since, as Zand had pointed out, she'd been on Ardun for almost a month. Human women ovulated once a month. It would have happened. If she was going to trigger his rut, she would have done it by now.

It was a pathetic hope anyway. One born of lonely desperation. Only the longer he thought about resigning himself to serving in the harem and returning to Ardun, the more desperate he felt. The surer he felt the bite he'd left on Selia's neck meant more than their arrangement. It meant more than he'd admitted to her.

He should be telling Selia these things, instead of bottling up all his feelings until they exploded. He should have talked to her about his worries from the start. Hadn't they always had that type of trust? He would have to drum up the words to have the conversation just as soon as the human border guards released him. That was, if Selia could stand to look at him after what he'd done.

The door slid open and there she stood, as if his thoughts had transported her to him. She stepped forward with a sad smile and squatted down to bring herself closer to where he sat on the floor. "Hey."

"Hi."

"You okay?"

"Are you?"

"Of course. I was worried about you. They said we can go. We're being admitted into Earthspace."

He let out a long gust of breath. At least his rash actions hadn't sabotaged the mission. "That's good news. Listen, Selia —"

She reached out and took his hand. "Don't apologize, okay? Let's just go back to our cruiser."

He got to his feet, steeling himself to face her displeasure when they were alone. He couldn't help pulling her close for a brief hug and pressing his nose to her neck to inhale deeply.

She gave him an odd look when he tucked her panties back into his pocket, as well she might, but she didn't say anything. No doubt he would be in for a tongue lashing later. One he fully deserved. The only problem was all he wanted to do was give Selia a tongue lashing of his own, and not the angry kind.

No. She deserved his words first. Words, and a chance to tell him what *she* wanted.

....

As soon as the door closed on the cruiser and they were alone, his heart rate skipped a wild beat. "Can we talk?" he forced out. "There are some things I need to say—should have said before."

Selia gave him a worried look, but followed him to the living area. "Hey, listen. Don't worry about what happened back there. Zand said it was actually part of their test—"

He couldn't even wait to let her finish. Taking her hands, he stood with her in the doorway and the words just sort of tumbled out of him. "I'm a fool. I'm such a fool. I didn't see it before. Didn't want to see it, but the fact is I lost control back there because I'm out of my mind with it."

She frowned. Was this the part where she shot him down? Would she tell him it was all just for the mission and he'd been imagining her feeling anything for him?

"Jaro, I don't understand. Out of your mind with what?"

"With need. For you."

"You are?"

"Yes." Hells, he was clinging to sanity like a maintenance worker on a thin tether outside a space station. "Please say something. I need to know how you feel. I would never force anything on you, but I think if I don't get inside you, I might go mad."

He should have said more. He should have told her about the depth of the madness. How it went beyond simple rutting. About the way he admired her caring heart and her strength. She was so close and her neck was marked with his bite, and all he wanted to do with his mouth was put it on her.

That and bury his poor aching cock in her pretty cunt.

Her eyes had widened at his words. Her arousal thickened and she stepped closer. She shook her head with a smile that twisted slightly to the side. “You really are a fool if you couldn’t see how much I’ve wanted this for so long.”

That was all it took to snap his tether.

He was free-floating in the vacuum of space and he knew exactly where to find safe harbor. Jaro launched himself at Selia with a feral growl. Pushing her back against the wall, he nudged his way between thighs that parted for him eagerly. She gasped, but there was no reason, only madness. He caged her in with his larger body until she must have been squashed and breathless. She never complained. In fact, Selia’s arms wrapped around his neck and she lifted to meet him as he ground his aching cock against her belly.

Mythic hells, this woman would make someone very, very happy.

A snarl tore from his lips and he nuzzled against her neck, lapping at the flesh that bore his mark. Not someone, not any other male.

Oh, he was so fucked. Would getting inside her actually make things better? Was he just kidding himself?

He nipped at Selia’s jaw, finding his way to a mouth which he captured in a kiss that was instantly searing. Her tongue danced with his, pushing and slicking into his mouth as much as he licked into hers. Her hands threaded through his hair and clutched him tight.

Her scent and flavor were everywhere and still not strong enough. There were too many layers between them. Before he could tear her clothing from her like a wild beast—again—Selia pulled back, lifted the top over her head quickly and

threw it to the floor. He sighed with relief, his hands going straight to cupping and lifting her breasts. His tail curled around her leg as he tried to slow himself down. Impossible when she was right here, offering herself to him so eagerly.

Or was she?

He was blundering around like a Ximian in the desert about to make a total mess of things. “Tell me to stop. Tell me. I will. Fucked if I know how, but I will.”

“No!” Selia gasped, clinging tighter to him. “Don’t stop, Jaro. Please don’t stop.”

His cock throbbed where it was wedged between them and he groaned. “I’m going to take care of you, sugar. I promise.” It was all he could manage before he needed his mouth back on her skin. Trailing a path of licks and kisses down her body, he flexed his claws. Then he pulled the tights from her lower half, exposing another pair of those small black panties visibly damp for him.

Even as he reached for them she shimmied out of them to reveal her luscious cunt. As she tugged them over her ankles, Jaro grabbed her wrist. “Mine.”

“Jaro—”

“Mine!” He snatched the panties, fisted them in one hand and brought it to his nose. He inhaled deeply and damn if his purr didn’t rattle the fixtures through the whole cruiser. He couldn’t help it. He’d need a constant supply of Selia’s panties whenever he couldn’t have her right under his tongue. The scent was musky sweet perfection, only surpassed by the aroma coming straight from the source.

The source!

He tossed the fabric aside and wasted no more time in dropping to his knees, bringing his lips to her entrance and taking what was his. Selia lifted one leg and put it over his shoulder and he hummed in satisfaction. “This pussy, this cream. It’s mine. This pretty little clit doesn’t swell and throb with pleasure for any other male, does it?”

Selia let out a sweet little sound as he licked slowly from her cunt to the little bud of her clit. He did it again. The scent of her need was the result of *his* words and now his actions. That made it his. All he needed now was to make sure that was always true.

He growled against her folds, redoubling his efforts to drink in all her moisture. He lapped ferociously at her until she was moaning and shuddering.

He was doing a terrible job of pleasing her. All he was doing was pleasing himself, drawing in her essence greedily, bathing his face in it. He couldn't seem to stop.

“More, Jaro, my clit. Please!”

Thank the stars, she knew enough to demand what she needed from him now. Selia's hand in his hair directed him where she wanted him and he went, berating himself for not doing it sooner. Planting his mouth over her clit, he sucked her in the way he knew she liked.

“Mmm, yes, that's it.”

His purr grew louder.

Selia's legs trembled and tremors shook her body. He kept going. When he flicked his tongue over her in several short, firm movements, she cried out, her body convulsed and yes, came for him. For *him!*

Stars, she was beautiful. He looked up from between her legs at her heaving breasts and her head thrown back. It was too much. His cock jerked, desperate for sensation.

He shoved at his clothing, pushing down his trousers, until he could wrap a fist around his aching length and squeeze tightly so he didn't come right then.

He couldn't wait any longer. This woman was his. Her pleasure, his. Her belly quivered with little aftershocks of what he had done to her. Jaro stood, lifting Selia's legs to wrap around his waist. With one brutal thrust, he sank straight into her cunt, claiming even the last throes of her orgasm as her walls fluttered around him.

What was he doing? Impaling her before he'd even checked to make sure she was ready. Thrusting straight into her tight heat and bottoming out so far she probably felt it in her womb. Star-blight him he was supposed to be taking care of her, supposed to be making sure she trusted him to pursue her pleasure, to hunt it relentlessly. He should bring her only pleasure. Instead he was rutting her like an animal, like a male whose female had gone into heat.

The image of Selia in heat, blooming for him, writhing and begging as she burned for him, milked the first drops of come from his throbbing dick where it speared inside her. It took all he had to squeeze his eyes closed and breathe through the moment so he didn't spill the rest.

“Selia, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, sugar. Fuck, tell me you're okay. Should I stop?”

“No!” Her legs tightened around his waist and her heels dug into his ass. “Move. You can move. Oh, please, move.”

Reason fled along with guilt and he plunged into her over and over. Loud slapping of flesh against flesh joined their moans, and he thrust and thrust. Bliss rose from his balls, shooting up his spine and tingling at the back of his brain fogged with lust. All he could think about was the way his body sank into hers, the way her pussy sheathed him so beautifully. The way she clung to him and breathed his name and tilted her neck to one side.

She had to be close. Please let her be close to another orgasm. Because the sight of her neck bearing his mark and deliberately bared to him was so tempting. Sweat beaded on his forehead with the strain of holding back.

When her hand slipped between them to rub against her clit, he brushed it away and replaced it with his own. “Mine!”

Brutally, Jaro pushed down over that swollen bud and felt her walls tighten impossibly around him. He gave three more powerful pumps of his hips, leaned in and claimed that spot that already wore his stamp.

Selia screamed.

If his mouth wasn't occupied he would have begged her forgiveness, would have kissed her sweetly to draw away some of the pain. As it was, he pushed into her and held on for dear life.

He nearly blacked out when her pussy gave a final spasm. His cock erupted and he came harder than he'd come in a very long time. Or was that ever?

FIFTEEN

SELIA WOULD HAVE SLID down the wall into a little puddle of bliss if it wasn't for Jaro's strong arms holding her up. At that moment, countless hours of doing squats in the gym meant nothing. Her legs were jelly and they slipped from around his hips as she groaned contentedly.

Jaro gently disengaged from her. The cool air over her body made her miss him instantly. She felt the loss of his teeth in her neck and his cock inside her. His hands at her hips kept her steady as she found her feet, shaking off the sudden sense of emptiness. "Wow. That was..."

He cringed. "Too rough. Too quick. I'm sorry, princess."

Selia laughed and Jaro's ears perked back up again.

"Too nothing. I think if you'd kept going, I might have combusted. As it is, I'm a mess. I can hardly stand."

At that, he scooped an arm beneath her legs and lifted her with a little growl. "Then don't. Let me make it up to you by putting you to bed and letting you rest."

She indulgently snuggled against his shoulder. "Are you joining me? Because bed in the middle of the day is only good if you have company."

He huffed a little laugh then and shook his head. "You still want my company after that performance? You're a better female than I knew."

"Jaro, are you shitting me? That was amazing. I have no complaints."

Another little laugh. "Your standards should be higher."

She rolled her eyes but didn't press the issue. If he was determined to do better next time, she wasn't really going to complain. If there was a next time. "Jaro, are we... What exactly are we doing here?"

He reached the bedroom and set her down on the bed gently. Running a hand over his tail, he sat beside her. "Selia, I

—”

Selia didn't speak for the longest time. She had to know what he was thinking before she pressed her expectations on him. After all, he was the one who had recently taken a vow to the harem. He was also the one with a small child, so it was Jaro who had to call the shots here.

His hand tensed, the claws digging into the bedding a little. “The last thing I want is to hurt you. But what that means in the long term? Honestly, I'm a mess. I've been so damn lonely for so long and it feels good to just say it to someone. Let alone have a female in my arms. *You* in my arms. I can't pretend it's anything less than that.”

Her heart leaped. He was sitting on the bed, leaning forward with his elbows resting on his knees. He added, “I wish we'd talked about this before. Again I've fucked this up and I hate that.”

She scooted across until she could wrap herself around him, press her cheek to his back, and give him a squeeze. “I hate that you're feeling like that,” she whispered. “I wanted this. I think I wanted it as much as you did.”

He laughed. “I doubt that.”

“Hey, believe me. I'm lucky there's no such thing as a lady boner, okay?”

His ear flicked. “Well...”

She snorted. “Yeah, okay. So I keep forgetting about your sense of smell. But that's exactly my point. You must have known how much I wanted this.”

He nodded slowly. “I guess I've been telling myself I was mistaken. Dreaming up that scent because I wanted so badly for it to be mine.”

“No, it's real.”

“All I know is I feel like the gnawing hole in my guts is finally full of something that feels good there. Feels like I might knit back together somehow.” His hands covered hers and he held them there against his belly. “But as for what we

are. I don't know that I can put a label on it right now. And that feels unfair to you. What do *you* want?"

"I don't want to make your life more difficult. And I know how you feel about mating someone who isn't your true mate."

Jaro sighed, his belly expanding and contracting under her palms with a long gust of breath. "I hate that I'm still so messed up about everything that happened with Riya. I'd like to just be happy for her. But I don't really know what I feel."

Selia ground her teeth rather than make a snarky comment on something that wasn't her business. Still, it rankled that her beautiful Jaro felt the need to be so kind and supportive to the female who had hurt him so badly. She, on the other hand, would like Riya to be miserable. Totally miserable. At least for a little while. That probably didn't make her a very nice person, so she kept her mouth shut.

"It's stupid, isn't it?" Jaro went on. "Most Ardun go their whole lives without finding their true mate. Is it different? Would we be different? Because you're human and you'd never react that way to someone else. But what if I... What if I hurt you that way? Hells, Selia, that would break me to do that to you."

"Hey. I'm strong. I can take it."

Jaro hung his head for a moment. Selia held on tight, breathing in time with him, wishing there was more she could do to chase his demons away.

Finally he spoke. "You're so strong and caring. But have we already taken things too far?"

He twisted, turning to face her, and brought one large hand up to stroke softly over her neck. Over the bite mark that was still a little tender. Not that she would take back any of it. Not for the five systems.

"Have I already put your heart at risk with this? With what we shared? 'Cause I have no idea where we go from here. I took the vow."

Selia set her smile in place, taking his face in her hands she leaned in to kiss the tip of his nose. “I know. I knew it when we decided to do this. Even if it’s just a bit of relief while we’re on the mission, yeah? It’s what we both needed. Her Majesty said you could have female companionship. You don’t have to commit to anything else.”

