



ALIEN OARCEA

A FAKE MARRIAGE ROMANCE

CALISTA SKYE

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Epilogue

- SELMA -

“Oh no. Don’t do this. Don’t... oh *damn* it.”

The engine just dies, and my delivery truck shakes to a halt at the edge of the road. Taylor Swift sings one more word of *Maroon* and then abruptly goes quiet. The dashboard is dark, and the headlights have stopped working. Around me the night is pitch black.

“Come *onnn...*” I frantically try to start the engine, but when I turn the key nothing happens at all. Except that my anxiety rises three notches.

I grab my phone, but it’s dead and stays dark whatever I do. I brace myself for a hard zap from the implant in my arm, punishment for letting my phone run out of charge. But nothing happens. And I made sure to charge it fully this morning.

That can only mean...

“Shit,” I yelp as the truck is suddenly enveloped in a bright, blindingly white light. It’s all over the place, making the dark woods look as if they’re coated in snow. It must come from straight above. And I don’t think it’s a helicopter.

I raise my hand to shield my eyes from the searing glare, which lasts for only another second before it's turned off. The darkness and silence is total, except for the dancing shadows in front of my eyes.

With a deafening screech the driver's side door is ripped off its hinges. I scream and throw myself towards the passenger side, but I'm still strapped in and I don't get far.

Struggling to release the seat belt, the next thing I know I'm grabbed under my shoulders and dragged out as if the seat belt wasn't even there. Which it suddenly isn't, one of my brain cells notices.

The light comes on again, this time from straight ahead. I'm on my hands and knees on the asphalt, still warm even hours after sunset.

"Ah," a deep voice says. "That one could work. Is it female?" It's Interspeech, the alien language most extraterrestrials seem to be fluent in.

"That remains to be seen," another voice says, squeaky and thin. "I would need to remove its casing and check. But my preliminary analysis would be that it is indeed a female of the species. A young one, too."

"The casing, Skix? Her clothes, you mean. No, I don't think that's necessary. With a shape like that, she plainly is a female."

Shielding my eyes with one hand I see two shapes, sharply outlined by the harsh light behind them. One is large, the other much smaller with a big, round head. Both have two legs and not much more than two arms, but it's too soon to tell.

"What do you want from me?" I manage, my heartbeat hammering in my ears. While I have imagined this moment a

good few times, it's nothing like what I expected.

All Earth girls know what happens when someone's being harvested by the Bululg aliens that own Earth now — your phone goes crazy, commanding you to stay still, a member of the Bululg's servant species comes and puts you in a net, and then you're taken away to their space station to be auctioned off. Many of us have seen it happen to others.

But that's not what's happening here. These two are probably not Bululg. That means they're poachers — aliens that land on Earth and steal humans for their own purposes, outside of the Bululg system. Of course that's completely unregulated and anything can happen to a girl that gets taken that way.

"It speaks," the thin voice says. "Interesting. Could be useful. Well, shall we take it aboard? Or isn't this one good enough, either?"

The large alien comes closer, towering over me and completely blocking the light. He bends down and peers at me with eyes so yellow they pierce me harder than the white light. I vaguely spot a sleek, black body with a bright white, sword-shaped center that starts at his mouth and then dives all the way down his front until it vanishes into his pants

"Would you like to go on a nice trip to space, little female?" His mouth is unnaturally wide and his hundreds of teeth are triangular and nightmarishly sharp.

"Get the *hell* away from me," I rasp, scrambling to my feet and turning to run, sprinting past the truck and sliding down into the ditch.

"I think that was a negative," the thin voice says behind me. "Indeed its behavior right now indicates it is putting distance between itself and us."

“What would I ever do without you, Skix?” comes the dry reply.

There are heavy footsteps behind me as I fight to keep my balance in the slimy bank of the deep ditch, and then there’s a strong arm around my chest. I’m lifted off my feet again and easily brought back to the road.

I panic. Being taken by aliens is bad enough, but with the Bululg at least you can be reasonably sure you won’t be sold straight to a research lab or a zoo or even worse things. Poachers like these guys are much worse — they are usually criminals and extremely bad news. And that big one radiates pure lethality.

“Nooo!” I go crazy with writhing and kicking and hissing, trying to bite the alien holding me. But he simply carries me held out in front of him, calmly walking towards the lights. That’s their spaceship, but I can’t see any details, except that the lights come from inside an arched doorway.

I only experience a jumble of sensory input. Hard alien boots clanging on a metal grating, a sharp hiss from behind, the smell of mud and warm asphalt and wet ditches suddenly gone, blinding light and the cool air of a spaceship, otherworldly smells and undulating patterns all over the place.

“Skix, if you’d be so kind?” rumbles the giant holding me.

The small alien comes towards me as I’m lowered to the ground. He’s bright green, with huge black eyes and a large, domed skull. Delicate little antennas curve up from his face. Where his nostrils should be he has two smaller eyes, green and intense. He’s holding an item that shines like silver in the light.

“No,” I plead, but then cold metal touches my hand and the world pulls away from me like I’m falling down a well.

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I come to, wishing I hadn’t. The serious trouble I’m in fills my mind right away, and I twitch hard in a panicked attempt to get up. But I’m sitting in a chair and I’m securely strapped in.

My breath is going fast as I yank at my arms and legs, finding them all free to move. But wide straps go across my chest and hips, holding me in the chair. Acid tears burn at the corners of my eyes, and it gets hard to breathe. This is worse than I thought it would be.

No, I can’t give up yet. This could be fine. It *could* be. I have to approach this calmly.

It doesn’t work. Panic overwhelms me, and I start kicking and writhing wildly in the chair, tugging at the straps but finding them impossible to move.

Finally I lean back. It’s a bare room, really big. It’s circular, and the walls shine like polished, black marble. The walls are incredibly tall and vanish out of sight above me, making me feel like I’m at the bottom of a giant stone barrel.

“Are you awake?” comes the thin voice from the small alien I remember from before. He waddles into view, short and stubby and green. A real little green man, exactly the way humans thought aliens would look like about eighty years ago.

I scrape my feet at the floor in a futile attempt to get away. “Where am I? Who are you?” I try to ask. But my mouth is so dry it’s barely intelligible.

“Hmm,” says the alien. “I thought you could speak better than that. I didn’t catch the first part. But the second part I think I understood. You were asking who I am?”

“Yeth,” I manage, trying to wet my lips.

“Very good. I am Skix. I could tell you more, but judging from the state of your backwards planet, anything I add to this would not make much sense to you.”

He has a funny way of talking, where the only thing that moves is his tiny mouth. I never before noticed how much of the face moves when a human speaks, so the absence of those movements makes Skix look like a puppet or some kind of animated character. There’s no tongue that I can see and barely any lips.

None of his four eyes give away any emotion, but I can see my own reflection in the two big ones with perfect clarity. Not looking too bad, and I notice I’m still wearing my cap. For some weird reason, the fact that I’m still in uniform makes me feel just a tiny bit better.

“Why did you... take me?” I ask.

Skix stands still like a statue. “Again, nothing I can say to that would be meaningful. The reasons are very good indeed, but you’ll have to take my word for it. For now, anyway. Possibly forever.”

“What are you going to do to me?”

Skix lifts one three-fingered hand and taps the side of his head. “I can see we’re going to have a little bit of a problem. You keep asking questions that I could easily answer, but which

only give rise to endless follow-up questions that I'm not paid well enough to deal with. Wait here." He waddles off, his round feet making strange noises. As far as I can tell, he's not wearing any clothes, but he also has nothing to hide. Just smooth, green skin, looking like stretched plastic.

I strain against the straps once more, but there's no give in them. Examining my hand where Skix touched me with the metal device, I notice a small, red dot at the base of my thumb. They must have put me in this chair while unconscious, but I don't think I was out for that long.

There's a hiss behind me, as from compressed air. Someone's entered the room, and I think I know who it is.

He saunters into view, easily eight feet tall and powerfully built. His torso is bare, but thankfully he's wearing pants. They're military-looking, with a blueish sheen to them. Around his waist there's a belt with several pouches attached.

My impression from before was right — he's basically pitch black, but he has big, white parts in a symmetrical pattern. His legs are long, and he has some seriously powerful arms, but apart from that he could have come straight from the set of *Free Willy*. He looks so much like a killer whale that he must be cosplaying as one. The little fin that stands up from the top of his head seems like overkill, but cosplayers aren't usually known for their subtlety.

His face is not whale-like, though. It's plainly not human, but there's enough recognizable features that he doesn't look too outlandish. There's even a nose, which is a dead giveaway for him not being a real whale. They usually have blowholes on their backs, if I remember correctly.

But oh, dear God. That mouth. It's the most killer whale-like thing about him, overly wide and curved upwards in a deadly

smirk. White teeth glitter between his lips, triangular and sharp.

“The female is awake,” he rumbles, yellow eyes running up and down me.

I swallow. He may not be an actual killer whale, but his predatory nature can't be hidden. And those teeth look completely real. When he speaks, they sparkle like little frost-covered mountains in the harsh light. Either his costume cost a fortune, or what I'm seeing here is actually him.

“Let me go,” I demand in a thin, weak voice. “You have no right to keep me here.”

He doesn't reply, just walks a slow circuit around me, like a panther evaluating prey.