Jaro sighed. “I don’t want to hurt you. But I can’t risk being banished either.”

And I didn’t want to risk never knowing what this felt like. Selia didn’t say the words out loud, afraid that revealing the level of her desire for him might be too much. “Tell you what? How about we take care of each other? I’m fine. This will be fine. We’ve always been friends, right? Well now, we’re friends with benefits. And you tell me if you start to get too attached. If it’s becoming too much. And I’ll tell you, okay?” Like hells, she would. She fought down the worry that she was making a mistake. Brushed aside the bitterness and anger. Right now she was what he needed. A temporary soothing of his hurt. If her heart got a bit bruised in the process? What did that matter? It still beat never having him at all.

Jaro pressed his cheek into her palm and closed his eyes for a moment. When his eyes opened again, they were even brighter than usual. She thought he would protest, but he must have fallen for her bluff. “It’s a risk.” He didn’t say more, but he hadn’t said no. Not yet.

“It’s one we already took.” She forced a lighthearted grin. “So what’s a few more risks, huh? Between friends.” She hoped he didn’t notice how much that word stuck in her throat.

••••

Selia spent the rest of the day trying not to think about how much she loved their new arrangement. It still left a sour aftertaste in her mouth every time she thought about the fact that this could only ever be temporary. So she just didn’t. She refused to worry about how much it would hurt when she had to go back to Ashad and relinquish Jaro to the royal harem. At least she knew it would only be a ceremonial position.

When had she started getting possessive?

Jaro had always been warm and easy-going, but now he was positively snuggly. He tucked her up against his broad furry chest on the sofa and stroked her hair while she read over the notes Sattar had sent about his mother's business in Earthspace. She could hardly concentrate on the meaning of the different vid-call transcripts or calendar notes, but she didn't have it in her to stop him. It felt so nice to be held.

She couldn't help feeling a little irritated when her wrist-com buzzed with an incoming vid-call from Natlea. She even considered not answering. But it had been too long since she had spoken to any of her friends.

With a sigh, she sat forward, meaning to disentangle herself from Jaro's arms. He only pulled her back again after she swiped to accept the call. They both stiffened when both Natlea and Sattar appeared on Selia's holoscreen. Sattar's narrowed eyes and Natlea's indrawn breath told Selia they hadn't failed to notice the extra intimacy between her and Jaro.

"Seels! It's so good to talk to you. I hope now's a good time. Sattar said this would be the best way to contact you, since it's much less likely that my call would be intercepted, but we don't have to talk now if..."

Poor Natlea. She was too kind to address the dinosaur in the room. Rather than deal with it herself as she ordinarily would, Selia let it slide. It wasn't that she minded Natlea knowing something was going on, but she'd be damned if she was opening up in front of Sattar.

"Hey, Nat. Good to hear from you. Sattar." She gave him a tight nod, which he returned without even a hint of a smile. Jerk.

"I got you an invitation to Spectre Station," Sattar said, without preamble. "I will send the details if you want them, but are you certain you can handle it?"

For Natlea's sake, Selia tried not to show how much his condescending question made her bristle. Her eyes flicked to Jaro, who was frowning.

"Why?" he asked.

Sattar's expression hardened. "Because it's exactly as bad as you would imagine from the sounds of things."

Selia folded her arms across her chest. "Shahra Fareeda trusts us to deal with this and we intend to. Send us the invite and let us worry about whether we can handle it."

Natlea gave Sattar a look and he rolled his eyes. "Fine. I'll send it. And now I will leave you to your girls' talk." He directed a cool look at Jaro. "I hope you know what you're doing, Jaro."

Selia huffed as Sattar turned and left the vid-call after pressing a kiss to Natlea's forehead. Natlea looked so happy it was hard to be completely mad at him, but he was still a dick.

Jaro stood and leaned forward to wave at Natlea. "I'm going to follow Sattar's lead on this. I've enough sense to know when to make myself scarce."

Selia wanted to tell him he didn't need to leave, but the barely contained excitement on Natlea's face told her maybe it was for the best.

When the door slid closed behind him, she shook her head, unable to hold back her grin any longer. "Go on. Ask me."

Natlea squealed. "Are you? Did you?"

"Kind of? Just hooking up though. Nothing serious. Don't say anything to the others, okay?"

Her friend's rounded face scrunched into a frown. "Seels, are you sure you know what you're doing here? I know I'm the last person who can judge, but I hate to see you get hurt."

Selia scoffed. "I'm a big girl. I know what I'm doing." But did she? Wasn't she already bracing for the hurt when the mission ended and she had to go back to her normal life and leave Jaro behind? It rankled having Natlea be the one to tell her though. It was unfair and unreasonable to feel that way. Her friend was only doing what she herself would be doing—had done, when their situations had been reversed. Only it felt different when the shoe was on the other foot.

Natlea chewed on her bottom lip, but she offered Selia a smile after a moment's hesitation. "Sure. Of course. You know I'm always here if you need to talk."

Selia nodded and tried to release some of the tension that suddenly had her shoulders up around her ears. Pretty hypocritical of her not to take advice from her friends when it was offered. She still thought she was better able to be realistic about her arrangement than tenderhearted Natlea, but she was mature enough to admit that she was probably seeing what she wanted to see. Still, she was invested now. It was pretty much too late.

"Hey, Seels?"

"Yeah?"

"I know Sattar didn't say much, but he's really worried about you guys at Spectre."

She couldn't suppress the eye-roll then. "Why? Because everyone but him is useless and can't take care of themselves?"

Natlea shook her head. "No. He's putting together a file of stuff to send with notes he's been making. It sounds bad. I know you're tough, Seels, and Jaro too, but... it seems like they might be trading in human women in heat—women ovulating—using hormones to accelerate and heighten the effects of ovulation and to keep the women docile. Just be careful, alright?"

She sobered a little at Natlea's description. This was pretty much what she'd been worried about, but her friend was right. They'd have to be careful. "Yeah. We will."

"Okay. Love you. Talk soon, yeah?"

She nodded. "Yeah. Pass my love to everyone."

SIXTEEN

IT TOOK THREE DAYS to travel from the Earth gate to the Acroph gate, the gate that would take them into the Acroph system, otherwise known as Edgespace. Maybe it was because they were just about as far from Ardun as you could get, or maybe it was because each moment he spent between Selia's thighs seemed to drain a little more of the tension and loneliness from him. Whatever it was, Jaro had almost forgotten that they were even on a mission.

He snapped back to reality though, when a message buzzed on his com from an encrypted ID. It had to be Shahra Fareeda.

Selia was in the shower after he had reluctantly agreed she should probably be allowed to wash at least once every twenty-four hours. He liked the scent of their combined juices on her skin so much, it was hard to be reasonable. It was hard to do anything but pounce on her the second she was dry and put that scent back where it belonged, which was what he had been waiting to do.

Then the message arrived.

A little twinge of guilt started in his gut. They should have been reading through the reports. He should not have been spending every waking second thinking about getting inside Selia or licking her pussy. What was he going to do when they eventually had to return to reality? When they could no longer drift in this happy little bubble? It was one thing while he had Selia completely to himself, and he didn't have to pretend to be devoted to another female. Just knowing he would have to speak to Shahra Fareeda and act like Selia wasn't quickly becoming the center of his universe fluffed his fur.

Yeah. He was fucked.

Encrypted ID: *vid-call in one hour. Please be prepared.*

He sighed. He should have called off the farce days ago. Should have been honest with Selia like he said he would if he was getting too attached. Ha! As if he hadn't already been too

attached when they'd made the deal. Trouble was, now he'd had a taste of her, he didn't care about getting hurt in the future. Selia kept telling him she was fine and her luscious body kept getting so juicy for him every time he so much as looked at her. How was he supposed to resist?

But the vid-call was a reminder of home, of reality. It was a reminder of the responsibilities he'd selfishly ignored for too long. What if he dishonored the Shahra and got himself exiled? What then? How could he live never being able to see Desi again?

The thought was just enough to sober him so when Selia stepped out of the shower naked and toweling her long hair, he stayed where he was.

Selia lifted the towel away from her face, looking at him with her head tipped slightly to one side. "You okay?"

"Are you?"

Combing her fingers through her hair, she came to sit beside him. He forced himself to lift his eyes from her small perfect tits to her face. "Okay, what's wrong?"

He sighed. He should have told her he was in so deep she might as well brand her name on his ass, but he didn't. Just the nearness of her warm, fragrant body and the softness in her eyes as she looked at him stopped the words in his throat. "I just... are you still okay? With this? With things as they are?"

Selia shrugged. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Not an answer. He should push for one, but...

Selia shifted, turning and throwing one leg over his lap so that she straddled him. Was she deliberately distracting him? His hands went to her waist automatically and his brain was quickly overruled by other parts of his body.

"Do you smell that?" She lowered a hand between her thighs and brought it up glistening with slick.

Fuck!

She wanted him. Needed him. The conversation could wait. It would have to. No way was he leaving this female

unsatisfied. She pressed her wet fingers to his face and he drew in a long breath.

“Angel, I could smell that calling to me from another star system.” Inwardly he groaned at the reminder of exactly how much distance might soon separate them. He tried to lose himself in pleasing her. Laying back, he tugged Selia’s hips until she crawled higher, bringing her wet naked pussy up to hover above his mouth. “Got a need for me to satisfy? Then I’m going to stay right here until my girl’s good and satisfied.”

He should stop. He needed to stop calling her his girl. He had to stop thinking about her needs as needs he’d be there to see to from now on.

Could he, though?

Slipping his hands under her legs, he pulled her close, groaning when he coated his tongue with her flavor for the first time that day. She made a soft little noise in her throat and fell forward to brace on her hands while he held her pussy to his mouth so he could devour her. She wasn’t as wet as he’d like though. She probably had been trying to distract him. Even that knowledge didn’t stop him. All it did was fuel the drive to lick her little bud until she drenched his chin and covered his lips with her essence. Jaro suckled at her clit, flicking it with his tongue, drawing on it forcefully until she gasped.

When that wasn’t enough, he teased at her entrance with a finger, drawing the slick he found back so he could slip into that tight virgin hole at her backside that he hadn’t yet explored.

She tightened, jerking as his finger probed at her little puckered hole.

“Anyone ever touch you here?”

Her gasp told him what he needed to know.

He pushed a little deeper. “That’s right. This one’s mine too, sweet. No one else is going to touch you here but me.”

“Jaro! Oh my goddess, Jaro!” Her breaths were ragged, hips bucking against his mouth.

Fuck, what was he talking about? As if he wasn't playing out a charade they'd have to stop very soon.

But there was that cream he was after. It trickled from her pulsing entrance, dampened his chin and made him purr with satisfaction.

Yes, that's it. Give me all of it.

It was almost as if she was as greedy for the words as he was greedy for her. So he threw himself into pleasing her with more urgency. He never moved his mouth from her sweet little clit until she pushed back, choking on a sob as she ground down against his face. He felt her tighten, and then felt the relief wash over her as her body seized and pulsed with pleasure. Gently removing his finger from her ass, he caressed her back and bottom as she came down from her orgasm.

When that was finished, he helped her turn onto her back so he could taste her again.

He was just thinking about how to wring more pleasure from her, when his wrist-com buzzed to signal the incoming vid-call.

Reluctantly Jaro pulled away.

“What is it?” Selia sat up.

“Vid-call from Her Majesty.” He sighed and helped Selia up to find her clothes.

“Shit!”

She was still scrambling to find her top when the wall panel lit up and Shahra Fareeda's elegant backswept hairdo and pure black ears snapped into focus. All Jaro had done was toss Selia's damp towel across his lap. The Shahra wouldn't care.

A sick part of him not so far beneath the surface wished she would care. Let her notice and question. Let her realize who his heart and body belonged to.

Fareeda's bright yellow eyes were full of her typical sardonic humor as she greeted them. “Jaro, Selia. Thank you for answering my call. I'm afraid I didn't check local time,

since I figured you'd still be working on Ardun time. My people assure me this line is encrypted, but I'd like to be careful regardless, so please take care with what you say."

"Understood, Your Majesty." Selia still sounded a little breathless as she sat beside him where the cam would capture her, but she was fully clothed. Jaro tried to keep his expression neutral.

"How far away are you from the destination you were sent?" Selia brought up her wrist-com, no doubt glancing at the estimated time of arrival.

"We're approximately twenty-four hours away, Your Majesty," Selia said.

Fareeda nodded. "Good. I'm increasing your fund for discretionary spending and to assist you in the task I've set you. I'd like you to report back on this line when you have completed the rendezvous. I'll also note that things are increasingly interesting here at home, so speed is important. I know I can trust you both with this."

Jaro mumbled his agreement, suddenly feeling a heavy weight sink into his gut. He hadn't even looked at Ardun news since they'd entered Earthspace about a week ago. Things had been unsettled the day of the ceremony, of course, when Sattar had run out before taking his vow, but Jaro had assumed they would settle. Had he just been assuming what he'd wanted to happen had taken place? Were things okay in Ashad?

Hells, if things had taken a turn for the worse—if he was contributing to that! He was officially the worst royal guard in Ardun history.

Fareeda added a few more details and instructed them to send an interim report before they went in. When she ended the call, he brought up his holoscreen, ears pressing back when he read the first headline that appeared.

Sharha Fareeda faces fresh criticism from monarchist party over deteriorating Earth-Ardun relations.

Oh, hells.

Selia had turned so she was sitting sideways, her feet tucked up in front of her. She gave him a worried look. “Has something happened?”

“Not really. Just more political tension. At least there hasn’t been another assassination attempt.”

She put her hand over his where it rested on the back of the sofa. “We should have been paying more attention to the mission.”

He nodded.