I breathe in short gasps, expecting his teeth to rip into me at any moment.

He has a giant fin on his back, I notice. An orca dorsal fin, curved and sharp, in addition to the one on top of his head. I even think I can see it move. Is this guy for real?

“I think she could be what we were looking for, Skix. Finally.”

“Not my fault you're hard to please, boss,” the green alien says, entering the room. “All the other ones I showed you were similar to this one.”

“Similar? Six of them were clearly males. And the females were not like this one. Notice the pleasing roundness, the smoothness of the skin, the small hands. And it speaks, too.”

I half expect him to start prodding me and checking out my teeth as if I were a horse being sold at a county fair.

“Let me go,” I repeat, not quite keeping my voice steady. “This is illegal for you to do.”

“I like the voice,” killer whale dude says. “So smooth and melodic. It should travel well.”

“The casing is very elegant,” Skix says. “All in the same color, with a covering for the head. The clothing, I mean. And notice the symbol at the head piece! It matches the one further down. Which in turn matches the one on the side of its vehicle. It must be of great importance. Clearly this specimen must come from a ruling class of some kind.”

I look down myself. My delivery company uniform is many things. Practical, brown, easily recognized. ‘Ruling class’ is not the first concept that springs to mind.

The orca chuckles coldly. “For a species that doesn’t wear clothing, you have strong opinions about fashion. Elegant? No, we should find something else for her to wear at some point. Feed her, Skix. Keep her in good shape for the meeting. Oh, and check if she can walk still. We saw her run, but we should make sure.”

He turns to walk away.

“Hey!” I yell, needing answers. “What are you going to do with me?”

He turns back. “You will help us in our dealings with certain other parties. Don’t worry, nothing else is expected of you. Just obedience and silence. Before I go: do you have a name? Do you understand the concept of names?”

“My name is Selma,” I tell him, straining against the straps. “I demand that you let me go. Put me back where you took me!”

“Selma,” he says thoughtfully and moves in close. “Not a name that would travel far in the ocean. Need help with that?” He extends one black and white finger.

I yelp and lean away, thinking he’s going to poke me.

species is. Nobody remembers a thing. Ever. We're not very smart."

"I don't think any of that is true," Skix says. "She just wants more details. She asked me the same things before. Notice how good her Interspeech is. She remembers fine. It is appropriate to say 'she', yes? For a female? You know I struggle with gender things."

The killer whale bends down and puts his face close to mine. I stumble backwards, but he reaches out and grabs my upper arm.

"Don't be dishonest to me, little alien," he snarls. "I'm not as nice as I seem. Do you want me to prove it?"

- CALADIN -

“No,” Selma squeaks, her eyes big and scared.

Her arm is round and thin in my hand, not very muscular, but firm. Her scent is all the more powerful — in my mind’s eye I see colorful flowers and ancient forests and fresh fruit, with a hint of spicy brine. And something more, something that’s extremely female and sweet. Something that takes me by surprise and makes me so dizzy that I have to keep my grip on her arm to make sure my knees don’t buckle. Oh, what would her skin taste like if I licked her face right now?

“Then tell me the truth only,” I instruct, keeping my grip on her. “Skix, we’ll take off now. Feed her and give her anything she needs. Take her to her cabin, too.” I focus on the female again, pulling her close. “You are mine now. Don’t forget that.”

Her eyes widen, and there’s a sharp intake of air. Most sentients tend to react like that to my snarls.

I let go of her and march out without reacting to Selma’s continuing protests. It annoys me to be questioned by a little female like that. She should simply nod and say ‘yes, sir’. But I can’t help appreciating that she’s not cowering, despite her

obvious fear of me. It must have been a shock to be abducted like that, but she's dealing with it better than I would have expected. Of course she's the first abduction I've ever done, and it is possible that endless questions are a normal part of them. I will never know; this is not going to become a habit.

I need to get away from her. Being that close to the female alien made me lose focus. She attracts my eyes and makes strange things happen in my crotch. The short pants she was wearing revealed her knees and the lower part of her thighs, showing a round firmness I would love to explore.

Beach, I was never expecting to feel this way about the Earth female! But now I'm starting to realize why they're the most prestigious possession in space, in great demand. She must have partial aquatic roots, with skin that smooth. But there is also fur, long on her head and with a light sprinkling of down on her forearms. So otherworldly, and yet so alluring.

I sit down in the specially-modified pilot's seat, making sure my fin slides into its slot and doesn't get caught between the chair and my back. Then I take off, activating the stealth machines that should keep the ship half invisible to the Bululg guard ships until we can get away from this planet. If it doesn't work, and if we can't outrun the defenders, we have to fight our way out. That could mean Bululg casualties and a less pleasant negotiation atmosphere at the meeting.

To my relief, lightening the ship before we came here worked very well.

Two Bululg guard ships discover us, but I easily accelerate away from them and set course for a planet further in towards the system's sun. We can stay in orbit there until the meeting.

Skix comes into the cockpit. "The female is in her cabin. She asked if you're always this grumpy. I told her that what she

saw was you in an unusually cheerful mood. Are we clear?”

I engage the autopilot. “We outran the guards easily. Emptying my pool made our ship much lighter.”

“Did it? Really? I wonder whose idea *that* was.”

I stand up and stretch. “Some green guy, I think.”

“Some green guy,” Skix agrees. “And there are so many green guys aboard. No, wait. There’s only me.”

“So there is. Then it must have been your idea.”

“And it worked perfectly. Seems like some kind of reward is in order.”

“A reward?” I scoff, checking the instruments and making sure the Bululg guards have given up the pursuit. “For emptying out my pool, so now I can’t even take a bath?”

“It worked,” Skix says. “This is a very fast ship now. Imagine if you had come to the meeting fresh from a battle with their guard ships! *That* would have been awkward.”

“It will still be awkward,” I tell him, just to keep the argument going. It might take my mind off the female. “You know what I’m like if I can’t relax with a long soak before a negotiation.”

“Oh, I can never tell the difference. You’re always cranky.”

“All right,” I give in. It isn’t working — I keep thinking of her.

“Put it on the tab. Did she really ask if I’m always grumpy?”

“Yes! Did you think it’s not totally obvious? Anyway, I think she has potential beyond being only arm candy. And you know you need a secretary.”

I give him a sharp look. “A secretary? Then what would I need *you* for?”

Skix waddles to his own seat and climbs into it. “That’s exactly it. You think I’m a secretary, but I am in fact a highly skilled legal advisor. That’s what it says on the contract. And I think it’s time you get someone who can do the easy work. The copying, the communicating, the taking of notes, the taking of minutes, remembering appointments, keeping track of projects, dealing with your other employees so you don’t have to. Abducting females, stunning them, doing light surgery on them. I’ve done all that for you, but it’s not really my job.”

“You know what the plan was,” I growl. “Get this female and use her for one purpose, then release of her in a suitable manner. Now you’re proposing that we keep her and hire her. She’s a random alien, Skix. We don’t even know if she can read.”

“Then maybe we should find out? I like the way she looks and the fact that she didn’t curl up in horror at the sight of you. Not a lot of females her size would stand up to that. They usually throw themselves at your mercy and hope that you’ll ravish them. And I’m frankly sick and tired of being a glorified receptionist. I went to the College of Binitini! I graduated from the Mitvi Academy of Most Excellent Knowledge of All Kinds! I lectured at Grini Elementary! I could legally advise kings, Caladin! Queens! Tycoons! And now I’m running around the galaxy arranging your appointments. Yes, yes. You do ask for my legal advice on occasion. And very well, you are a tycoon yourself. But do you get the point?”

I adjust the autopilot to take us into a tight orbit around the planet. “You want to quit?”

“No. I don’t want that. I just want to share the burden with someone.”

“Do you also want to share your salary?”

The small green Tig alien leans back and puts his small, three-toed feet on the side of a console, and the suckers under his feet attach to the smooth surface. “Of course not. You pay me very well, Caladin. And I expect that to continue.”

He’s not pushing me hard on this, and he doesn’t have to. He knows I won’t let him leave my service. He’s far too valuable, and he knows too much. In the wrong hands, he could do a lot of damage. And the wrong hands are always reaching out to seize him.

“Fine,” I tell him. “We’ll see how smart she is. And if she can string a sentence together that’s not ‘what are you going to do to me’, then perhaps we can find some simple tasks for her.”

“That’s all I ask,” Skix says with satisfaction. “Now you should go and check on her. She can’t hurt herself too badly in that cabin, but perhaps she doesn’t like the food I gave her.”

“I sometimes wonder who’s in charge here,” I tell him mildly. “You or me.”

His head snaps around, alarmed. He knows that tone. “Oh, it’s *you*, Caladin. Not me. You’re in charge. Of course I can check on her myself.” His feet detach from the console with loud *shvupp* noises.

“No, no,” I tell him. “I’ll go. You keep an eye on the autopilot and the sensors. Don’t want to be surprised by a stray Bululg guard ship.”

I leave the control room, fully aware that the only reason I didn’t send Skix is that I’m curious about the female and I want to see her again. That roundness... is it real, or is she wearing some kind of padding under that strange outfit?

The ship is large, and the cabins are only used when I have employees onboard. Which I do as rarely as possible — I enjoy my solitude, if being stuck with Skix at all times can be called that.

I open the door to Selma's cabin and walk in.

The only thing I see of her is her behind, pointed towards me and encased in the brown fabric of her short pants. *Enticingly* encased, straining the fabric a great deal. She appears to be examining the opposite wall.

“So round,” I marvel out loud.

Selma yelps and bounces to her feet. “*Outta fuk yufink yuduin?!?*”

“It's no use,” I tell her. “There's no way out of here except the door. Security regulations. You can search as much as you want, of course. It's a waste of time. Especially since the door *is* open.”

She glares at me and somehow makes it look adorable. “It wasn't open! He said I'd be stuck here!”

“Skix said that? I think he must have meant something else. He was probably muttering about himself. The door needs to be worked in a certain way. See this lever? You push it in. And then...”

The door opens silently.

“Oh,” Selma says. “But even so.”

I close the door again. “Don't worry, you can leave the cabin, but you won't be able to enter any place that isn't safe. Now then. Can you read? Write?”

The air in the cabin smells of her, and the old dizziness is returning. I know I'm staring, but I have no choice. Her chest

and hips attract my eyes like strong magnets attract iron filings. The swelling in my crotch increases fast.

“Yes, I can read. I mean, *real* letters. Not weird alien scribblings.”

Skix was right — she speaks remarkably well, probably better than me. Interspeech is not a native language to anyone, as far as I know. We all have to learn it, and she may have a gift for it.

“If I have one fin and you have one, how many do we have in total?”

“Fin?” she asks, crossing her arms over her chest and depriving me of some of the view. “I don’t have *any* fins! Can’t you see that?”

“Answer the question. Pretend you have one. How many do we have?”

“If you have a fin, and I have one, in this silly game of yours, then we have two. One each.”

“Yes! Well done.” I rummage through my pockets. “Ah yes. Another one. I have six of these small power packs. I give two of them to you. Here, take them.”

She doesn’t move, so I grab her hand and put two power packs in it, then curl her fingers around them. “Now how many do I have?” I show her my open palm.

“Four. Are you checking to see if I know basic math?”

“Perhaps. *Do* you know it?”

“Yes! Everyone knows this simple stuff. And again, I demand to be set back where you found me. I do not consent to any of this.”

She's remarkably tenacious.

"If you have a triangle with one right angle, how do you calculate the length of the sides?"

Selma shakes her head. "This is ridiculous. You stop my truck, cut my seatbelt, drag me out on the road, and then knock me out to abduct me in a spaceship. And now you're asking me questions about geometry. Are you crazy? Buy a *fuking* school book and put me back where you found me!"

I tap my lips. "So you don't know that. Well, it might not be important. We have machines to do those calculations."

"I know it," she protests. "You just take the square— no. Actually, I don't know that one. I don't know anything about math, really. Except that one plus one equals three. That's all I know. Really. I'm useless. You should put me back. I'll only eat your food and annoy you."

"The food Skix gave you is still on the table, untouched," I point out. "So we know that's not true. But the annoying part may be right. I wouldn't recommend it, though. I don't so much get annoyed as furious. Anyway, since you're not eating, I can show you your duties." I take a step over, grab her wrist, and pull her along out of the cabin.

She struggles and strains against me. "Stop it! Where are you taking me?"

"You'll see."

I drag her to the main transport tube and push her inside. She's sucked away faster than the eye can see, and then it's my turn.

A split second later I step onto the floor in my office. Selma is in a heap at my feet, not yet mastering the art of being spat out of the tube.

“Ohmigahahaad,” she mewls.

I bend down and lift her to her feet. “The trick is to close your eyes and imagine that you’re taking a normal step on a flat floor. You’ll get the hang of it. Sit down.” I lift her again and set her down in the chair opposite mine. Then I walk around my desk and take a seat in a chair that was made by my own people, so that the fin slides right in without any effort.

“As my secretary, you’ll be expected to do anything I tell you. I won’t give you tasks that are too challenging for your brain, but some writing and reading will be necessary. You’ll keep my calendar— yes, what is it?”

Selma is sitting strangely in the chair, with her feet up, hugging her knees. “There’s... the floor...”

I peer down through the diamond floor into the now empty pool under us. “It’s just a tank. Regrettably empty. I enjoy swimming in it when there’s water. But we had to dump it to get away from your planet.”

She looks anxiously down. “*Is* there a floor? I can’t see it.”

I sigh, get up, and walk over to her, stomping my foot on the transparent surface. “As solid as anything. It was remarkably costly to get it this clear and flawless, but worth it. The entry point is over there.” I point to the edge of the office, where there’s a me-shaped hole on the floor, ringed with yellow so I can easily find it and dive through it into the tank.

I return to my chair. “Now, there may be other things I will ask of you, but Skix will instruct you further. Your first task is to come with us to a business meeting. You will not need to say anything, just to be there. That’s tomorrow. You can choose if you’ll wear those garments or if Skix should find other clothing for you. I recommend against it — he uses no clothes

himself and is not the best judge of cuts and shapes. Oh, and your salary is seventy spong per week. Starting the moment you entered this room.”

“Salary,” Selma repeats, her face contorting in what has to be an adorable frown. “You’re... you’re going to *pay* me?”

“I think you’ll find that’s common with secretaries. It’s a job, you see. A *profession*. So you get paid. Oh... are there jobs on your planet? Do you know what that is?”

She looks at me emptily. “Jobs? Yes, of course— I mean, no. Never heard of it. Is it some kind of rock?”

- SELMA -

Caladin frowns. “No. It’s not a rock. It is a function that you fill, certain things you do, and then you get paid. Seventy spong per week, as I said. And this, I think, is the time to recall that you’re not supposed to lie to me. I suspect what you’re wearing right now is not a fashion statement, but a uniform that means you have a job on Earth. Had, rather. Well, now you have a job for me, or more specifically, for Oumia Corporation. Of which I am the manager and part owner. Yes?”

“No,” I tell him. “I don’t want to be your secretary. Or anyone’s secretary. Even if you paid me a *hundred* spunk a week.”

“Spong,” he corrects me. “It’s a respected currency from the planet of Vup. Accepted many places in the galaxy. Very well, a hundred spong it is. It’s a strange and uneven amount, though. I mean, why a hundred, exactly? But for that kind of pay, I expect extraordinary performance from you.”

I cross my arms on my chest, partly because he keeps staring at it. “How about you expect no performance from me at all?”

I know it may not be smart to provoke this guy, but I'm feeling a strong urge to obey and to accept what he says. There's something commanding about him, something strong and dangerous that I don't want to give in to, because who knows where it would lead. I have no idea what he expects from a secretary. For all I know, that could be what they call strippers up here in space.

And I have to keep my anger ready and flowing to be able to resist and not just go with the flow. I should be angry. He did abduct me. But offering me a job after that feels really weird. Granted, it's better than many of the things he *could* have done. It kind of takes the edge off the whole abduction thing. He's making it hard to hate him, but I have to try.

Then there's the other thing. He's actually really attractive. That killer whale look is not cosplaying at all — it's really him. He even has to have a special chair so his dorsal fin can fit. He must come from a species that's closely related to the killer whales on Earth, but not so related that he has a tailfin. He's more humanoid than whale, but orcas are attractive creatures, and this guy looks like he got all the best bits. He has muscles like a bodybuilder, he moves like a big cat, and he has a burning look in his eyes that I can't help but wonder about — do they look like that always?

And of course there's a bulge in his pants. A big, twitching bulge that seems to be in some kind of constant swelling. A part of me would love to see what that really is.

His presence, though. It's like being in a room with a real killer whale. I can't look away.

"No," Caladin says calmly, "I do expect you to do your best. I'm starting to wonder if you think I'm not serious about that.

Shall I perhaps demonstrate exactly how serious I am?" He gets to his feet, eyes flashing and teeth glinting.

"No, no!" I hurry to say when I see the look in his eyes.

The way he can change from smooth and civilized to a deadly predator in the blink of an eye is incredibly unsettling.

"I believe you! And I'll do my best. I will." I hug my knees closer to my chest.

"Good," he rumbles and sits back down. "Now, Selma the secretary. The Bululg own your planet. Do you understand the Bululg language?"

It crosses my mind that while this is weird, it's probably the best deal any abducted Earth girl has ever gotten. The others are all slaves, bought and sold at will. Here, it seems like I may have a good job for a very interesting guy. And that could suit my plans really well.

"Yes," I admit. "I understand it. The Bululg don't want us to learn it, but there are secret classes. Earth linguists have figured it out. I took those classes, and I can understand the Bululg language. And speak it, as well as anyone who's not an actual Bululg can ever hope to. They have strange voices."

"Excellent!" Caladin says, managing to convey satisfaction without a trace of a smile on his face. "That will come in handy tomorrow. The translator devices work well most of the time, but they sometimes struggle with the Bululg language."

He speaks like a CEO, smoothly and calmly. But most CEOs would wear some kind of business suit. He's bare from the waist up, possibly because any garment that would cover his mountains of muscle and that enormous fin would take several rolls of fabric. And because it would just look weird anyway. He has no reason to hide his real nature.