“And you feel bad because we’ve been sleeping together, don’t you?”

“I could never regret that.” He slipped his arm around her shoulders, pulling her into his lap. “I guess I had started to tell myself that maybe...” He let his thoughts trail off. It would be unfair to Selia to even finish the sentence. Of course she basically read his mind anyway. He wasn’t even sure why he was surprised.

“You were hoping there’d be a way for us to be together, and now you’re worried there’s not?”

He nodded grimly. “How can we work everything out without creating political upheaval? There’s too much at stake. It’s enough to make me wish I’d never entered the games at all. Except then I never would have met you.”

Selia snuggled against him and patted his belly. “I understand, believe me. And I also have no regrets. Even if this has to end tomorrow. I wouldn’t change a thing.”

They spent the rest of the day snuggled up together, reading through the files on Spectre. Jaro threw himself into it with renewed passion now that one thought had finally occurred to him. Maybe—just maybe—if he was able to complete the mission and end the political tension with Earth, things would settle enough that the Shahra would consider allowing him to leave the harem and claim Selia.

It was a long shot and he couldn’t risk banishment. It was such a stretch he didn’t say anything to Selia for fear of getting her hopes up over something that was far from certain.

SEVENTEEN

“I DON’T LIKE IT,” JARO said, when Selia had stripped off her clothes down to her underwear and removed her shoes.

“Trust me, I don’t love it either, but it’s what we agreed on to get into Spectre without raising suspicion.”

His tail lashed as he looked at her and she could see him clenching his fists over extended claws. Stepping toward him, Selia ran her hands up and down his furry chest and belly until he sighed and his hands drifted to her waist. “I know, I know. I just don’t know if I can do it.”

“I hate to tell you this, Jaro, but you’re not the only one to ever see me naked. Besides, I have bathers that cover less than this!” She looked down at her sensible black underwear. In reality, her bathers were rather conservative, one piece all in black, because apparently she was afraid of color and drawing attention to herself. Still. She knew for a fact Anya owned a gorgeous two-piece that was little more than string and a few cleverly placed triangles of fabric. The principle was the same.

Jaro growled. “It’s not that.”

She lifted a brow and he huffed.

“Okay, it’s more than that. You have the right to dress however you want. But I hate the thought of you posing as a slave. The only thing worse than that is me posing as your owner, even if it is all just kinky play. And what if those reports were right? What if it’s more than that? It makes my fur stand on end playing any part in that.”

“I’d reverse roles with you, but the reports specifically said it’s human slaves, so I think that would draw too much attention.”

He sighed.

Selia reached around his thick waist to stroke his tail, a move which always seemed to snap him out of a spiral of negative thoughts. “Come on. We’ve got this. You’ll be right there. If anything feels off, we’ll just leave. We don’t have to

stay if it feels unsafe. You'll have a weapon and you know my safe word if I'm freaking out, right?"

"Snowman," he grumbled.

"Right. Now give me a kiss and then tie the blindfold on me and let's get going."

He cupped her cheeks with both his hands and leaned down to give her a slow, tender kiss. Then another. Finally following another sigh, he placed the blindfold over her eyes and secured it at the back.

"How does that feel?" She couldn't see him of course, but she could read the frown in his tone.

"Feels fine. Are you ready?"

"No. You sure you didn't do anything different today? You smell too good to let out of my bed, let alone dress up as a slave and walk around half-naked in front of other eyes."

Selia snorted. "You always think I smell good. You wanna cover me in your scent again just to be sure?"

Jaro groaned. "Yes. Trouble is I'm not even sure I could get hard right now. But after this is done, you better believe you're wearing my scent without washing all the way back to the Ardun gate."

"Eww." She laughed and was relieved to hear Jaro laugh too.

He had been unusually tense that morning. Selia had assumed it was all the buildup over the mission and his worry over keeping her safe. What else could it be? Perhaps a show of possessiveness just like at the Earth gate? Then again, he had said he'd been triggered by the fact he hadn't really claimed her when they'd gone through immigration and his desperation to make love to her had driven him to snap.

If that were true, then today's tension had to be because of the mission. They'd had sex every day since entering Earth space, sometimes multiple times a day. Truth be told they'd been acting like horny teens. Well, the way she'd wanted to act as a teen, back when sex was still a theory and the

disappointing reality had yet to set in. Only the reality with Jaro was so far from disappointing it was no wonder Selia had felt almost insatiable.

Jaro pressed one more kiss to her forehead, then he turned her gently toward the door. A wide palm at her lower back guided Selia through the corridors of the cruiser. It was strange at first, walking without being able to see where she was going. But Jaro's touch kept her centered. So she concentrated on the warmth of his skin against hers and the tiny prick of his claws to stop the worries from invading her thoughts when they stepped out of their ship into the docking tunnel, and then into Spectre station. As they walked, Selia tried to imagine their surroundings. The floor beneath her feet was smooth and cold, and there was little noise other than Jaro's quiet footsteps and the soft hum of engines. They must be walking down a plain metallic corridor.

A door slid open as they approached and a gruff male voice spoke. "Entry fee."

"How much?" Jaro's hand drifted to the back of her neck as he spoke to the unknown male. His grip was firm and possessive, but gentle. His tail brushed the backs of her bare legs for a moment.

"Two hundred."

A hiss from Jaro. "That's more than what I was told."

"Take it or leave it," the other male snarled.

Jaro must have paid. There was a beep from his fake ID being scanned.

"You left your coms on your ship?"

"Of course."

"Lose your weapons."

Jaro growled. "What's to stop any asshole from robbing me as soon as I do?"

There was no verbal response from the other male. Selia imagined him shrugging or simply glaring at Jaro. Jaro's tail flicked away, leaving her skin cold. She would have liked to

reassure him. They had known all these conditions going into the mission. This was hardly a reason to freak out. Jaro seemed to get himself together though, because a few moments later he spoke again.

“Here.” His hand had never left her neck, but he must have handed over the blaster he’d been openly wearing. That left him with the knife he had concealed.

Jaro guided her forward and she walked, trying to resist the urge to reach out for his hand. As they went through another door, the noises around her changed. This space was full of the noises of other people: voices, footsteps, and a beep which sounded like a payment scanner. Music played, though the volume was low enough she could hear Jaro easily, even in a hushed tone. “I doubt we’ll find her here. Far too many people. We need to wait until there are less eyes on us and check out some of the smaller spaces.”

“Okay.”

He led her about another twenty steps and stopped. Suddenly he spoke in a voice she didn’t recognize. “On your knees, human.”

She suppressed a shiver at the icy timbre to his voice that made him sound like someone else. It was a reality check about what they were doing. Getting to her knees, she kept her head down and listened for anything new. It was probably pointless. Jaro’s senses were better than hers anyway and what’s more, he wasn’t blindfolded. It was hard not to be on high alert though. The music grew louder and Jaro’s hand on the top of her head encouraged her to lean against his muscled thigh. A body pressed against her from her left and she shifted closer to Jaro. Was it her imagination, or had the air grown warmer? She got the sense of other people close to her, but without seeing, she couldn’t be sure.

Fur brushed her arm and an unfamiliar hand traced across her jaw, tilting her head up. Jaro hissed. “Back off.”

An unknown voice chuckled. “You sure you don’t want to share this morsel? She smells like she’s about to ovulate. You could get good marks if you take her to the Opal Room.”

Ovulate? Could that be true? Her cycle was irregular at best and she hadn't thought to use the med bot to check. She had kind of assumed after a month on Ardun with no reaction from anyone, perhaps she just didn't have the right pheromones to attract attention. She kinda figured she would have already ovulated. If it was true though, perhaps they could use it to their advantage.

A low, menacing growl from Jaro sent tingles shooting through Selia's body. His claws spread on her scalp. "This human is mine."

The gruff, possessive tone in his voice was part of the new side to Jaro she had discovered since they passed through the Earth gate. This part of him never failed to spark awareness in her core, even though she loved the humble, easygoing side of him as well. Here, she couldn't help but be glad of his possessiveness. He might not have responded to her pheromones, but at least he felt strongly enough to care this much that another male had.

An outright laugh came from the stranger. "Your loss, friend. But if you want to keep your plaything to yourself, that's fine with me."

She slipped her arm around Jaro's leg, feeling the tension in his body. Stroking his thigh she leaned into him wordlessly. After a few moments he sighed and his tail curled around her.

As they waited, music rose to a crescendo around them. Selia had no idea what was going on and she didn't risk speaking to Jaro to ask.

Eventually he instructed her to rise and led her through the crowd. People bumped and jostled her a few times until he tucked her against his side. It probably wasn't wise, but it felt nice, so she kept quiet.

They checked several other rooms. Selia wasn't able to get a proper sense of the different spaces other than the doors opening and other people speaking to Jaro. Plenty of times someone must have stepped too close. A brush of fur or a heavily indrawn breath alerted her to the presence of another Ardun, but it was only ever a brief moment before Jaro

snapped and snarled at whoever it was and they backed off in the face of his aggression. If she hadn't known him so well, she might have assumed it was all part of the mission. All an act to seem like a possessive owner with his favorite plaything. The way his tail kept tucking around her at every opportunity and the way his claws stroked through her hair told her Jaro was doing his best to stay calm. The hostile hisses and growls that tore from him every time anyone else came close told Selia he was losing the battle.

She heard a door open and then they stepped into a quieter space. Jaro lifted the blindfold from her eyes and she blinked. The room she was in was small and dimly lit. Booth seating in a u shape with room enough for a couple of performers faced a tiny stage. Jaro led her to a seat and pulled her down into his lap. On the stage an Ardun male sat sprawled in a large, black seat. Between his spread thighs, a pale human woman kneeled, her head bobbing up and down as she sucked him off. Selia looked away, twisting a little to search Jaro's tense features.

"I hate this," he murmured.

It made her feel a little guilty for the spark of arousal she felt watching from the corner of her eye at the way the male's head tipped back and his mouth hung open as the woman worked his cock. It wasn't that she had much interest in the public sex. But it made her think about the fact that Jaro still hadn't let her go down on him. He was always too enthusiastic to please her, but when it came time for her to repay the favor, he brushed her off.

Beneath her, tension radiated from him, his large hand tightening around her waist. She should do more to help him. She leaned close to his ear. "We can leave whenever you need to. You're in charge. If it's too much..."

Jaro huffed. "We should keep trying. I'd feel bad leaving without searching all the rooms."

"What about the Opal Room," she hissed under her breath.

Jaro tensed again. "Only if we can't find her anywhere else."

She was startled when his hand slipped up from her stomach over her breast, but then she spotted the other male approaching them. A low growl came from Jaro, vibrating through her side where it was pressed against his chest.

The other male had thick wavy hair, worn long over his pointy ears and a sneer on his face that he directed straight at her. He led a woman behind him on a chain attached to a collar around her neck. Thank the stars it was only a leather collar and not a shock collar, but it was degrading nonetheless. The woman kept her eyes down and followed behind him willingly enough, but that meant nothing. The stranger's nostrils flared as he slid into the booth seat opposite Jaro and his grin spread wider. "You're in the wrong room," he said to Jaro.

Jaro's hand never left Selia's breast and despite the situation, she couldn't help feel another tingle of awareness low in her belly at his touch. It was still Jaro after all. It would have been different if she was here with anyone else, but she trusted him to have her back. He would never do anything she didn't like.

Jaro scoffed. "Really? Why's that?"

"Ripe human, smelling like that? You better make the most of it while you can. You know it only lasts a few hours, right? Get yourself to the Opal Room."

"Who says I'm interested in the Opal Room?"

The other male scoffed. "You're a fool if you're not. Although maybe you just haven't experienced it yet. Believe me, if you get a good one. One that triggers your barbs... it's not an experience you're likely to forget. But I guess this one's doing nothing for you, since you're able to sit there with her in your lap instead of rutting her over the damn table."

Jaro grunted.

Selia had to work hard on keeping her face neutral. The other male was speaking about her as if she wasn't sitting right there listening. As if she was an object. It was infuriating. However, interjecting into the conversation would only give them away as outsiders.

Underneath the surface, she couldn't help wondering about what the stranger had said. It was possible she was ovulating. She was overdue for a period, but there was no way she could be pregnant. Though she and Jaro hadn't used protection, Ardun males weren't fertile unless the females were in heat. Now several males had commented openly about her scent.

A lumpy feeling settled in her throat.

This guy was right: Jaro wasn't reacting. She'd heard her friends talk about their mates enough times to know how an Ardun male in a rut acted. Goddess, hadn't she wished for that? If she was ovulating, then it was confirmation they couldn't be true mates.

Not that there had ever really been a chance. But now that she was forced to confront it, she had to admit, the potential had been there at the back of her mind. An unnamed, unvoiced hope that she had been clinging to, right up until that moment.

The stranger was still talking. "Listen, maybe we could trade. Give my human a sniff. See if she does anything for you. I was going to take her into the Opal Room myself, but I can't smell anything. Med bot assures me she's ovulating within the next ten hours though. Your female... fuck! She's delicious."

"Not interested." Jaro's thumb flicked across Selia's nipple and she jumped, the sudden stimulation jolting her from her self pity and making her squirm. As she did, she shifted in his lap and moved right over the firm bulge of his cock. His very erect cock. She wiggled again just to be sure and he hissed. His hand tightened around her breast.

But did that mean?

No. She forced herself to think logically. He was always eager to make love to her. It wasn't unusual for him to be aroused since she was in his lap. He was probably just reacting the way he always did, to the feel of her body, regardless of the situation. Wasn't she responding to him too? Right now they could have been in the middle of a piranha-infested river. It wouldn't matter. A flood of moisture threatened to seep

through the thin panties she wore at just his touch on her breast and the press of his cock against her ass.