It's a really nice office, I suddenly notice. The ceiling is a transparent dome that shows a starry sky above, and the walls are some kind of black stone with veins of gold. It looks expensive, like something you'd find in a palace. There are glass shelves all along the walls, as well as display cases with weird artifacts inside.

The glass floor gave me a shock when I was suddenly thrown out onto it and I thought it wasn't there at all. I was sure I was going to fall to my death in the empty tank below. I still dread walking on it with the bottom of the tank a hundred feet below. It will be like walking on thin air, and dealing with great heights was never my strength. Way down there I think is where I woke up, strapped to the chair.

I point up at the stars. "Where are we now?"

Caladin doesn't even glance up. "We're approaching one of the inner planets of your solar system. We have to pass the time until the meeting, and I want to be out of sight."

"What kind of business do you do?"

He slowly stands up and walks over to a display case. Taking out an item, he holds it up. "This is a musical instrument from a civilization that died out a thousand years ago. It's the only one left, and collectors of such things would pay tens of thousands of spong for it. Not to play it, you understand. Just to own it. Because it's unique. Nothing like it will ever be made again. Its creator is long dead."

He puts it back and takes out another object, metallic and intricate. "This is probably a kitchen implement of some kind. Nobody knows, because the world it came from was lost to a supernova. Again, collectors will pay lots of money to acquire something like this. It was made, you see. It's not just a rare rock or an interesting plant. Someone *made* it, someone with

thoughts and abilities and a complex mind. Someone who's long gone, whose entire species is long gone. To some, that's worth a lot."

"You sell those things?"

"I buy and sell them. And some I keep. The very best ones. The unique and especially ancient ones."

"You're a picker."

"What?"

"A picker," I repeat. "We have those on Earth. They make shows about them. They go to places where they might find rare items, then buy the ones they like and sell them on."

"It's only a small part of my business," Caladin says, carefully turning an item over in his giant hands. "But it's the one I enjoy the most."

"Things made by people who are long dead and so no threat to you."

His eyes flash yellow. "What was that, little female?"

"Oh, nothing. I will say strange things sometimes. It's a hazard you may have to live with. So you're here to pick out items on Earth that you want to sell?"

He saunters back to his chair and sits down, elegantly threading his back fin into it. "Mostly I'm here to buy things in bulk. Plastics in particular. The plastics of Earth are of fine quality, and we have many buyers for them."

"You'll buy from the Bululg," I state with revulsion. "Those filthy slave traders."

"I am aware of how the Bululg make their money," he says coldly. "Dealing with them is not my favorite thing in the

world, but sometimes things like that are necessary.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t talk as if you’re any better than them,” I suggest, feeling the weight of thousands of abducted Earth girls on my shoulders. “You abducted *me*.”

“And then I hired you to do a job that many would find prestigious,” Caladin points out. “I’ve heard of worse ways to recruit staff. You’re certainly not a *slave*.”

“Okay, then take me back. Put me back where you found me.”

The room is quiet for several seconds while Caladin gives me a thoughtful look, probably deciding how many pieces to rip me into.

“Very well.”

I didn’t expect that. “Huh?”

He gets to his feet. “I will put you back on Earth, right next to your vehicle. It should be fully functional. You can then continue your existence on that prison planet, always in danger of being harvested by either the Bululg or anyone else who comes along. You can watch your home planet being slowly taken apart and sold as the population dwindles. Soon there will be a shortage of food of all kinds, like we see on other harvested planets. There will be widespread starvation and probably diseases. Oh, and you should be aware that the Bululg almost certainly know that you’re no longer on the planet, because we did remove a tracking device from your arm. They will be interested in where you’ve been. We can put it back, of course.”

I touch my arm where the tracking chip used to be. But he’s right — it’s gone, and only a small, red line shows me where it was. I hadn’t even noticed.

“Oh. Um. Secretary to the chief picker of the Something Corporation does sound better,” I admit. “All right, I’ll stay. For now. I was just checking if I am a slave or not.”

“The *Oumia* Corporation. Do you now accept that you are not?”

Except that I’ll have to rely on you for everything? I think to myself.

“Yes,” I say out loud. “But this secretary job — I will do nothing sexual. Just saying.”

“A secretary’s job is respectable,” Caladin says, yellow eyes glued to my chest. “Most are highly skilled. Perhaps one day you will be, too. Now I think you should go down to your cabin and eat the food Skix gave you. It’s certainly gotten cold by now, but I don’t like to waste things.”

It’s clearly a dismissal. Peering down onto the invisible floor, I lick my lips. It’s like I’m hanging in thin air, only held up by the chair. “Could you... I mean, it looks dangerous.”

Caladin sighs. “It’s completely safe, as I showed you. Simply avoid the yellow ring over there if the tank is empty.”

Mobilizing courage, I straighten my leg, clutching the chair’s armrest hard as I tap my heel where the floor should be. It hits something hard, so I try with the other foot, too.

All right. It looks like there’s nothing, but I can stand on it. Closing my eyes, I put both feet flat on the floor and push up from the chair.

“Good,” Caladin says. “Now walk to the tube and tap the little circle with your foot.”

I open one eye enough to admit light while keeping everything out of focus. Panic is close at hand, but I manage to slowly

make my way to the tube, taking one step after another, making sure my foot stands safely on something hard before I trust my weight to it.

The circle is displayed on a big tile that looks like a tablet, and I press it with my heel.

Nothing happens.

“You have to step into the tube,” Caladin says. “It will suck you back to the cabin level.”

“There’s no floor in that tube,” I point out. “Where do I stand?”

“Simply close your eyes and pretend you’re taking one step into a new room.”

“If this kills me I’ll be really mad,” I warn him. I take a deep breath, clench my eyes shut, and step into the tube.

Next thing I know I’m on a much more solid-looking floor in a corridor with many doors. Pretty sure mine is the closest one, I walk over and push the door lever. The door quietly swings over, and I walk in.

“Shit, that was intense.” I sigh as the door closes behind me.

I sit down on the bunk and consider my situation. It’s bad. But it could be much, much worse. I’m simply being kept semi-prisoner in space by an alien orca antiques picker and his naked, green buddy. It would probably make for a decent Netflix show.

“Space Pickers,” I say out loud. “Turning ancient alien trash into spunk.”

The cabin is comfortable enough, and plainly made to be able to house even quite exotic creatures. The bathroom is even bigger and badly over-equipped, full of shiny metal fixtures I

partly recognize but mostly don't, as well as some that just make me shudder. But at least there's a large shower in there.

The food Skix prepared for me actually smells pretty good, so I try a couple of scoops. It's some kind of stew with mostly vegetables, I think. It has a bland taste, but considering where I am, that's probably a good sign.

Shit. I'm taking this abduction thing far too well, going along with everything I'm being told. I should start acting like an abductee and try to get away. Going back to Earth is probably not the best idea, as Caladin pointed out in his grumpy, un-diplomatic way. But if I can escape this ship, perhaps I can find my way out into space on my own. I might even be able to contact the Resistance movement, if that is an actual thing and not just a rumor. That would be a big help for my plans.

I check myself in the huge mirror in the bathroom. Looking a little haggard, but that's understandable. The uniform still doesn't fit me too well, but the cap is on my head and I still have pens in my pockets, scraps of paper, an empty pack of chewing gum, and some change. My hand-held shipping computer must have been left in the truck, but it wouldn't be much use up here anyway.

I quickly search through the cabin to see if there's something here I can use, but it's a Spartan kind of cabin and there's nothing I can carry with me.

Pushing the door lever, I step out into the corridor. As far as I can tell, there are no cameras anywhere. Which probably makes sense if this is Caladin's personal spaceship — maybe he thinks it's not polite to spy on your guests. He doesn't strike me as the stalker kind at all. He's far too direct and determined.

I walk to the end of the corridor and find another transport tube of the same kind as the first. Using these things is something I might do for fun if I were eight, but now it's just scary being transported so fast. It must be super advanced technology, but I'd settle for a set of stairs.

The pad on the floor by the tube is displaying a square. I have no idea what that means. The one thing I should probably avoid is ending up in Caladin's office again. But if I do, I can just say I wanted more food or different food or to clarify some details about the employment situation. Still, it might make him suspicious if he knows I'm playing with his transport tubes.

Experimenting with the tip of my shoe, I get the tablet to display various symbols and weird chicken scratches I think must be alien writing. Now which one do I go to?

I randomly pick a diamond symbol, thinking that maybe it leads me to some kind of treasury.

Tapping the tablet with my foot, I close my eyes and step into the tube.

- CALADIN -

“Hey boss,” Skix says on the comms. “That’s not a smart place to be.”

I try to parse his message, but come up short. My office is neither smarter or dumber than before. *“What’s not a smart place?”*

“You just entered the backup power brick storage. The alarm started howling the moment you got in there. You know that’s not a safe place to be during flight?”

“I’m in my office,” I tell him sheepishly, feeling silly because there’s something here I’m not getting.

“Well, someone’s in there. You don’t think...”

But I do think, so I vault across the desk and scramble to the tube before he can complete his sentence.

“...it’s that fema—”

The rest of his message is cut off as I step onto the metal floor of the storage room. It’s stacked floor to ceiling with power bricks because I believe in being prepared. The handling robots hang from the ceiling, but none of them are active right now. Selma is nowhere to be seen.

Between the stacks there's a walkway so narrow I have to turn sideways to slide along it with my fin folded double against the thousands of hand-sized power bricks.

"Selma!" I yell as loud as I can. I immediately regret it when my own ears start to ring from the noise. But she's been here. I can smell her on the air.

"Selma!" There's no reply, but I don't suppose I should expect one. She may have thought she was escaping.

"This is a dangerous place to be," I yell, not quite as loud. "These bricks can produce radiation. They could kill you!"

It's an exaggeration, of course. Modern power bricks don't leak radiation or anything else, but there could theoretically be residual radiation in here from older bricks, long since spent in the secondary reactor. I doubt it, though — my service crews know that I want things to be as close to perfect as possible, and I certainly pay them enough.

"*Oh,*" comes the thin reply from somewhere. "*I can't find the tube!*"

"*Beach,*" I swear viciously.

She's gone and gotten herself lost. The stacks of power bricks form a simple labyrinth that should be easy enough to get through, but not if you've never seen it before. The robots that do all the handling of these things prefer a particular pattern for maximum efficiency.

"Stay where you are," I tell her. "Don't move. I'll get you."

I want to run, to sprint along the walkways and find her. But sliding sideways like this, I only make painfully slow progress. I don't want my fin to scrape along the shelves and dislodge any of the bricks.

“Say something,” I command.

“I’m standing still,” she says with her thin voice. *“Can you hear me?”*

“I can hear you,” I confirm, “but I can’t tell where you are. Keep talking.”

I close my eyes. My kind should be good at this, catching thin noises from afar and being able to determine where they come from. That’s much easier in water than in air, of course. But in here, it’s pretty quiet. There’s only a deep hum from the main drive, and that shouldn’t disturb too much.

“I’m sorry,” Selma says. *“I couldn’t sleep, and I just wanted to explore the ship without bothering you or Skix. You said I wouldn’t be able to go anywhere that would be dangerous to me.”*

Ah. She’s close. And I think there’s an intersection coming up... yes. And now...

I let out a short sonar click, just to hear if I’m right. When the complex echo returns, it tells me that the walkway parallel to this and one over has a soft, round obstruction.

“... so I didn’t think there was any harm in it. I saw the diamond symbol and I thought it looked nice, so I picked that. But it means something else, doesn’t it? Danger or something?”

“You can stop talking,” I tell her, sliding along and about to turn the corner. “I’m here.”

Indeed Selma is in the walkway I predicted, coming towards me fast. “Caladin! I’m sorry.”

I wait for her to reach me, then give her a quick once-over. “Any injuries?”

“No, I’m fine. But you said there could be radiation.” She’s flustered and has a fetching red tinge to her face.

“There could, but the chances are small. The actual danger is power bricks falling on you. They shouldn’t, but it has been known to happen with spaceships in flight. Let’s leave.” I take her hand and pull her along. “You should not have access to this room. It’s not necessary for anyone to enter it. The robots do the work.” I point to the ceiling. “We should have made it off limits for you.”

“What are these things, anyway?” Selma asks.

“Power bricks for the secondary reactor. We rarely need it, but I believe in backups.”

“This is the symbol for sick bay,” I tell her when we get to the tube and I dial up a simple triangle. “And we’re going there now.”

I push her into the tube and follow.

“You can sit down,” I tell Selma and point to a multi-species resting frame in the sick bay. “We’ll just check if you got any radiation through you. My guess is you didn’t, but let’s make sure.”

She sits down backwards on the frame, but I don’t correct her. If it works for her, then fine.

I grab the polyheal wand, go right up to her, and slide it along each limb. It doesn’t give much of a reading anywhere, except at the point where Skix removed her tracking device with his exotic tool that can be used for just about anything.

When I’m done I frown at the readout. “Interesting. No radiation, but it says that you’re pregnant. Triplets, it says. Is that possible for your species?”

“What?!” Selma exclaims. “That’s impossible!”

“Oh. But...” I turn the polyheal wand over in my hand. “Ah. I held it upside down. You’re fine.” I give her a little smirk. “No pregnancy. So you can’t get pregnant with triplets.? Says here you are a mammal.”

She breathes out and relaxes. “I see. Medical humor. Earth women *can* have triplets. But *I* can’t be pregnant because... well, I can’t.”

“You haven’t done the necessary... activities?” I glance at her crotch, which is well hidden behind the coarse fabric of her shorts.

Her face takes on an interesting tinge of pink. “Not... really.”

I put the wand away, take her hand, and help her out of the frame. “It’s easier to get out if you sit the other way. You appear perfectly healthy. I see no reason to stay here.”

I dial the galley and push Selma into the tube, then take a moment before I follow.

What is going on with me? Why did I make that joke about pregnancy? Everyone knows I never joke, certainly not with an employee like Selma. Holy Oceans, she confuses me with her softness and roundness and the incredible scent she keeps sending out. My crotch is in a constant state of swelling, and I keep seeing flashes of what it would be like to flay her silly garments off her and *feast* on her.

No, I have to get a grip on myself. This won’t do.

I step into the tube.

Selma is standing by the wall, looking out a window. “I didn’t think you were coming.”

“I had some business to attend to elsewhere,” I tell her. “Now, did you eat whatever it was Skix made for you?”

“Some of it. I’m not all that hungry.”

“*Boss? You there?*” Skix says on the comms.

“We’re fine,” I tell him. “Just a misunderstanding. Skix, block Selma’s access to anywhere that can harm her.”

“*Already done, boss. It was just that storage room. What was she doing there, anyway?*”

I give her a little glance. “She was just looking around. First time on a spaceship.”

“*There’s a first for everything,*” my advisor says. “*Even death.*”

I walk over to the counter, a long slab of exotic stone that I had specially installed. “He only uses the automatic cook, which is fine if you’re in a hurry. It’s what we usually do. But let’s see if we can’t come up with something better.” I pick some items out of the cooler, get a pair of dried plants from the heat cabinet, and then a very special thing from the humidity locker.

Selma turns away from the window and watches with interest. “Do you cook?”

I get a medium-sized carbon blade from the dispenser and start chopping. “When the mood strikes me. Which is rare. But I think we should have made sure you couldn’t get access to the power brick storage. So consider this an attempt at making it up to you. Do you have any allergies?”

“Food allergies? I’m mildly allergic to *shellfish*. It won’t kill me.”

I concentrate on the chopping. “What are *shellfish*?”

Selma gives me a little smile, making her round cheeks dimple. “The first thing to know about shellfish is that they’re not fish at all. They’re a type of animal that lives in the oceans on Earth. Actually, there are many types. And we sometimes cook and eat them. But if I eat a lot of them, I break out in a rash.”

“Then I shall make sure to not use any of those things in this meal. Thankfully, none of this is from Earth. Let’s see what we have here.” I show her the plant parts I’ve chopped up. “These are *murts*, which are used for flavor and little else. When boiled in water, they gradually vanish and leave only their spicy flavor. I chop them into pieces to make sure they vanish quickly. Here we have a *hondokonk*.” I hold up the green sphere the size of my fist. “It protects itself from those who want to eat it by making a fluid that tastes unreasonably good. Botanists have trouble understanding how that works, because it seems to only make it more attractive to eat.” I knock on the green nut with one knuckle, and immediately it starts to drip with juice. “Smell that?”

“Oh,” Selma enthuses, “it smells like *kokonut*!”

I give her a glance. “You have these on Earth?”

“I don’t think so. But we have big nuts that we call coconuts, and when they’re opened they smell like that. Almost. That one is more spicy. More... complex?”

I let the juice drip into a titanium bowl. “It does add complexity. Now, these are just spices that we’ll grind. Actually, you do this one. Here.” I slide a hardwood mortar over to her, then put the small leaves into it. “This is called *frenk* and is quite powerful, but I like it.”

“Frenk. Looks like *laurel* leaves.” Selma grabs the pestle and starts grinding the leaves. It nearly makes me smile — the

counter is at a comfortable height for me, but it reaches her to the chest. Still she does her best to reach.

“But they smell nothing like it,” she adds when the fresh scent from the leaves fill the galley.

I hold up the final item. “This is the main ingredient. It’s a *shomp*, specially grown in the jungles of some exotic planet with a name I can’t remember. It’s not an animal, but also not a plant.”

“A mushroom?” Selma suggests.

I carefully cut a square pattern into the shomp’s outer layer. “It’s only known as a shomp. It would normally grow to an immense size, as big as this spaceship. Unless it’s put in a ball-shaped net and aged that way. It can’t grow, but it becomes extremely tender and flavorful. It’s all concentrated in this little bulb. All these other ingredients we only use to bring out the various nuances of the shomp’s flavors. But we can’t bring out all of them. It’s not possible. So we have to choose which ones we want, knowing that we will never know the other flavors of this shomp. They’re all different. The myth is that when you sleep after having eaten shomp, in your dream you can taste one of the elusive flavors and you will always long for it. But you know that you will never taste it again. It’s called ‘shomp’s revenge’. Selma, I’m puzzled about why you didn’t reply when I called your name down in the power brick storage.”

She stares straight ahead, concentrating furiously on grinding the frenk leaves. “I was confused, and I was lost. I thought you would be angry.”

“M-hm. I don’t think it will be possible for you to escape, if that’s what you were doing. As I said, I can put you right back on Earth if you really want that.”