Jaro groaned as his nose trailed up her neck over his mark.

The other male was still trying. “Come on. Help a male out. I haven’t found a ripe female that affects me for months, no matter how many times I come back here. Once you’ve had one, you never forget what it’s like. Just give mine a sniff.”

“Fuck off.” Jaro’s snarl echoed through the room just as the music from the stage ended. Several heads turned as Ardu and humans stared in their direction. His hand left Selia’s breast and slid down her belly, cupping over her sex. She almost moaned as the heel of his palm pressed over her clit, but he only held it there.

The other male’s gaze landed on Selia’s neck. He laughed. “Did you bite her? You’re not supposed to mate them, idiot. They’re only human. Good for play, but you really want to shackle yourself to that? You want bald kittens?”

Jaro growled. With her back pressed to his chest, it vibrated through Selia and sent shivers through her pussy, which was still desperately aware of the firm hand held there and the throbbing bulge pressed against her rump.

“This is why a queen is in charge of the Opal Room,” the guy went on, apparently oblivious to his impending doom. Selia was really having trouble stopping herself from kicking his butt herself and she suspected Jaro was about to leave this guy as a smear on the carpet. “Once you get the scent of a ripe one in your nostrils, it sends you a little crazy, but believe me, you’ll get over it.”

“This female is *mine*. Now fuck off, unless you want me to demonstrate what I’ll do if you keep sitting there smelling what doesn’t belong to you.”

The other male’s eyes widened, and his tail flicked in the air. He slid out of the booth and tugged his human away, presumably to bother someone else.

Jaro didn’t move his hand. Against her back, his chest rose and fell rapidly and his hot breath fanned her bare skin. Her

own breath caught in her throat and her whole body hummed with the question she couldn't quite bring herself to ask.

EIGHTEEN

SELIA SQUIRMED IN JARO'S lap again and her movements set off another little wave of her scent, socking him right in the balls. Wolf Star take him, this was both the best—and worst—thing that could possibly have happened. When they had docked the cruiser, he'd had a feeling. A sense that her scent had changed, that something had changed. He'd told himself he was being foolish. He'd told himself he was worried about the mission and getting overprotective and irrational. He hadn't been willing to trust in fate to deliver him what he had wanted so badly.

What a bloody epic mistake.

Now he had her here, dressed in only a few scraps of material, squirming in his lap, wet and aroused and in heat! Not only in heat, but sending out such a powerful perfume that he couldn't work out why every male in the whole damn place wasn't salivating at her feet by now.

He hadn't been surprised at all that arrogant little jerk-off came sniffing around. Jaro had barely kept himself under control when the other male had suggested they could swap though. As if anyone was getting their hands on his Selia. Not a fucking chance.

Just the thought of it made him pinch his eyes shut tight to hold back the headache. He had to forcibly retract his claws so he didn't scratch her soft breast. It was complete reckless stupidity to raise her scent to new drugging heights by toying with her nipples beneath the thin fabric of her bra, but he couldn't seem to help himself. As for removing the hand he currently had cupped possessively over her pussy, there was no chance. Not unless she would let him push aside the panties and impale her on his cock here within full view of every low life bigoted human-hating scum in the place.

Not an idea he particularly relished.

Except, if he wasn't somewhere private soon with at least his face buried in that cunt, he might very well go mad.

“I think we should go,” he bit out, clamping his jaw as she wiggled in his lap again.

She turned toward him to put her lips against his ear. “Didn’t you hear what that dick said about a queen running the Opal Room? Don’t you think we should check to see if it’s you know who?”

“No fucking way I’m taking you in there.”

“Jaro, I’m fine. I can take care of myself, remember? And I’ve got you as backup. We can do this.”

“No, we can’t do this.” He scrubbed a hand over his face. “I can’t do it.”

She frowned down at him. Then she turned all the way, threw her right leg over his lap and straddled him, bringing that glorious pussy within inches of his already painful erection.

Fuuuuuck!

“You can. I know this is hard, but—”

He almost laughed. Hard! She had no idea!

Madness seized him and he pulled her forward until her tempting heat sat flush with the bulge of his thick cock. Her eyes rolled back a little and she rocked her hips. That had been a mistake. He cursed.

“Don’t move, Selia. Sweet Shahra, do not move.” His hands gripped her waist and, for a moment, he wasn’t sure if he was holding her still or silently begging her to ignore his words.

Some jerk onstage was pumping into a slim red-haired woman, slamming into her over and over while the poor female whimpered. The slaps echoed through the room. People came and went past the table where he’d taken Selia and a serving bot whizzed past.

All of it faded into black as his world centered on her glorious pussy hovering right above where he needed it, begging for his cock with that scent.

“Why? What is it?” She leaned forward, pressing those little pebbled nipples practically into his mouth and he groaned again.

“Selia, unless you want me to tear off what little clothing you have on and take you right here then, please. Stop doing that.”

She sat back, eyes wide, generous lips parted in surprise. “Then I really am—?”

“Yes.”

“And you—”

“Yes.”

She didn't even wait for him to finish speaking. Just put one hand on either side of his face. The kiss she planted on him shook him to his very core. He was utterly powerless and unable to do anything but respond to it. He hungrily devoured her mouth, sliding his tongue against hers. Holding tight to her, he pulled her closer still to grind against the aching bulge in his pants that only grew larger.

Not here! Stars, not here. No way he would finally claim his true mate like this.

Selia moaned and rocked her hips, driving him to the edge of his control. Somehow he held on. It didn't stop him cupping the back of her neck and holding her mouth to his. He never wanted come up for air.

He tugged her head to the side and choked down the purr that threatened to rattle through him at the taste of her salty skin over his mark and the way she shuddered when he kissed it.

“Jaro, stop.”

He squeezed a handful of her glorious ass, kissing and nipping further along her collarbone.

“Jaro, you have to stop.”

He heard her words, but it was like listening underwater, the sounds drifted one by one into his ears and out again

without reaching his brain. He'd been holding back, but why? He couldn't really remember. His cock throbbed, eager to burst through the fabric of her panties and find its home inside her little wet pussy.

“Ah, fuck, Selia, I have to be inside you. Have to taste your sweetness and sink into you. My cock's so swollen it's going to reach places no male ever reached before.”

Her gasp was followed by a jerk of her hips, but then she pushed at his shoulders. “Not here.”

He blinked up at her, trying to focus on what she was saying.

“Not here,” she hissed again.

Shit. That's right!

He nodded. “Not here. Okay, not here. But where? Need you so bad, angel.”

“Stop calling me that. I'm supposed to be your slave. People are looking.”

He should have checked, but then he would need to look away from her. That didn't seem possible right now.

Pushing herself off his lap, Selia dropped to the floor in front of him. He might have whimpered. He certainly bit down on his lip hard enough to draw blood. He hated the sight of his gorgeous human on her knees for him in this place, but his cock didn't have any such inhibitions. It jumped at the sight, the head already weeping with moisture the throb, throb, throb of his aching shaft kept time with the wild rhythm of his heart.

“No, angel. Not now. Not like this.”

She was already running her hands up his thighs, teasing his body into betraying him.

“Then how do we get you in the headspace where you're ready for the Opal Room, 'cause I don't want to go in there alone.”

“No way you're going by yourself.”

“Good. Then relax and focus on me. I take care of you, remember. And you take care of me. Only not here, because we have a mission.”

He let out an undignified noise when her hand slid under the waistband of his trousers and closed around his shaft. Moments later she had pulled him free and he was gaping down at the largest erection he'd ever had. She opened her mouth, stuck out her tongue, and swallowed him down.

The groan he let loose turned heads. Biting down on his fist, he closed his eyes and concentrated on not simply thrusting his hips up to get even more of his cock between her plump lips. The last thing she needed was him fucking her mouth in this hell of a place.

It wasn't long before his resolve not to do that was sorely tested. Holding a firm grip on him with one hand, Selia worked her hot wet mouth over his length in punishing strokes that had his legs shaking and his claws digging into the seat.

Those people staring at him as they walked by, nostrils flaring and tails twitching as they sniffed the scent of his mate's arousal? They could get fucked. No way he would do anything to lift Selia's perfect mouth from his cock before he was finished.

Finished! Fuck!

Finishing with her in heat meant barbs. Fucking barbs! He'd waited all his adult life for this. Instead of sinking them into her flesh, he was about to choke her. Clenching his jaw, he fisted a hand in her hair. “Selia, sweet. You have to stop.”

She moaned around his cock. He choked and clenched with every inner muscle he had so he didn't spill right then.

“Selia! That's enough.” He pulled back on her hair, hoping to hell she'd forgive him for the rough treatment, but if he went off now, his barbs would be lodged at the back of her throat until she suffocated.

She came off with a pop and a look of confusion, cheeks hollowed out with the force of her suction. “You can come in my mouth.”

Sweet Shahra, he would take her up on that offer later, but not now. Not now!

“No, I can’t,” he hissed. “My barbs!”

Her eyes widened. “Oh, I see. Are you nearly finished?”

His laughter sounded more like a bark. “Yeah, you could say that.”

She smiled again, pumping her fist over him, leaning forward.

“Be careful!”

“Babe, I got you.”

She ran her tongue around the head of his cock and gave it a wet kiss. Then, First Shahra and all her consorts, the tip of Selia’s tongue delved inside the slit at the head of his cock and he lost it. Fucking lost it.

Come exploded from the tip, covering her face, squirting in white ropes over her nose and across her cheeks. His body trembled with the force of his release and he heaved long breaths in and out trying to regain his composure. Unlikely with her kneeling there between his thighs, tongue already darting out to clean off her lips.

Sweet mercy!

Boy was she clever, his angel. Reaching up, she wiped the rest of his come from her face and rubbed it into her breasts and up her neck, covering the mark. Then he really had to squelch his purr. He sat forward, tugging her back into his lap and into kisses that tasted like him, like them, like perfection. She smelled of him. She would smell of him to every star-blighted male in Spectre and suddenly he was tethered back to the station and reeling himself back to sanity.

NINETEEN

JARO'S MUSCLES FELT bunched as tight as if he were about to step into the arena on the opening day of the games. He might have just had the best damn orgasm of his life, but that made no difference. His cock was semi-hard and ready to perform again. He suspected it would be like this until her heat ended. Until he finished inside Selia's body. Until he sank his barbs in her while she clenched around him, and he topped it off with another bite.

Okay, forget semi-hard. He palmed down full-blown wood, willing it to behave.

He had blindfolded her again under protest. Now he led her down another corridor toward the Opal Room. Scenting other males around the corner, his hackles raised, reminding him of their shitty surroundings and the worries he had for her safety while she was in heat.

Yep. That did it.

Finally.

The Ardun they passed gave him knowing smirks and more than one male actually turned to follow after taking a sniff of Selia, which drove him near crazy. His tail fluffed out, his claws extended, and all the hair on the back of his neck stood on end while his ears flicked behind to monitor their pursuers.

Selia seemed calm enough for the moment. Her arousal scent was only laced with a hint of acrid fear. So Jaro sucked down his own overwhelming emotions and concentrated on keeping her that way.

Not understanding the exact processes that operated inside the Opal Room only made it worse. Selia was right that they had agreed to come here to find Jaessa. That felt like a very trivial concern right now. His promise to the shahra, even his desire to avoid interstellar war was a much less pressing concern than his burning desire to keep Selia safe and to ensure no other male got even close to touching her.

When they stopped in front of the guard at the door to the Opal Room, the other male raised a brow. “She’s a ripe one. Little come slut smells like she’s already been used. You sure you want to bring her to the Opal Room, friend?”

“No,” he muttered under his breath. Selia stepped back, as if by accident, but considering her heel landed squarely on top of his foot, he knew it wasn’t. He shrugged at the guard. “Doesn’t do much for me,” he said through gritted teeth. “I want one that’ll rouse my barbs.”

He should have found something better to say. The other male would smell his lie from the other side of the impromptu station. He’d always been a shitty liar.

Still, the guard only snorted and stepped aside, ushering them in with a smirk.

Jaro led Selia into a space filled with clear glass capsules. Inside many of the glass boxes, a human woman stood or sat. Outside each, stood an Ardun guard, most female. The capsule rooms meant Jaro couldn’t pick up the scent of the women inside.

A well-dressed female with blonde hair and light brown fur, strolled toward him as they entered. He waited for her to approach. The queen’s long brown tail swayed through the air casually, but the way her black-tipped ears flicked around to listen to what was behind her betrayed her focus on her surroundings.

The female gave Selia a long sniff and smiled. “Nice. You can put your human over there.” She pointed to a free capsule room. “First time?”

He nodded.

“You can hire a guard for fifty marks, or do it yourself. Patrons pay to smell the female and then negotiate a price with you to rut her. If you want a female, you have her inside the capsule. Understood?”

He grunted, unable to form words. Was this the queen who was in charge of the Opal Room? She looked somehow familiar, but it most definitely wasn’t Jaessa. This queen was

too young for a start. He tried to keep his face neutral, all the while feeling like he was choking down bile at the image of Selia being sniffed, or worse, groped by passersby. Hells, these women were being traded like cattle and he was now a part of it.

This kind of shit was the reason the original founders of Ardun had created a matriarchal society. Then again, here were Ardun males and queens both making animals of other people.

Shaking off his disgust, he nodded and led Selia toward the capsule the queen had indicated. The door was open, so he led her inside and removed her blindfold since it seemed few of the humans inside the room wore them. She stepped inside, giving him a little smile as she passed that did nothing to reassure him. As soon as Selia entered, the door to the capsule swung closed, and locked with a click.

The well-dressed queen sauntered over. “Oh, I forgot to mention when you’re done, you pay a fee to release her again. Have fun.” She slapped him on the shoulder and turned to go.