Once more her face takes on a pink hue, although this time it's a darker red. "I just wanted to look around."

"There's not much to see. Remind me to give you a tour. I think those leaves have been ground finely enough now." I take the mortar and sniff the dark green dust in the bottom of it. "Perfect."

I mix all the spices and chopped plants in a flavorless bowl, then add some Arcturan wine and stir it well. I close my eyes for a moment. The intense scent reminds me of my youth. Strange how such an unpleasant time can still make me nostalgic.

"Now we'll prepare the shomp. I have cut a pattern in the outer skin, but we can't cut it any deeper or it will go rock hard. What we'll do is confuse it, make it think it's home on its own planet. Only then will it bloom. Stand back, please."

I place the shomp in the middle of the counter, in a spot where there's a big steel plate on the wall. It's there specifically for this purpose.

I check that Selma has pulled well back from the counter, standing with her back to the opposite wall, squinting at me with her fingers in her ears as if the galley is going to explode.

I take the two carbon electrodes out from under the counter and check that everything is charged. Satisfied, I place one electrode on either side of the shomp, holding them a finger's width from the outer skin.

"Close your eyes," I tell Selma. "Or better yet, turn your back to it."

I close my own eyes and press the buttons on the electrodes. Immediately there's a hard *zzzt* sound and the galley fills with an intense blue light as a small bolt of lightning comes into

existence between the electrodes, piercing the shomp and going straight through it. Even with my eyes closed, I can see the searingly bright light.

I take my finger off the button and the room goes dark, except I know it's just as bright as before.

I open my eyes. "Let's see if that worked. You don't want to miss this, Selma."

The shomp looks the same as always for a couple of heartbeats. Then it swells and splits along the square pattern I cut. It calmly turns itself inside out, displaying a dazzling kaleidoscope of colors. The myriad of scents that are released are light and delicate.

"That's incredible," Selma marvels. "It's like it has a whole garden inside it! With every flower that ever existed!"

"It's special," I agree. "I wonder what kind of planet it comes from, where the only thing that can make it fold itself out is lightning." Grabbing a new knife, I carefully slice the shomp into pieces along special seams at its base.

"Must be a lot of weather on that planet," Selma says and pokes one of the pieces. "It's still hot."

"It's perfectly cooked," I tell her and place the pieces into the bowl with the other ingredients. "Now we put the pieces in here and we can eat. Try a piece. Shomp is eaten with the fingers. We don't want to get anything between it and us."

Taking a piece between two fingers, I put it in my mouth.

Selma's eyes go wide. "Oh..."

I send her a fake grin to really show off my teeth, of which I have very many. "Looks scary, is that it?"

She swallows visibly. "A little."

Her prey-like reactions add heat to my mind and midsection, but then I forget it as the flavor of the shomp fills my mouth and I zone out with the wonder of it. The frenk brings out the freshness, while the Arcturan wine strengthens the spicy notes. At the bottom of it all is a meaty texture, tender and delicate.

I'm aware of Selma looking up at me.

"You should try," I tell her. "Just a small bite, if you're not sure about it."

She gingerly takes a small piece of shomp between two slender fingers and lifts it to her mouth. "It won't kill me, right?"

I savor the marvelous complexity of the shomp. "I don't think it can hurt you in any way."

She puts the piece in her mouth and chews carefully. Then she looks emptily into the air.

"Good, yes?" I inquire.

She just nods her head slowly, too overwhelmed to reply properly.

I think back to my first taste of shomp. It took me by surprise just how delicious food could be, and since then I've enjoyed cooking many dishes. It warms my heart to see Selma going through the same process.

I let my gaze run up and down her. Sweet depths, those curves! She *must* come from an ocean species, just like me. She's clearly made to slide through the waves with minimal resistance, so smooth and perfectly shaped.

A thought flashes through my mind like another lightning bolt. What if I were to run my tongue along her skin now? With the flavor of the shomp already in my mouth? Surely that would

create the most magnificent taste... and then I might choose to remove her clothing altogether, and taste every part of her, then sample her in different ways, creating all kinds of fantastic flavors... oh, how like prey she is...

I have to steady myself on the counter, drawing breath with a strange tremble in my throat.

Reaching out to Selma, I want to touch, to own. To *take*. Right here and now.

She sees my struggle and takes a step back. "Caladin? Are you all right?"

With supreme effort, I stagger backwards and turn around on weak legs.

"Finish it," I manage before I stumble into the transport tube and have it take me to a random place in the ship.

- SELMA -

Caladin leaves so abruptly that it scares me. God, he was staring at me so intensely I started to worry if he was going to eat *me*.

At the same time, the shomp's flavor is exploding in my mouth and demanding most of my attention. It's like sucking on a lemon or having eaten a really hot pepper, except the other way around — this isn't sour or painfully hot, it's just... tremendous. I can't separate the various flavors, but they complement and strengthen each other. It's not just a party in my mouth — it's a royal wedding of the most ostentatious type, with half a dozen bands playing and a wedding cake the size of the Empire State Building. And the happy couple is the shomp marrying my taste buds.

Yeah, I can absolutely understand why Caladin likes this. I appreciate him cooking it for me. The experience overshadows the embarrassing way I tried to escape.

I was scared down in that storage room — I had gotten lost for real and started to worry I'd never find my way out again. But Caladin didn't seem angry, just worried. I kind of liked that he joked with me in the sick bay, although it wasn't the funniest joke. It showed a part of him I didn't know existed. He's

always so serious and grumpy that seeing a playful part of him surprised me. In a really good way. He has more facets to him than I thought, and this cooking interest just supports that.

I can't help myself, so I eat the entire bowl of the shomp dish. The complexity is crazy, but it's light and barely filling at all, like a salad. And yet, when I'm done I'm fully sated. And my mouth feels remarkably clean, as if I've gargled a mouthwash.

Standing on tiptoe by the high counter, I tidy it up as much as I can and drink some water.

Should I stay here? Or can I go somewhere else?

Now the tube tablet only allows me two options — a triangle and a circle. I know the first means sick bay, but I'm feeling fine so I touch the O and step into the tube.

It's the corridor with my cabin next to it.

Entering, I sit down on the bunk and yawn. It's been a long night, and I do need some rest.

- - -

Skix shakes my shoulder with his thin, three-fingered hand. "Time to get up, secretary. The meeting begins soon."

I sit up in bed, still fully clothed. "What?"

"The. Meeting. Begins. Soon," the green little alien says with exaggerated slowness.

I rub my eyes, remembering the events from last night. "Oh *fuck*."

“Expletive?” Skix asks. “I have a good ear for those things. Just guessing.”

Resting my head in my hands, I give off a low groan, deeply felt. “Shit.”

I have an elusive taste in my mouth, hard to pin down but forcing me to chase it with my tongue because it’s delicious.

“Another one? Interesting.”

I pull myself together and straighten up. “Skix. Is a hundred spong a decent salary?”

“Did he offer you that? What a strange amount. Not bad, Selma. Not bad. But he was always a generous employer. It goes with being unpleasant. He has to pay people well to stand working for him. Ask how I know.”

I get out of bed and smoothen down my uniform. It’s getting wrinkled, but otherwise holding up fine. “I think I can guess.”

“I think so too. Be in his office as soon as you can. It’ll be the only option for the tube.” Skix leaves.

I visit the bathroom and try to freshen up. I have zero products to use, so Caladin will just have to accept a secretary with a messy bun and a noticeable lack of lipstick.

The only option for the tube is a triple figure eight, so I press that.

At the last moment I remember that there’s no visible floor in the office, so I close my eyes as I step into it.

“Hello?” I call, afraid to open my eyes and see myself hovering in thin air a hundred feet above a stone floor.

“Selma,” comes his deep voice. “We’ll be leaving soon. The meeting is on a Bululg station. Come here.”

I open my eyes to slits so I can walk the same way as before, not having to scare myself silly with my fear of heights. But I can see something has changed, so I open them fully. “Oh.”

There’s a narrow, white carpet leading from the tube all the way over to Caladin’s desk. It makes me feel more secure, but not by a lot — walking on it feels like a balancing act with a long drop on each side. But I focus on the killer whale alien behind his desk, and before I know it I’m sitting in the same chair as before, knees at my chest.

“You made it easier to walk on,” I say as I sit down. “Thank you for that.”

“It ruins the entire point of that floor,” Caladin grumbles. “You must train yourself to walk on it normally, without that carpet.”

I take a deep breath and deliberately look up at the starry sky. “I’m sure I’ll get the hang of it.”

“What did you think about the shomp?” he asks. “I saw you finished it, like I asked you. Any lingering flavors?”

“Just one,” I tell him. “But I can’t quite describe it.”

“And yet it’s the most wonderful flavor you can imagine, yes? Shomp’s revenge. Now then. We are going to negotiate with the Bululg about taking certain goods off Earth. Not slaves, I hasten to add. Only plastics and refined metals. And possibly something more.”

“Old stuff made by people long dead?” I ask.

“Old stuff,” my boss confirms. “Made by people *assumed* to be long dead. The reason I want you to come along is that the Bululg can be good negotiators, and I want them off balance. Showing up with an Earth girl they know I’ve not bought from them should help with that. They know I’ve stolen you from

them, but they can't point it out to my face and then endanger the deal. But it will bother them. Do you understand?"