Jaro growled, but fighting her would achieve nothing except a shock from her weapon and perhaps a little satisfaction. He reminded himself the shahra had deposited plenty of marks in his account. He would just swipe his chip and free Selia if things looked like they would get dodgy. For now, at least no other males could smell her, taking that weight off his shoulders. They sure as hells weren’t touching her. He’d ask for a price so high no one would be stupid enough to pay it.

Was there a price high enough to put anyone off wanting to get their hands on Selia?

Fuck!

Why had he agreed to this bullshit?

Ah yes, Jaessa. If she was here, he was going to make her pay for the fact that his sweet human was being subjected to this indignity. While he was at it, he’d make the bitch pay for every human who’d been subjected to this.

Jaro took a long calming breath to center himself as his thoughts threatened to spiral out of control.

Taking one more long look at Selia, who sat on a low bench at the far side of the capsule, he turned and scanned the room, looking for Jaessa.

A scruffy male with gray fur and dark clothing approached. Jaro glared at him. *Keep walking, asshole.* He smiled with satisfaction when the male took a wide berth around Selia's capsule.

His glare fended off three more males before a soft tapping from behind him made him look around. Jaro turned to see Selia, head tipping and eyes widening in a tiny, almost imperceptible gesture. She froze as soon as another Ardun walked past, but her point was clear. He was being a dick and losing sight of their mission to stay undercover. He needed to cool it.

With a sigh, he folded his arms, leaned back against the capsule and looked down at his feet to avoid watching anyone who went past. He'd already looked around the room as much as he could from here and spotted nothing useful. Where did that leave them? He'd have to either talk to someone, or leave Selia's side to look for Jaessa.

Fuck!

With a long look over his shoulder, he tensed to act. Selia jerked her chin, encouraging him to go. Shaking his head, he walked away, almost bumping into the female he'd spoken to earlier because he was too busy looking back at Selia.

"Hey, if you want to sample the goods then you need to hire a guard. No point having her here otherwise."

"I have no intention of sampling anything, you—" He grit his teeth. "I just need to use the bathroom. I assume that's okay with you?"

The queen smirked. "Hope she's still there when you get back."

He almost snapped out his hand to grip her by the throat. She was just goading him. She wasn't being serious. Was she?

Shit.

Fur practically standing on end, he stalked around the room, looking behind every corner.

Nothing.

He was already edging back toward Selia, when a queen in a slim-fitting black jumpsuit caught his attention. She was facing away, the cutout at the back revealing a long fluffy brown tail which swept slowly to and fro.

She pointed at one capsule, gesturing to a smaller queen dressed in a black and white uniform. “That one. Set a service bot to work on it and double check the lights by hand. One regular was claiming they were flickering earlier, though I can’t see any evidence of that now.”

The older queen turned, gaze flicking over him and then away again. Then she stilled and looked back at Jaro. Her cropped bob had been cut short and she wasn’t wearing anything nearly as fancy as she ordinarily would. But Jaro had spent far too long looking at images in the files Shahra Fareeda had sent them to be in any doubt. That was Minister Jaessa—or ex-minister, since the shahra had stripped her of the position officially a few days after Sattar had presented evidence against her in the public trial.

Jaessa’s tail twitched. She stiffened. Then she turned and walked down a side passage, swiping her chip to allow her entry through a sealed door.

He had moments to react. Dashing after her, Jaro caught the door just before it slid closed. He forced it open and paused in the doorway, while he braced to keep it open.

Should he follow? That would leave Selia unguarded for even longer.

But she was in a locked box. No one would touch her.

Here was the one thing they’d come into this shitty situation for in the first place. He knew what Selia would say if she were here. She’d tell him to keep going, to catch Jaessa and complete the mission. She wasn’t here though, and that was the problem.

Every instinct screamed at Jaro to turn around and go straight back to make sure she was okay. Of course she was. She could handle herself even if he wasn't around. He just had to be sure. Completely sure.

He growled. The door led into a docking tunnel. He was probably already too late. Once Jaessa made it back to her ship, there would be no way of forcing entry. At least not without tools and techniques Jaro had no experience with or access to.

He hadn't anticipated her being so jumpy, but it figured. She'd probably seen the trial even from Edgespace. Shahra Fareeda had wanted to make it public to assure the Earth government she was taking action against the members of her government who had caused the interstellar incident.

With an irritated huff, he stepped back into the Opal Room and let the door slide closed in front of him. Decision made, he turned back to Selia.

Only to find her box empty.

No. He was mistaken. He was looking at the wrong capsule.

His breathing grew shallow and rapid and his skin heated and chilled with fear.

Though he made two full circuits of the room, he could find no trace of her. Not until he drew in a long breath and caught her scent in the air.

Thank every mythic power!

Wasting no time, he took off in pursuit.

He pushed other people out of his way as he hurried on her trail. He wasn't too late. Her smell was potent in the air. He would catch whoever had taken her and make them wish they'd never been born!

As he went from one docking tunnel into a tiny cruiser, the wind rushed out of him as if he'd been punched in the guts. The scent of Selia's heat became tainted with blood. The scent teased his tongue with memories of sinking into her and biting

her as she came around his cock and it sickened him to live through the memory through the scent of blood spilled through violence. Tainted with acrid fear.

All because he hadn't been there for her.

TWENTY

SELIA WATCHED THE SLENDER blonde queen approaching her box with trepidation. She had only waited for Jaro to leave before coming straight over and Selia suspected that wasn't good news. Sure enough, when the other female swiped her ID and opened the door, she had a nasty grin on her face. She said nothing at first, only stepped closer as Selia watched and drew in a long breath. The queen's nose pressed to Selia's chest.

The queen stepped back with a smirk. "You stink of him. I can't believe I didn't notice it before, but your heat is potent. That stench overpowered his smell."

Selia kept her eyes down, hoping to maintain the ruse of being a docile slave girl.

"You can stop pretending. Might as well tell me what you're playing at. Or I'll make you tell me."

Before she could react, the queen pulled the shock stick from her belt and whisked it up to Selia's neck. Instincts honed through hours of training brought her arms to block, but she still took the brunt of the charge. Her teeth clenched as pain locked up her spine. When it released, she stumbled. She grunted, dropping to the floor. Her head spun, but she didn't black out.

While her defenses were down, the other female snapped a shock collar around her neck and darted back, holding out a hand with the controller for Selia to see. "Unless you want more of that, I suggest you do exactly as I say."

Selia seethed. She should have seen the attack coming, but she'd been too worried about Jaro and Minister Jaessa and her guard had been down. She had only herself to blame for that. Her one hope was that given a moment, she knew how to disable the collar, provided it was a newer model. That probably wouldn't happen anytime soon, given the queen's fixed interest in her, so she'd have to play along for now.

Nodding, she braced herself, waiting for another shock in case the queen was feeling aggressive. Apparently not.

“Get up. Come with me.”

The other female only waited long enough to step back a few paces from the door, looking behind her, presumably for Jaro. When he didn't come, she gestured for Selia to leave the capsule. Selia did as she was told, following the queen's hissed directions to walk back toward a door to her right. Selia suspected it was the entry door. Keeping her movements slow, she tried to buy time for Jaro to return. It wasn't hard to look shaken, since the zap of the charge still sent phantom pain through her legs and tingles into her fingers. She exaggerated stumbling a few times. That earned a growl for her trouble, but it might have bought a few seconds.

It wasn't enough. Soon they were in a docking tunnel and making their way toward another door. The whole makeshift station was a warren of tunnels between vessels and with so many Ardun and humans on board, would it be possible for Jaro to find her? She might need his help and he would be worried about her.

As she shuffled forward, she considered her options. Screaming and fighting would only earn her another shock. That could well knock her out, giving her very little chance of escape. Were Ardun senses good enough that Jaro could track her scent? It was possible, particularly considering how much scent seemed to play a part in his reaction to her being in heat. Her scent wouldn't linger in the air though. Not unless she left some kind of trail. Considering she had nothing to drop, that left her with two options. She could let go of her bladder control and leave a trail of urine—gross!—or blood. Yeah, she chose blood. No way she wanted her lover following the stink of her piss.

Okay, so blood. But she had nothing to cut herself with.

The queen led Selia through a door to her left that opened onto a small vessel. Inside the vestibule they paused so the female could open another door. Selia used the opportunity to

slip her hand under the shock collar and feel for the battery case. Bingo.

She flicked at the mechanism to open it with a fingernail, but as she did, the queen turned around. Quickly Selia pulled her hands out of the collar. She didn't want to get caught meddling with it or she'd lose the advantage.

The next door opened and she stepped through, getting a prod from the deactivated shock stick in the back when she was too slow.

How to make herself bleed? It was gross, but still better than the urine option, so Selia shoved a finger right up her nose, scratching at the skin there until she felt her toes curl and the need to sneeze overtake her.

When she couldn't take it anymore, she pulled her finger out and inspected it. Though there was blood, it wasn't a full nosebleed. Dammit.

She deliberately stumbled as they turned a corner and resisted the urge to catch her fall with her hands. She smacked into the wall with her face, sending another jolt of pain through her from the impact. But it had the desired effect.

The queen hissed. "Get up."

Selia staggered to her feet and wiped her hands in the bloody mess under her nose. The next time she stumbled, she clutched at the wall to right herself, leaving a smear. Coupled with the drips from her still bleeding nose, she had to hope it would be enough to give Jaro the clue he might need to find her later.

"Disgusting." The queen's tone was laced with disdain, but she made no further comment.

They entered yet another tunnel and honestly, Selia was losing track of their path. She had been focused on leaving a trail, but she'd need to keep her wits about her in case that didn't work. So she repeated the next few turns in her head to herself in her mind, to lodge them in her memory. Turn left, through a cruiser, docking tunnel into a large cargo bay, docking tunnel to a space yacht, class F.

The queen swiped her ID and the door to the space yacht opened. “In.”

Selia obeyed. She watched the queen turn and lock the door behind them. Then her captor pointed toward the far side of the cargo bay they had entered. “Sit on the floor. Face the wall. And for heavens’ sake do something about the mess.” Selia went to sit quietly, hoping for a chance to pull the batteries from the shock collar.

Surely by now, Jaro would either have captured their target or returned to check on her. He might be following her trail this moment. It would be no good if the door was still locked. She’d have to find a way to open it for him.

She sat on the hard floor, the metal cold against her bare legs. Behind her, the queen huffed in irritation as her com buzzed. She must have answered it. “What?”

Another female voice said, “We need to leave. Where are you?”

“Back on the yacht. Where are you?”

“Coming to you. Prepare to disengage as soon as I make it back.”

“Fine.” The queen must have ended the call, because Selia didn’t hear any more conversation.

She needed to act quickly. If they disengaged the docking tunnel, getting off this ship was about to get a lot harder. Reaching under the collar again, Selia flicked the mechanism. A firm press in, the one to the right and up. There was a satisfying little click. It made the countless hours spent looking at schematics on her most recent investigation almost seem worthwhile when the tiny button battery, just a spec not even as big as her fingernail slipped out into her palm. She slipped it quickly into her bra just in case. The collar was still around her neck, but without the battery it wouldn’t generate any charge.

A clunk behind her suggested something being moved around. That could mean the queen had her hands busy. It was now or never.

“Hey. Can I get something to drink?” she called.

“Just be quiet and stay where you are,” came the response.

She turned to see the blonde queen standing at a wall panel, entering something onto the screen.

She jumped to her feet. She had seconds to get as close as possible before the other female looked up. She made it five steps before the queen hissed. “Sit down or I will shock you again.”

“Go ahead and try it.”

Selia lunged. The queen pressed the controller still in her hand. Nothing happened. Selia had the immense satisfaction of planting her fist right in the queen’s face, snapping her neck back and making her stagger. Snatching for the shock stick at the queen’s belt, Selia grabbed it and pressed the button to activate it. By the time the queen tried to grab it back, it was activated and the Ardun jolted and hissed. One more shock, this time to her neck, and the queen was out cold.

Swiping her forearm across her face, Selia grimaced at the amount of blood still dripping from her nose. Not elegant, but hopefully effective. The wall panel was still on. Selia quickly selected the controls and opened the cargo bay door.

When she hurried to exit, there stood Jaro with an absolutely murderous expression on his face.

TWENTY ONE

“YOU’RE BLEEDING!” JARO charged onto the ship, tail fluffed, claws extended, eyes searching the space for who to kill. All he found was the well-dressed queen from the Opal Room passed out on the floor. That was so unsatisfying he wanted to draw his claws down the wall and then smash something.

That bitch! He had thought she’d been giving him the side-eye. Had she been planning to snatch Selia all along? Selia, who was currently still bleeding!

Seeing no other immediate threat, he went to Selia and gathered her into his arms. She actually chuckled against his chest.

“It’s fine.” Selia sniffed, wiping a hand across her poor, bloody face.

He could have kicked himself for turning his back for even a moment. What did it matter if the world burned down around his ears if he lost her? Mission be damned. He’d only ever had a chance in hell of impressing Fareeda enough to persuade her to take pity on him anyway. If Selia was hurt, if she lost her trust in him... nothing was worth that.

“Jaro. I did this to myself.”

“You what?!”

“I made my own nose bleed.”

Some of the burning anger left him and the fur on his tail smoothed a little. “You—why?”

She laughed. “It was either that or pee my pants, so I know which one I prefer.”

He pulled back, holding her by her upper arms to look down into her face. Maybe she’d been hit harder than he thought. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, okay. Forget I just said that.” She winced. “That’s going into the vault of we’re never speaking of that again.”

“Okay...”

“No sign of Jaessa?”

Jaro scowled. “I found her, but she ran, and in the end I let her go. I should never have left you even for a moment.”

His fingers tightened around Selia’s arms, but forced himself to relax. She smiled, reaching up to stroke his face but hesitated before her bloody hand made contact with his skin. Jaro leaned in and nuzzled his cheek against her. As if a little blood would put him off.

“I can’t even bring myself to regret failing the mission. I just regret not being there for you.” He closed his eyes for a moment, selfishly reveling in the touch of this strong, brave female. He couldn’t be more proud of the way she had handled herself. Though the fact that she so clearly hadn’t needed him scratched at the old scar and threatened to re-open it again.

“You *are* here,” Selia said. “You found me and we’re okay. We’ll keep trying to catch Jaessa.”

Of course his caring human would try to reassure him, would hear his unspoken worries. He sighed. “I’m sorry. I had hoped...well it all hinged on actually catching Jaessa. But I let you down.”

Just then, Selia stiffened, looking past him to the door. “Listen, we don’t have much time.” She indicated the unconscious queen on the floor with a jerk of her head. “Whoever this bitch is, she’s got a friend coming, and I don’t know if they’ll be armed. We need weapons.”

Jaro nodded, some of his shame receding. Finally. A chance to spill some blood and make someone pay for the fact his mate was bleeding and recently abducted. Bending, he pulled the knife from his ankle and offered it to Selia. She held up the shock stick. “I’ll keep this. I have more practice with one of these anyway.”

He nodded. Without needing to discuss it, they both moved to either side of the door and waited. Before long, Jaro could hear someone coming. Locking eyes with Selia, he used a flick of his head to make sure she knew it too, unsure how much her

human senses would pick up. She raised the glowing shock stick, ready to pounce.

The last thing he was expecting though, when the door opened, was for Jaessa to walk right into their trap. He was so surprised he hesitated, trying to be sure he was really seeing this. “Jaessa?”

The stern-looking older queen seemed as surprised as he was to be confronted with him in her ship. She started, tail flicking the air.

Shit. The knife he held was useless. He couldn't risk killing the quarry they'd come to capture. He tossed it aside.

Then he put the rest of the puzzle together. The Ardun queen from before had been Kora, Sattar's sister. That was why she looked familiar. She was the sort of minor celebrity you saw in the newsfeeds and at important functions from time to time. She rubbed shoulders with ministers and royalty and she was next in line to the hereditary position of Minister for Culture. He only berated himself for not seeing it sooner. Glancing around, he looked for her, but her body was no longer lying where they had left her.

Fuck!

He had no more time to worry about Kora. Jaessa reacted more quickly than he could have anticipated. For a moment, he thought she would turn and run. Raising the blaster she carried in her hand, she aimed. Jaro had precious moments to act as it swung up and pointed straight at him. He barged into Jaessa and knocked her off balance, sending the blast firing off into the cargo hold. Selia brought her shock stick down against Jaessa's shoulder. Still grappling with Jaessa, Jaro felt the shock reverberate through his body too, sending him to his knees.

Selia swore. Jaessa had stumbled, but most of the shock had been transferred to Jaro, so she was still conscious.

Jaessa re-aimed her blaster. Straight at Selia.

No!

Diving, he grabbed Jaessa's ankles and brought her down. She fired and he had an awful moment of gut wrenching panic until the blaster fire rebounded off the wall with a spark. Before Jaessa could fire again, Selia lunged with the shock stick. The zap from the charge was audible. Jaessa's body spasmed and her blaster jerked. Her foot caught Jaro in the jaw and he hissed. Another jolt of energy traveled through her body and into him.

He grunted. His head swam as he tried to get to his feet.

Selia straightened from checking Jaessa's prone form, caught him under one arm and stopped him from pitching into the wall. She was brilliant. Utterly brilliant. Her scent—always delicious—was stronger than ever. Now it was laced with a hundred other things. Sweetness, sweat, blood, a little fear. All things that made up the profile of the most amazing female Jaro had ever met. A flavor he needed on his tongue, a scent he needed surrounding him. Always.

How was he suddenly the luckiest male in the five systems? He pulled Selia into his chest. She squawked in protest. "You're hurt!"

"I don't care," he murmured against her hair.

Selia grumbled and pushed him away. "That's ridiculous. Where's the damn med bot?"

"I'm okay," he ground out. "Is she down?"

Selia nodded. "Are you alright?"

"I'll be fine." He winced though when things got hazy again then shook it off. "Just give me a minute. Where's Kora? The other queen?"

Selia swore as she looked around. "She's gone."

Then the AI chimed. "Escape pod two activated."

Fuck. How nice to ditch your own mother in the face of an attack. "Let her go." They could chase her later. Surely she wouldn't get far in an escape pod.

How would they secure their prisoner before she woke? How would they get her back to Ardun? "Can't go back

through Spectre like this.” He gestured at Jaessa, unconscious on the ground.

“You’re right.” Selia grimaced and petted his chest. He almost stumbled. It was getting harder to think again. Now there was nothing to fight, but his own desire smacked him so hard it was like a punch to the balls. “How’s your shoulder?” she was saying. “Can you help me lift Jaessa? I think we should put her in the pod and get her in stasis as soon as we can.”

Merciful shahra her scent was so ripe. Her lips so close.

“Jaro?”

“Huh?”

“Hey. I’m worried about you. Sit down, I’m getting the med bot.” She helped him lean against the wall and rushed to the panel. He was still standing there trying to force his mind out of the vision reel that had somehow started up. A constant stream of the different ways he’d take Selia. It was like a bad porno. He’d push her face down onto the floor, straddle her legs and sink into her like that so her pussy hugged him tight.

Too rough.

He’d lie back and let her sit on his face so he could drink from the source.

No! He needed to be inside her.

He’d lift her up so her legs wrapped around his hips and—

“Jaro?”

Fuck! What had she been saying?

“Come on, let’s find you somewhere to sit.” A hand slid over his belly and up to his chest and he shuddered with the force of need that sucked at his core and threatened to hollow out his insides. How had he never known it was possible to feel like he wanted to crawl out of his own skin and into someone else’s?

“Jaro, baby, are you okay?”

He was gasping, dragging in breaths that didn't satisfy the burning need for oxygen to his lungs. Burying his face in her neck and breathing her in helped. It helped a lot actually.

When he parted his mouth to draw in more of her aroma, he found himself licking, tasting, kissing her neck until she moaned and tipped her head to the side, giving him better access.

“Need you. Need you. Need to be inside you now!”

Her scent swelled. The sweet, addictive perfume of her arousal drowned out other things until there was nothing but her need and his, one and the same.

This was it. This was the moment he claimed his true mate, the one he'd waited for. The one who made all the hurt and the years of loneliness fade to nothing.

“Jaessa!” Selia was pushing at his shoulders.

“What?”

“We have to get her into the escape pod and into stasis before she wakes up. Help me.”

Grumbling, he moved to stand over Jaessa.

“Computer, give me the med bot and open a stasis pod,” Selia instructed.

The AI beeped. “You are not the registered owner of this vehicle. Unable to activate the stasis pod at this time.”

“We'll see about that.” Selia retrieved Jaro's knife, made a small cut on Jaessa's hand and removed her ID chip. Holding it up to the panel she smiled a cold smile as the computer acknowledged her. “Now get the med bot in here. And disconnect the docking tunnel.”

“Affirmative.”

Jaro watched Selia go through the motions of disconnecting the ship from the makeshift station as if through a haze. His eyes were working, but it was almost as if they belonged to somebody else, as if he were watching a vid instead of real life. All his brain function seemed to have

rerouted elsewhere in his body as the force of her scent sucked more and more of his ability to function normally right out of him.

The med bot buzzed around him, scanned him, and injected him with a mild stimulant. By the time the ship was disengaged, it had finished its task.

Somehow he forced his limbs to cooperate, when all he wanted to do was pull his mate onto the floor and taste her. He wrinkled his nose at touching another female, holding his breath to avoid smelling her, and somehow they did it. The light on the escape pod went green and the AI beeped. “Unrecognized live cargo has been placed in stasis. Awaiting further instructions.”

“Hold in stasis until further notice,” Selia said.

“Affirmative.”

He had Selia back in his arms in half a moment. Now finally now, he would claim her in the truest sense. Then he remembered—his vow!

He wanted to weep or tear his fur out at the roots, but he breathed through the hot pressure that suddenly struck him low in the belly and once again resisted the urge to just grab at his mate.

TWENTY TWO

JARO HELD HIS ARMS out, stopping Selia back as she reached for him. Her brow furrowed with a look of concern. He shook his head. “We have to call the shahra. Have to tell her.”

“Not yet. Surely it can wait.”

“No. Can’t wait. Once I get my barbs in you I’m never, ever letting you go. But if the shahra won’t release me from my vow and I’m banished...”

Selia sucked in a harsh breath. “Desi!” She drew back, nodding. “Yes. Of course. I’ll set up the vid-call. Hold on.”

A grim smile and a brief nod was all he could manage. Thank the heavens for his perfect mate. Selia rushed to the wall panel, entering the ID for the palace. Jaro watched and prayed they weren’t caught in red tape forever. Without their coms, they couldn’t access the private line Fareeda had given them.

When the stern features of Hala, chief of security at the royal palace appeared on the screen, Selia glanced over with a worried frown. Hala was frosty at best and overtly hostile on a bad day. Jaro knew exactly what Selia was thinking. Hala might prevent them even getting through to Her Majesty. Jaro remained at the other side of the open space, refusing to go closer to Selia in case just being near enough to touch her eroded what was left of his willpower.

Selia turned back to the screen and gave the queen her brightest smile. “Hala, hi. It’s Selia. I need to speak to Her Majesty on a matter of urgency.”

“Is that right?”

“Please, Hala! You know Her Majesty sent us on a mission. It’s really important.”

The queen rolled her eyes, but brought up her wrist-com and entered something into a message. Moments later Hala

frowned at her screen. She looked back at the cam. “I’m putting you through.”

“Thank y—” The call was cut off before Selia could finish her thanks. The thin face of Sharha Fareeda appeared, her bright yellow eyes flashing with interest. By the Wolf Star, finally something was going right! “Selia, Jaro. Do you have good news for me?”

Selia twisted her mouth into a half frown. “Sort of?”

Fareeda raised a brow.

Selia opened her mouth to explain, but Jaro stepped forward, close enough for the cam to put him in the vid. “Your Majesty, I’ll leave Selia to give you the good news. First I have to confess something.”

Fareeda’s expression stayed passive. “Go on.”

Jaro looked down at his feet, clenching his fists until his claws dug into his palms. “I did more than bite Selia during the mission. A lot more.”

“I see.”

“Your Majesty, I’m sorry, I—”

Fareeda held up her hand. “Jaro, it’s okay. Remember I told you that if you were discreet, I don’t mind you having female companionship.”

“No! Selia is more than female companionship! Forgive me, Your Majesty. She’s my true mate.”

Fareeda’s brows raised at that, but she was smiling softly. “Is that right?”

Jaro nodded. His ears were pressed back against his skull and he could hardly look at the screen, unwilling to see the disappointment and disapproval in his matriarch’s expression. “She is, and I—”

Fareeda chuckled and he looked up in surprise to see her smiling. “Let me guess. She’s in heat as we speak?”

Was it that obvious? He opened his mouth to respond but a choked grunt was the only sound he could force out.

“Then what are you waiting for?”

Jaro stared at the screen. Had he heard her correctly? His tail lashed the air behind him.

Fareeda laughed, her yellow eyes crinkling into a look of pity. “Go claim your mate and call me back with your good news when you’re done. Not even a matriarch can stand in the way of true mates. Surely you know that by now.”

He was still fumbling with the right words to thank Fareeda, when Selia turned to him with a bright smile. “See? Everything is going to be fine.” She turned back to the cam when Jaro only stood staring at the wall panel. “Thank you, Your Majesty. We were worried Jaro would be banished.”

Fareeda shook her head. “Of course not. We’ll discuss the details later. Now is not the time for talking, is it?”

Damn right! He didn’t even wait for the panel to go dark. Lunging, he gathered Selia in his arms, even as she shut off the call with another thanks to Fareeda. He hauled her against his body and kissed his way along her neck and collarbone. Heaven! Had the taste of her grown sweeter? Saltier? Her scent was everywhere and still not strong enough. He wanted to cover himself in it. Wanted to bathe in their combined juices until it would perfume his skin even after he washed. But not on the hard floor of the cargo bay on a stolen ship. At the very least she deserved a bed.

His cock and balls were heavy and aching, as if he hadn’t come all over her chest just a short while ago. Just the thought of separating from her, lifting his mouth from her skin long enough to find somewhere he could lay her down, seemed impossible.

He’d waited too long. How would he ever do her justice when he felt desperate to just push into her over and over, punishing her body in violent thrusts until he emptied into her? Selia jumped, wrapped her legs around his waist, and clung tight to him like she felt it too. At least now he didn’t have to choose. Stumbling toward the door, he tried to think beyond the excruciating ache around his cockhead.

“I can walk!” she protested.

He growled. “Not today.” He carried her through the ship, slamming his palm down over every panel to reveal room after room. Gym, kitchen, rec room. No, no, no. She writhed in his arms, kissing his neck, and he was forced to push her up against a wall so he could grind his throbbing erection against the cradle of her sex. Had to lick over the mark that finally meant forever.

Hells, had he even asked her? “Need a bed.”

Selia groaned. “I’m fine with this. Here is good.” Her hips rolled against his until he thought he’d go mad.

He shook his head. “Got to do this right. Needs to be good, perfect! Have to make you want to keep me.”

“Jaro—”

“Right. Yes. Couch will do. Just need you to know how special you are.” The rough, deep timbre of his voice had grown even lower and more raw. He hardly recognized it! “Need to make this right for you. This should be special. I want to show you I can be what you need.”

“What? Are you crazy?” She kissed his nose as he stared at her in wonder. “Jaro, you *are* what I need.”