I change to a cross-legged position in the chair. "I understand that the Bululg are slave traders that nobody should make deals with or give money to."

His eyes narrow, making him look even more dangerous than otherwise. "I thought we went over this. This is not a slave trade. I will never touch anything like that."

It takes an effort to stick to my guns. I get the impression that he could pounce at me at any time. "We did talk about it, but I think we still disagree about the Bululg."

"Be that as it may, you will also translate what they say. And what *I* say. As accurately as possible. This is a big deal, Selma. The other owners of this company are counting on me to land it."

He's clearly back to his old, grumpy self.

I shrug. "All right."

Skix comes through the tube and waddles over, avoiding the carpet and making *shvupp-shvupp* sounds on the glass. "Are we ready? I don't mean 'we' in the usual sense, since I won't be going. But I'll eagerly wait for the result."

Caladin gets to his feet. "We're ready."

He comes around the desk, grabs my wrist, and drags me out of the chair, then over to the tube. "You have to say 'sir' to me, Selma."

He pushes me into the tube.

"Fine."

It's a big hall that reminds me of an airport, with wide lines painted on the deck. There are craft here too, sleek machines that are clearly small spaceships.

"We'll use a shuttle," Caladin says, still pulling me along. "The Bululg can see the size of this ship and expect us to cross over in a large ship. But we'll use the smallest one we have. Keeping them off balance, being unpredictable. Get in."

He opens a hatch on a craft the size of an SUV, which has to be the smallest ship in here. Holding the hatch open, he ushers me in.

It's dark inside it, and it smells moldy. I find a recognizable couch and sit down on it for about a half second before Caladin grabs me and pulls me out of it. "The Bululg will expect the secretary to sit in the back. So you will sit up front."

He sits me down in what has to be a co-pilot's seat, close to an instrument panel that looks really old, even to me. Taking his place beside me and fastening my seat harness, he uses the controls with practiced ease. Before I know it the shuttle lifts off the deck, starts moving forwards, and passes out of a large hole in the ship.

In front of us is a Bululg space station, and far beyond it, Earth is spinning slowly in its axis, looking peaceful and as blue as ever.

I would have expected some strong emotions at that sight. But it all seems unreal, like someone else is seeing this, not me. Or as if I'm just watching a movie. Everything has happened too fast for my brain to keep up.

The Bululg station is gray and ugly. Caladin pilots the shuttle towards it, goes up and over the edge, and then plummets right down into a big hole framed in red lights.

My stomach does advanced gymnastics with all the movements, but suddenly the shuttle is calmly hovering before it touches softly down on a deck inside the station.

Caladin unsnaps me and stands up. “Be demure and quiet, except when translating. And do remember to call me ‘sir’.”

“Do remember to kiss my ass,” I mutter in English.

He ignores it and opens the hatch so I can get out.

The first thing that hits me is a sour smell, as from stale milk. This hall is darker than the one on Caladin’s ship, but it’s also much bigger. And less well kept.

Two fresks, one of the Bululg’s servant species, come trotting. I instinctively draw closer to Caladin — the horse-sized things give me the creeps with their big, brown teeth and dead eyes.

“Come,” one of them brays in Interspeech. “To the overseers.”

Caladin follows them, and I make sure to stay close to him. I shouldn’t feel safe with him, but for some reason I don’t feel as exposed or in danger right next to his giant body. He attracts more eyes than I do, what with his size, his black and white color scheme, and his predatory grin.

And there are quite a few eyes to attract on this station. As we walk along corridors and hallways, I don’t see a single Bululg, but many of their servant species. And a good few others. Some of them stare, especially a hairy one that follows me with his single eye until we’re out of sight.

After a long walk we enter a doorway, and on the other side is a meeting room. There are three Bululg aliens in here, sitting on high stools with a number of small pedestals in front of them. They’re small and dirty white, looking a bit like Skix. Surplus skin hangs down their short, pear-shaped bodies. They’re all staring at me with eyes that fill half their faces.

“*Greetings, Caladin,*” one of them squeaks.

“He says ‘hi’,” I translate.

Caladin sits down in a strange contraption that I would never have guessed could be sat in. It reminds me of the similar thing in sick bay, except this one is weirder. And bigger.

“Greetings, honored Chief Overseer and subordinates,” Caladin says.

“*He returns your greeting,*” I try to say in the Bululg language. It’s really hard to form the sounds — I have to curl my tongue and establish some vibrations in my throat. But I think it’s possible to understand.

“*You wish to make a deal,*” the chief Bululg says. “*You wish to extract goods from Earth for transport off the planet and sale in some other place.*”

“He says you’re here to take part in the plunder of a helpless planet and its innocent inhabitants,” I translate.

Caladin frowns. “Ah. I... well, I suppose. I wish to extract certain goods and take them off the planet. Plastics, mostly. Rare earth metals. Things like that.”

I turn to the Bululg. “*He says ‘yes’.*”

“*The quality of the goods on Earth is very high. The prices must be, too.*”

“He says you probably can’t afford the prices.”

“Give me a number,” Caladin says easily. “I have resources.”

“*He wants a number,*” I translate tightly, acutely aware that I’m now being instrumental in the plunder of my own planet.

“*This deal does not include the harvest of Earth females,*” the Bululg says. “*We see you have acquired one, but not from us.*”

“You can’t abduct anyone from Earth,” I translate. “He wonders what you’re doing with me. I thought you said they wouldn’t point it out.”

Caladin leans back in the chair. “Everyone wants an Earth woman. They are remarkably attractive. I wanted one, so I reached out and took her. I agree to not harvest any more females. What is the number?”

“He says he won’t do it again. He asks for a number.”

“Seventeen thousand spong per banikweight,” the Bululg says.

“Seventeen thousand per unit of weight,” I tell Caladin.

“Banikweight? At that price, I’d have to harvest females after all,” the orca-man says. “To supplement my income.”

“He says no.”

Caladin leans forward and grabs my wrist. “Are you translating properly? That sounded much shorter than what I said.”

I meet his gaze. “You’re forcing me to take part in the plunder of my home planet. What do you expect?”

He stares me down for a second, but I tough it out and don’t look away. I feel like my retinas will have bright yellow scorch marks in them after this.

Finally Caladin takes out a small, black box and sets it on the floor beside him. “I think this will translate better.”

I lean back and shut up.

The negotiations continue, but they don’t go well. There’s a gap between the amount the Bululg want and the amount Caladin wants to pay, so after a while there’s a tense silence.

“Let’s leave the bulk materials for a while,” Caladin says. “I am also interested in other items. Buried items, perhaps. Ancient ones. Have such things been found?”

The Bululg seem surprised and look at each other. “Buried items? Ancient? We don’t think so. We suspect your translating device is not working right.”

Caladin glances at me. “Is it?”

“It works,” I tell him curtly. “Sir.”

He checks the device, which as far as I can tell has translated much better than I did. He pretends to twist a knob on it. “Then may I look for them? On planet Earth and also on its moon? I could not do a bulk deal for that, but a split of the profits.”

“The items in question could not be plastics or metal,” the Bululg say after hearing the translation and conferring among themselves for a minute. “But we suspect nothing is to be found. Your terms for the ancient objects are acceptable. An even split of the profits.”

“Of course,” Caladin says. “Then that is the only deal we could reach today. Until next time, honored Chief Overseer.” He gets up and takes my hand, then leads me out of the room.

We start walking back to the shuttle in silence. We both attract a lot of looks, but mostly he does.

Except one of the creatures we pass has an eye only for me. It’s the same one that was staring at me before. It’s waiting in the same place where I saw it.

It’s a big, dirty gray alien that reminds me of a yeti, with tangled, mangy-looking fur hanging from its limbs. It has one eye placed low on the head, with a star-shaped mouth right above it. Even from a distance, I expect it to smell really bad.

As we pass, the monster turns to stare at me with its single, milky eye. Its stench almost makes me retch. I think this is the creature that made the whole hangar stink.

I make sure to look away and to stick close to Caladin.

Just when I think we've passed him safely, I hear the sound of clawed paws on the floor behind me. Not even looking, I quickly step around Caladin's huge mass.

But the yeti is fast and grabs my shoulder with a huge paw.

I yelp and grab hold of Caladin's forearm.

He spins around, spots the yeti's dirty paw on my shoulder, grabs it in one massive hand, and yanks it off me. A furious growl fills the hangar as he keeps the paw in his grip.

"What are you doing, friend?" he snarls.

"Female," the yeti says, the word barely understandable. "Pretty."

"We don't touch other people's females," Caladin says, fire in his eyes. "Go away now." With a hard push with his hand, he shoves the yeti away, then pulls me behind him.

The yeti doesn't take the hint. "Buy," he says. "Buy female." He holds out the other paw, where there is a small orange crystal in his hand.

I can't help noticing a bright red protrusion from his mid-section, thin and long. And stiff.

"She's not for sale," Caladin snaps and pushes me towards our ship.

The yeti stares at me for another few seconds. Then he comes running, giving off a terrible war cry.

Caladin is ready and pushes me away from him. He feints, avoiding the monster's clawed paw by a fraction of an inch. Then he gives the monster a hard punch at the side of the head, making it reel.