“Even after I let you down today?”

“Exactly what I need. You always have been. How do you think I got through being captured today? I was thinking about you and how worried you would be, and how you’d be coming after me.”

He buried his nose in her hair. “I was out of my mind. I should never have left you for a second.”

Selia pushed her fingers into the back of his hair, scratching at his scalp in a way that made him sigh with pleasure. “That’s why I made myself bleed, because I knew you’d find me.”

“Always.”

“And when we’re together it’s always perfect. You make me feel ways I’ve never felt with anyone else before. It doesn’t matter if it’s rough or tender, fast or slow. It’s always what I need because you pay attention. You pay so much attention, it’s like I’m the whole focus of your world.”

He shuddered and nodded. “Yeah. It feels like that.” His arms tightened around her for one more moment. Her words lifted the final burden of worry off his back. He cupped the back of her neck. He tilted her head and claimed her mouth. His kiss was ruthless. It left no part of her mouth untasted. He thrust his tongue into her mouth, parted her lips to make way for him. He suckled on her lip, nipped with sharp teeth so carefully he never broke the skin. Each time she caught up with him and met his passion, he intensified the kiss. He pulled her close and squeezed her waist. Claws pressed into her skin, pricking, but never piercing.

He could be what she needed. He already was. Because she was exactly what he needed. Where was that damn couch!

No longer fearful of disappointing her, he turned her with one swift motion, and tossed her backward onto the sofa. Crawling over her, he pulled off her panties, pushed her thighs apart roughly and finally—fucking finally—lowered his hungry mouth to taste.

TWENTY THREE

JARO MOANED AGAINST Selia's damp flesh. In seconds, his purr was vibrating her folds as he lapped and sucked at her frantically.

“So good.” He drew his tongue through her center. “So good.”

She spread wider for him, arching her back. He sucked her clit into his mouth, grazing sharp teeth against her sensitive flesh and she cried out, “Yes. Keep going.”

Finally something in him had seemed to crack. Had he been holding back all this time, worried that he wasn't enough? After what he'd been through with Riya it was no wonder. Madness that anyone could have this perfect guy and ever let him think he was anything less than amazing. She silently promised herself never to let that happen.

So he needed to know what he did for her? That his touch, his mouth on her, lit her up from the inside? No problem.

“Just like that. Fuck! That feels so good.”

He growled, gripping her and working her frantically.

“You can be rough with me. Scratch me, bite me. I can take it.”

Jaro swore, breath coming in rapid pants. “Love that you're not fragile. Love that you can match me.” His thumb took over tormenting her clit when his mouth lifted so he could speak to her.

She nodded. “Yes! Yes!” Stars, her pussy felt so empty. So hollow and needy. “Jaro, please come fill me. Let me come with you inside me.”

On a long growl, Jaro crawled over her, cockhead pushing at her entrance. His eyes met hers. He waited only a beat. At her nod, he plunged inside, filling her completely.

It was brutal, her body tightened around him instinctively as he slid home. But goddess, it felt good. The look of wonder

on his face was everything. “Fuck! How is it so good? How did you get even sweeter? Even tighter?”

She squeezed her inner muscles as she wrapped her legs around him, holding him close. The deep, rough noise he made in his chest as he throbbed inside her nearly sent her over the edge. He rocked his hips, grinding his pelvis against her clit without retreating. She tightened again.

Still he didn't thrust.

She was already pulling at him, tugging at the fur on his shoulders, rolling her hips and digging her heels into his butt. “Jaro! If you don't move soon, I'm going to have to kill you!”

He laughed, bending his head. “Just give me a minute.”

When he seemed to have recovered, they breathed together through his first slow lunge in and out. The pressure built higher. He nipped at her mouth and then kissed her in long, slow movements.

For long minutes he held them both there at that pace. Goddess knew how he had the patience. He kissed her with deep, drugging kisses. She closed her eyes and gave herself up to it. He moved in her slowly, circling his hips as he sank to the root putting pressure over her clit.

Everything felt tight and poised on the edge. But it wasn't her orgasm. Not yet. It was the edge of something else.

Was this what it felt like the moment you knew you were in love?

Selia had been waiting to dive from that height for weeks, afraid of falling if there was no one to catch her. In that moment, with Jaro moving inside her, filling her, tasting her, looking at her like she was the most precious thing in the five galaxies, she realized she had been wrong about it. There was no one to catch her and it didn't matter. Because she was never going to stop falling. She would be free-falling forever, each time he looked at her that way, each time he touched her and saw her and cared for her.

Finally Jaro pulled away from the kiss. He was breathing hard, sweat beading his brow despite the leisurely pace of their

lovemaking. Selia couldn't resist running her hands down his muscled arms planted on either side of her, reveling in the silky feel of his fur and the power beneath.

Jaro pushed in deep. "I need you to know this means everything to me. You mean everything."

She nodded. "I know it."

"I love you, Selia."

She grinned. "I love you too, Jaro. Now stop holding back!"

He laughed, relief flickering across his expression. "Yeah?"

She nodded. "Yeah!"

He let loose. Finally he stopped worrying and just took from her like she wanted him to. He pounded into her in quick punishing thrusts until it shook the couch. Soon Selia was clinging to the armrest, shaken with each rough slap of flesh. With another partner she would have been worried about climaxing, worried he would come before she was finished and leave her hanging. Or she would have been thinking about whether it would be awkward to reach between them to rub her clit and try to come before he did.

Not with Jaro.

She didn't need to. If she didn't come, he wouldn't give up on her, so rather than worry, she spread herself to him, clung to the sofa and let him plunder her body until he was groaning at every pump of his hips. "Close. I'm close. I'm waiting for you. Please say you're ready."

She nodded.

"Barbs, angel. Yes?"

"Yes, I think so?" What would it feel like? Would it be everything he had waited for? What if he was disappointed?

"Seels! My barbs. Need. You. Sure." Every word was rasped through gritted teeth and punctuated with a thrust of his hips.

Goddess, she wanted to feel him come. She wanted to see the look of rapture on his face as he let go. “Yes!” Selia clenched hard around him, squeezing him tight with everything she had. “Yes, I’m sure. Come for me.”

She thought she was prepared as Jaro pushed deep inside her, buried his face in her neck, and sank his teeth into her skin. A pinch of his fangs. His cock throbbed inside her. Her pussy clenched tighter still. Nothing could have prepared her for the sharp swell of pleasure that took her breath and stuck it to the back of her throat.

His thrusting stopped. He moaned her name. Then he froze, buried inside her so deep it was almost painful.

She would have screamed, but that was impossible. Her scream was silent as her orgasm took hold of her and shook her muscles, tightening and loosening every one. She was unraveling, spilling out in hundreds of droplets like liquid in zero-G. Then she was forming back together around the place where their bodies were still joined.

His purr gone silent, Jaro lifted his head to look down at her, holding himself up on powerful arms. His tail thumped the mattress once and a slow smile spread over his face as a matching one spread on hers. Then his purr was back, louder and more rumbling than ever. She reached up, brushing a thumb over the stubble on his chin. “Yours. Really yours.”

Jaro huffed a laugh and leaned into her touch. “Really. And I’m yours.”

The best part about the barbs, she reflected, as they lay locked together after, was the way it forced her to stay in the moment with him. She wasn’t lying there wondering if he was uncomfortable, or sticky, or restless. He rolled to the side, pulling her with him so her leg rested over his hip. The movement sent a little tingle of pleasure through her and the stutter in his purr told her he felt it too. His furry tail curled over her legs and she rested her head against Jaro’s arm and sighed. “Have you thought about what happens next?”

Jaro’s fingers were already combing through her hair, working through the tangles. “A little.”

She chuckled against his fur. “Does that mean a lot, but you’re waiting to hear what I want?”

“Mmm. It might.”

“What if I’m waiting to hear what you want first?”

He sighed. “I think I’m asking too much of the universe already just to keep you. But if I have my way, I’d like to stay as close to Desi as I can. I’d like you to get to know him.”

She smiled. “I’d like that.” She was quiet for a while, petting the fur on his belly, listening to his gentle purr soften into a quiet rumble. “Would you like to stay on Ardun?”

“Would you? What about your job? Your family?”

She snorted. “My family can learn to make do without me for a while. And as for my job...” She brushed her fingers through the fur below his navel and he grunted. “Well, I have an idea, but you’ll probably say it’s crazy.”

“I doubt it.”

“Well, you know Zara is staying on Ardun as an advisor to Shahra Fareeda. And I know the Shahra was worried that she had so many guards refuse the vow. So I thought...well I thought maybe I’d offer to join. I mean, I’m trained. I can fight. And now that the guards aren’t part of her harem anymore...I dunno. Is it stupid?”

“No.”

“And you’d like that? We could stay together on Ardun and be close to Desi and, even if the shahra was traveling, we’d be traveling together. And I’d still be doing what I wanted to do all along when I signed up as a cop. I’d be protecting people, protecting peace.”

Jaro’s claws ran lightly over her back. “It’s perfect.”

TWENTY FOUR

JARO TOOK ONE LAST glance at his beautiful mate standing proudly beside him in the throne room. Selia was dressed in a long golden tunic with loose pants and practical black boots, her long hair braided into intricate patterns and woven with golden thread that set off her bronze skin and her dark eyes. She looked every inch the strong, fierce royal guard she was about to become.

Selia beamed up at him, her generous mouth stretched into a wide smile that lifted the beauty mark on her chin. She reached over and gave his hand a little squeeze.

The music began and he straightened, pushing back his shoulders to stand at attention. Shahra Fareeda and Soraya entered from the door at the rear. Fareeda looked as serene as ever, her short hair swept into her usual dramatic style and her elegant navy suit embroidered with flecks of silver. As she approached the throne, she inclined her head and gave Jaro and Selia the tiniest of smiles before she sat.

The music cut off and silence stretched around the circular room, heightening the anticipation.

“Good afternoon,” Fareeda began. “Thank you all for joining me in this historic ceremony today. I’m optimistic that today’s changes will only serve to strengthen the existing bond between Earth and Ardun and further unite two peoples who have only ever had one origin. It’s no secret that a couple of months ago, it looked as if we were poised on the brink of interstellar war. I’m pleased to say that today things couldn’t look more different. Today I’m swearing in the matriarchy’s first ever human guard, alongside her mate, who will officially leave the royal harem, stepping aside to give another male a chance at that illustrious position.

“You all know that Jaro and Selia have chosen to offer their service to me together, but you might not know that they are also global heroes whose recent mission is a major reason why we are not currently at war. Thanks to the bravery and commitment of these two people, an interstellar criminal was

apprehended and extradited to Earthspace, re-opening the channel of communication between Earth and Ardun. For these actions, and their commitment to the matriarchy, I'm awarding Selia and Jaro the Desert Star."

She stood, walking forward to take two tiny golden stars from a hovertray, pinning one first on Jaro's and then Selia's left breast. Fareeda only winked at him when he had to choke down a growl as she pinned on Selia's. His cheeks heated, but thankfully it had been quiet enough that the whole room probably hadn't heard. Selia's elbow in his ribs reminded him he was being ridiculous.

After they took their vows and Fareeda had made the rest of her speech, Jaro and Selia followed her to the reception hall, which buzzed with cams and bots hovering to and fro, serving food and filming the gathering. The Earth ambassador was back in Ashad for the first time in months. Humans and Ardun were gathered at Grevista Gardens to celebrate the reopening of interstellar borders.

The best part of being a guard was the natural requirement to stand back and observe. To take in everything—be a part of everything—without having to be the center of attention. It made Jaro a little uncomfortable to be attending the function as a guest of honor, rather than in an official capacity. But seeing Selia so excited, hugging and whispering with her friends Zara and Natlea, beaming at him from across the room whenever she got the chance, it made him incredibly proud. His mate leaned close to Natlea, shaking with laughter.

A familiar cool voice jolted him from his thoughts. "I can't help wondering if I should worry about what's being said over there."

Jaro looked around to see Sattar scowling over at the women, his long thick tail perfectly brushed, flicking the air behind him.

Jaro snorted. "Probably."

Sattar's icy blue stare turned on him for a moment, before his expression cracked into a half-smile. "I expect I deserve it, whatever it is."

Jaro's brows lifted. "You've changed."

"True. Then again, so have you."

He thought for a moment. Everything felt different, everything except him. Well, the outside part of him that the world saw. Inside he felt completely different. Full up instead of hollowed out. He shrugged. Maybe he hadn't been hiding the hurt as well as he thought he had. "I guess I have."

"You seem happy."

"Happy doesn't even begin to describe it." He didn't even bother to hold back the silly grin that spread across his face. "Never thought I'd be half so lucky."

Sattar gave him a slow nod. "Well, if anyone deserves it, it's you. You're a good male."

Jaro was still staring when Natlea and Selia approached. As Selia slid her arms around his waist and leaned her head against his chest, he fitted his arms around her. Sattar inclined his head. "Ladies. I hope you know that it doesn't matter what your friend says about me, you're still coming home with me, Natlea. Even if all of it is true. Which I'm sure it is."

Natlea laughed. "Actually I think you're winning Selia over to you. Isn't that right, Seels?"

Selia only shrugged. "I will say this for you, Sattar, you bring out the best in Nat. It's pretty hard to argue with that."

••••

Jaro might not have been nervous at the ceremony, but he was nervous as he waited, later that afternoon at the park for Riya and Desi. He gave Selia another bright, forced smile and tried to stop flicking his tail against the bench where they sat waiting in the shade. "He's going to love you. Don't worry."

Selia laughed. "Are you telling me or telling yourself?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. Both?"

"It's fine. He might not like me right away. That's okay. I think that's normal. I'm not going to give up on him, alright?"

He let out a long breath, sinking back against the back of the seat, loving the way his mate instantly tucked herself close and petted his chest. “Yeah. I know. It’s just...you two are my world, so if it doesn’t work...”

“It will work. We’ll make it work. Not every family looks the same, but they all have their issues to work through. We’ve got this, okay?”

He nodded. Just then, he spotted Desi’s mottled fur and bouncing gait across the park. Riya walked behind him, scanning the area until her eyes met his. She smiled and lifted her hand to wave. Selia gave him one more squeeze, then she disengaged to stand. Jaro followed. As soon as Desi spotted him, the kit launched himself into a run and jumped up. Jaro caught him up in a big bear hug. “Dad!”

“Hey buddy. I missed you.” He squeezed him close and pressed his nose against Desi’s messy curls for a moment, breathing him in. He let him go reluctantly when Desi started to squirm. He bounced on his little legs, rushed over to Selia and shoved a bunch of mangled flowers in her face. “I’m Desi. I got you these.”

Selia bent down to accept the flowers. “Thank you. These are beautiful.”

Riya approached, carrying Desi’s overnight bag, which Jaro took from her. “Hi, thanks for bringing him down.”

“Of course.”

Desi was still looking at Selia, his little ears pricked forward. “You look funny. Where’s your fur?”

Jaro slapped a hand over his face, but true to form, Selia only snorted with laughter. “I don’t have any.” She turned, showing him her back. “I don’t even have a tail. Look!”

“What?” Desi grinned at her. “No tail! Aren’t you sad?”

“I’ve never had a tail, so I guess I don’t know what I’m missing. What about Hesam, though? He doesn’t have a tail and he’s still a champion, just like your dad.”

“Oh yeah! I guess you can be a hero without a tail.”

Riya leaned close and whispered in an undertone. “Sorry. I tried to explain that your mate was human, but you know how he is.”

He shrugged, still watching Desi and Selia with half an eye. Desi was pointing at a stall selling ice creams at the far side of the park and loudly debating about his favorite flavor.

“You look good,” Riya said. “Better than you have in a long time. I’m really happy for you, Ja.”

Luckily, Desi turned to them with a mischievous smile and a flick of his bushy tail, saving Jaro the need to respond. Had it been that obvious how badly he had been coping before Selia? It hardly mattered now. Everything had changed.

“Mom, Dad, Selia says she’ll take me to get ice cream. Can I get an ice cream? And can we keep Selia? She’s the best.”

A laugh broke from him. No question whose son Desi was. He probably had been worried over nothing. Riya smiled. “Well, remember I told you you’re staying at Daddy’s place tonight?” She shot a wicked look at Jaro. “So if you eat too much ice cream and can’t get to sleep, that’s your dad’s problem.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“And on that note, I think it’s time for me to leave him with you.” She turned to Selia. “So nice to meet you, Selia. We’ll have to catch up properly some time.”

“Yeah, I’d like that.”

Riya kissed Desi and walked back to the metro with a final wave. Selia, Desi, and Jaro spent the afternoon at the park. They let Desi eat far too much ice cream and stay up past his bedtime playing Snapping Dragon. Later that night, as Jaro stood in the doorway of Desi’s room, leaning against the frame while Selia read “just one more” book, he smiled to himself.

Two months ago he’d been looking in the wrong places for something to fill the hole of loneliness in his life. He hadn’t let himself see that he’d already found the thing that fit there perfectly.

••••

Thank you for reading. [Sign up for my newsletter](#) for exclusive art, a free prequel novella and a bonus scene from Hesam. Read on for a sneak peek at Ikkad.

PREVIEW: IKKAD

ANYA DARTED BETWEEN two furry bodies on the crowded street, swearing when her shoulder was jostled roughly and she almost stumbled. There wasn't time to look behind and make sure she had lost him. She just had to hope.

If that insufferable prick thought she was just going to roll over and do what he told her, he had another think coming.

At the smell of steamed pork buns from a nearby food truck, her stomach rumbled angrily, reminding Anya that she hadn't been able to eat breakfast. In what civilized place did spicy savory porridge count as breakfast anyway? If the civil corrections office on this goddess-forsaken planet was going to insist on holding humans prisoner then they ought to provide proper human meals. Besides, it was well after siesta, the harsh afternoon sun pounding down on top of her dark hair, making sweat dampen the back of her neck.

She tripped over the paved walkway in her heels, the straps cutting into her feet as she ran. Her tight dress restricted her legs, making every short step more difficult than it needed to be. Last night when she'd decided on her outfit, she hadn't exactly been worried about how practical it would be for running away from a grumpy cat alien minder in order to try to find her friend who had been abducted from the middle of a crowd in the safest city in the five systems.

Funnily enough, that just hadn't been on her radar.

Anya turned a corner into a smaller street with fewer aliens, hurriedly looking around for somewhere to get out of sight. It was probably stupid. No doubt Ikkad would find her. The guy was the bane of her existence right now. He seemed determined to thwart her attempts to find Zara for fuck knew what reason other than his own perverse satisfaction.

The asshole had quite literally stood outside her cell all night glaring at her. Then to find out this morning that he could have gotten her out whenever he had chosen. Infuriating! And yet he had been unwilling to do anything

about the fact that some idiot CC officers somehow thought her asking a few questions was reason enough to arrest her.

This planet was fucked. These cat aliens were fucked. The sooner she and her friends were back on a spaceship to Earth, the better. The rest of their vacation be damned.

Then she saw it.

A tiny hole-in-the-wall restaurant selling fermented fish curry. The place stank even from the opposite side of the street. The smell was so potent that she had to fight down her gag reflex. But smelly was good in this case. Who knew what kind of abilities cat aliens had when it came to tracking by scent. Better to play it safe. She really needed to get to the embassy.

Taking a deep breath through her mouth, she pushed through the door from the street, finding herself in a cramped kitchen where a rusty-looking bot stirred two bowls of thick, gunky black liquid. She looked away quickly.

“Hey!” An Ardun cat alien came storming around the corner from another internal door, lashing her long black tail. “Who are you? What are you doing in here?”

Anya held her hand up to cover the spot behind her ear where her translator chip was inserted. “Huh? Sorry. My chip is broken. Is this a med center?”

The queen scowled, her thin nose wrinkling. “Does this look like a med center to you?”

Anya shrugged. “Sorry. Can’t understand you.”

The female pointed at the door she’d come in through. “You need to leave.”

Anya glanced quickly around the little shop. Apart from the door she had come in by and the door the Ardun queen had come out of, there was one more door. It could lead to a storage cupboard or another shop or fuck knew what. But it could also lead out to a back alley. She held her hands up, trying not to choke on noxious fumes as she took a breath. “Look, I’m not trying to cause a problem here. I just hurt my ankle and my chip’s not working and now I can’t find my way

back to the metro. I have to get to the embassy. Surely you heard about the human abductions last night. It's not safe in Ashad." She watched the other female anxiously, ready to move if she reached for her wrist-com.

Finally, the queen sighed. She pointed to a small hard chair in the corner. "Sit there. I will get a med bot." She spoke loudly and slowly as if speaking to a small child. Using exaggerated hand movements, she gestured for Anya to sit down. Anya had to fight back the urge to roll her eyes. As if speaking in that exaggerated way ever helped anyone. Still, at least that meant she bought Anya's story. And it won her some more time, too.

She went and sat in the chair, breathing shallowly through her mouth and making another surreptitious assessment of the third door, while the queen went to the opposite end of the room and opened a cupboard beneath a large metal sink. Yep. Definitely looked like another exit.

The queen turned, holding out a small bot which she activated with a press of a button. The thing hovered toward Anya and danced around her head, running a green scanning beam over her ear. It beeped once. "Translator chip detected. Fully operational."

The queen narrowed her eyes.

"Oh, what do you know? I guess the damn thing's working again." She slapped the side of her head. "Well. Thanks for your help, I guess." Darting out the third door while the queen was still scowling at her, Anya found herself in a narrow alley, full of waste chutes and dirty pots. A leuth, a native bird with a long curved black beak, delved into one pile of trash scattered on the stone pavers. She swatted at it with her hand as she ran past, but the bird only squawked angrily.

When she made the corner, Anya forced herself to slow down. There had been no one in the alley but the leuth, but in the larger street beyond there were shopfronts and Ardun walking to and fro. She would already draw enough attention being human out on these streets today. Not to mention she had no government appointed guide and she was still dressed

in last night's dress. No need to draw extra attention by running out into the busy area as if she had done something wrong.

Flicking her long black hair over one shoulder, she slowed her steps and strode out into the walkway keeping her head up and her shoulders back.

Not for the first time that morning, she reached for her wrist-com, only to remember it was missing. Because the CC officers who released her this morning apparently felt that she couldn't be trusted with her own possessions. So what had they done? Handed the damn thing to a male. For a planet which was supposed to be a matriarchy, there sure wasn't a lot of respect for foreign females. So now, that asshole Ikkad had her wrist-com, since had refused to give it to her, making some stupid claim about her location being traced and it putting her in danger.

Still, even without her com, it shouldn't be that hard to get to the embassy. She just had to find a hovercar and enter in the navigation. It was infuriating that she couldn't look up the nearest car docking point, or call one, or let her friends know she was safe, but those things could wait. She would be able to take care of everything once she got to the fucking embassy.

She glanced to her right, past two tall palm trees and an overarching walkway to where a blue sign indicated there was a hovercar bay. By the time she made it past the lingerie shop and the cafe on her right, it was painfully obvious there were no waiting hovercars.

Clamping her teeth together over a growl, she stomped toward the hovercar bay anyway. Her feet were aching, her legs were starting to cramp and she had no idea which direction to head even if she thought she could walk to the embassy, which she highly doubted. It was in a completely different quarter of the city, she knew that much. And Ashad was a massive sprawling megacity, stretching over thousands of square miles.

Sighing, she sat on the bench by the hovercar bay, trying to work out what to do next.

“You won’t get a hovercar today, love,” an older Ardu male passing by said to her with a grim smile. “I heard there’s a five hour wait to book one.”

Anya bit back the sarcastic comment that she longed to make and forced a smile. “Thanks. Could you tell me where the nearest metro station is, then?”

The male pointed down a street to their left. “A couple blocks that way.” He gestured to her feet, which she had stretched out in front of her. “Those shoes sure are pretty, but I can’t imagine how you walk around in them. If you ask me, you picked the wrong outfit today.”

“Lucky I didn’t ask you then isn’t it?” she snapped. Before he could respond, she hauled herself to her poor aching feet and stumbled in the direction he had pointed. She probably hadn’t needed to be rude. But if he’d kept his unwanted opinion to himself he wouldn’t have copped it. It didn’t help that she felt like she wanted to cut off her feet at the ankle. She didn’t need some idiot pointing it out to her.

Anya got partway down the steps to the metro station when she spotted the pair of CC officers standing at the bottom. Their calculating gazes swept over all the Ardu coming and going. The one on the right, a tall dark haired female, palmed the handle of the shock stick holstered at her waist, her long striped tail swishing slowly behind her. The male on the left leaned nonchalantly against the wall, his arms folded across his chest. Though he looked relaxed, his bright green eyes scanned the area and his gray pointed ears twitched and tilted to allow him to better hear what was going on around him.

It was too late to turn back, though. The female’s gaze had already locked on her. Neither of the officers made any move, so Anya lifted her chin and walked down the remaining steps as boldly as she could.

They’re probably just here to keep the peace after last night’s riots. Just an extra security measure. They’re not looking for humans out without their—

“Where’s your guide, human?” The green-eyed male stepped forward as Anya reached the bottom step.

Fuck.

“Funny story.” She tossed her hair back over her shoulder and tried a casual smile. “I got kinda caught up in all the fuss outside the stadium last night and now I can’t find my guide. I was just going to head back to my—”

The female frowned, cutting her off. “You need to be escorted by a government guide unless you’re an embassy staff member. Are you an embassy staff member?”

“Well, no, but my friend—”

“Hold out your ID, please.”

“Look,” she tried a different approach. “I just need to get to the embassy. I’m really not trying to snoop or cause any trouble. So if you don’t mind, I’ll just be on my way.” She turned, hoping against hope they wouldn’t follow her back up the stairs. She didn’t get far. Her first step up was blocked as she slammed face first into a furry, muscled chest and strong hands closed around her upper arms, holding her still.

“There you are.” The low, dangerous tone of the voice was familiar. Anya looked up to see the black and white ears and stern features of Ikkad, the very Ardun she had been running from all morning.

••••

[Pre-order Ikkad now](#)

Keep in touch! [Get my newsletter](#) and keep in touch about all my upcoming releases, sales and special offers.

Or find me here:

<http://linktr.ee/AmiWright>

Want more Ardun? You can find my cat-alien heroes in lots of my published books while you’re waiting for Malik. I even have one book featuring an Ardun queen as the heroine (see below). Books featuring Ardun heroes are marked with *

MORE BY AMI WRIGHT

THE LOST ROMANS:

[Sampson's Savior](#) - prequel

[Rescued by the Interstellar Agent](#) - Minnie and Felix

[Trained by the Interstellar Renegade](#) - Kesha+ and Titus

[Releasing the Interstellar Captive](#) - Jynna and Milo

[Conning the Interstellar Conman](#) - Leshi and Silas*

[Stolen by the Interstellar Android](#) - Lupus and Rory

[Married to the Interstellar Colonist](#) - Series final

Forbidden Mates of the Ardun Royal Guard:

[Farrokh*](#) - prequel, [free when you get my newsletter](#)

[Amir*](#)

[Hesam*](#)

[Malik*](#)

Sattar*

Jaro*

[Ikkad*](#)

[Alien Billionaires](#)

Alien Billionaire's Assistant

Alien Billionaire's Fake Girlfriend