The yeti just won't take the hint. He gives off another ugly howl and tries to maul Caladin with both his paws and his giant feet, where the claws are even longer.

Caladin has had it. He grabs the yeti's wrists, bares his killer whale teeth in the yeti's face, and gives off an almighty howl that contains every note of every scale at immense volume.

The sound makes stars dance in front of my eyes. Clapping my hands to my ears and gritting my teeth, I immediately know that if we'd been under water, we would all have been permanently deafened by that noise. Even in air, it makes my ears ring.

Stunned, the yeti seems to lose his nerve and backs off fast, stumbling over his own feet and crashing to the ground while Caladin follows, plainly going in for the kill. His head is tucked down, his huge dorsal fin waves tightly back and forth, and his hands are curled into claws.

He bends down, grabs his opponent, and lifts him as if to bite his throat out. Then he seems to regain control of himself. He tosses the yeti thirty feet along the corridor, turns on his heel, and walks away.

I scurry after him, making sure that the yeti isn't coming again. But now it's only a groaning, stinky pelt on the floor.

"If he hadn't smelled so bad, I would have bitten his head off," Caladin growls as we approach our ship.

"I could see you were going to kill him," I manage, voice unsteady. "But I'm glad you didn't."

“Not worth the hassle,” he agrees and holds the hatch open for me.

I sit down in the co-pilot’s seat, still shaking. “Thanks for getting him off of me. He was pretty determined.”

Caladin starts the preflight procedure. “I told you, you’re mine. He must not have received that message.”

I don’t dare protest. Right now, being Caladin’s feels pretty good. I suspected he was protective, but he also has a possessive streak to him. I shouldn’t like it, but I’m only human and it feels good to be this wanted. If that’s what’s going on here.

The flight across to his ship passes in silence, until a gasp escapes me when I see his spaceship from the outside for the first time. It’s an oval egg shape, made up of gently rounded hexagons. It shimmers calmly with an inner, purple light.

“It’s huge!”

“It’s big enough,” Caladin says with obvious pride. “My tank takes up a good portion. And there is some advanced digging equipment at the bottom of it.”

“For digging up ancient artifacts?”

We fly into the hole in the ship and set down. “This far I haven’t done much digging. But I want to get into it. And I want to start over there.” He points over his shoulder with his thumb.

I unsnap my own harness and climb out of the seat. “On the Moon? Is there anything in particular you’re looking for?”

- CALADIN -

I never expected Selma to be this perceptive. That question is a good one.

“There might be,” I say as I follow her out of the shuttle. “There are rumors about Earth and its moon. New rumors, and that’s rare. Usually rumors like that have circulated for centuries. But Earth being of interest is new.”

Selma walks beside me through the hangar. “What are the rumors?”

I give her a glance. “They concern an old race of aliens. We call them the Elders. They left a lot of artifacts all over the galaxy, traces of their civilization. Most of it is useless, but there are some highly interesting items among them.”

“Musical instruments?” Selma guesses. “Kitchen utensils?”

“Probably,” I tell her, strangely satisfied about the negotiations with the Bululg. They didn’t go well at all, mostly because I suddenly realized that I wanted them to fail. “But what we all want most of all is weapons. Ancient weapons of unspeakable power. We think the Elders had them, and we think they’re still around. That’s an old rumor, I want to point out. The *new*

rumor is about Earth being mentioned in the same breath as those Elder weapons.”

“Why do you need weapons?” Selma asks. “You seem to be doing just fine. You can win fights just by using your war cry, looks like.”

“And I want that to continue. So I don’t want others to get hold of those weapons. If they are anything like other Elder items, they will be extremely powerful, seeming to break the very laws of nature. You could probably conquer the whole galaxy in a few dozen days if you controlled them. I don’t know anyone who could be trusted with things like that, do you?”

“I don’t,” Selma admits. “I wouldn’t even trust myself.”

I walk up to the nearest tube. “Exactly. So my plan is to investigate the rumors and see if there’s anything to them. There’s almost certainly not, of course. But maybe I’ll find other things.”

Skix is still in my office.

“Boss! I have... hmm. How did it go, Selma?”

“Pretty good,” the female says. “They didn’t make a deal, except for the picking.”

Skix gives me an eye signal that I recognize from before — he blinks. And with eyes that size, it’s hard to miss.

I sit down in my chair. “Selma, why don’t you go and get some rest. There is a food machine in the galley, too. Experiment with it until it makes something you like.”

She gives me an alien shrug. “*Yeh, no needta tell me ‘gudjob’ or anythin.*”

“What?”

“Fine. *Sir.*” She turns and walk away.

I follow her pleasantly jiggling behind with my eyes until she taps the destination tile and steps into the tube.

“Yes, Skix?”

“Boss, there’s interesting news.”

“Oh blasted *shallows*. That’s never a good thing.”

“Your mother has been in touch.”

My mood was pretty good after the fight with the furry alien, but now it turns sour instantly. “*Beach*. What did she say?”

All families on my home planet of Xaokui are traditionally ruled by a matriarch, an old woman who has the last word on every issue. These days that’s not taken too seriously, but in my family it is. Especially when it comes to the company, which is the family’s joint property. While I am the manager, my mother is the president and can overrule all of us. She mostly stays out of the day-to-day operations, but when she makes her opinion known, it’s usually trouble.

Shvupp shvupp. Skix takes two steps back, alarming me. He’s not expecting me to react well to this news.

“Your mother says... Hm. Let me get it right. Your mother has noticed that while all your cousins and siblings have formed some kind of matrimonial union, you have remained a solitary member of the family. With no clear path to providing heirs and offspring.”

“I was always solitary,” I point out. “She knew the deal when she appointed me to this position.”

“But she thought you would change,” Skix says. “She thought that you would start to enjoy the company of others. Or as she put it, ‘the only person he hangs out with is a green, four-eyed

swamp-species bookworm with suction cups for feet'. She clearly meant *me*."

"Oh, you think so?"

"Then she said she meant no offense, and I said 'none taken'. She feels that it's time you found a life partner, boss. A wife."

I groan. "Does she think I can just reach out and find a soulmate that easily? I'm a picky man, Skix. She knows that, too."

"It's been six years, she said. And now time's up."

I put one hand in front of my eyes. "Just give it to me, Skix. Stop this drawn-out torture."

"You have seven days to get married. If you don't, you will lose your position as manager of the company. You will lose this ship, and you will be required to spend the rest of your career on Xaokui, staying put as the matriarch's assistant. Your current position would pass to your cousin Taledak."

My stomach goes cold and I feel lightheaded. This is worse than I could ever imagine. "*Beach!*"

"Your mother," Skix goes on, "feels that seven days should be ample. She's convinced that you know a great deal of presentable females all over that galaxy and that each one of them would be thrilled to marry you. Speaking for myself, I would have to agree with that assessment."

"Would you really?" I groan.

"Yes. I have seen you with females, boss. To say they fawn over you would be a gross injustice. They can't help but adore you on sight. And greatly fear you, which with females seems to amount to the same thing. I don't know how that works, but it's obvious to everyone but you. You certainly never act on it.

Anyway, that was the gist of your mother's message. Oh, and if you can't come up with a bride, she'll find one for you. She wants to talk to you soon, and she looks forward to seeing you on Xaokui for your wedding in at most seven days' time."

"Beaching *beach*," I curse. "A wedding. With guests and speeches. Dancing and *chatting*. And with me at the center of it. Losing my freedom forever." I take a deep breath. "Skix, it's time to earn your extortionate pay. How do I get out of this?"

"You can't," the tiny law expert tells me with clipped precision. "Your mother *can* require this of you. She can require just about anything, actually. The laws of your planet are extremely mother-centric. It must be unique in the galaxy."

I bounce to my feet in sheer frustration. "And Taledak, of all people. The idiot brute! He couldn't make a deal to save his own life from a pack of beggars."

"I suspect that's the common opinion," Skix says. "And I suspect your mother uses your cousin's less than ideal reputation as extra incentive for you to follow her instructions."

"Because being replaced by that violent moron would be a bad blow to my pride? She might be onto something."

"It's either marriage or staying on your home planet as a servant to your mother, not being allowed to leave. It looks to me as if she's making the choice easy for you."

"I'd lose the ship," I say darkly, staring down at my empty pool. "I could no longer look for ancient items. I could no longer take long, solitary swims under the starry sky of an alien world. I could no longer travel through space alone. Well, practically alone."

“Thank you, boss.”

“I couldn’t enjoy the solitude of space, the thrill of making a deal, being my own man. But as a spouse, a *husband*... I also won’t be able to do those things.”

“I fear that’s true, boss. A wife does usually prefer to be in the same general area of space as her husband. Some insist on the same solar system, while others prefer to be on the same planet. In fact, it’s not unknown for a married couple to find themselves in the same city. Or, and this might shock you, in the same *room*. Hard to imagine, I know. But it does happen.”

I shoot him an angry glance. “There’s no need for cruel sarcasm, Skix! Can’t you see I’m devastated?”

“Sorry, boss. Shall I start to look for candidates?”

I take a deep breath. Might as well get this over with. “I can’t let my mother find a bride for me. Make sure she’s beautiful. Cultured. Sweet. Submissive and presentable. Not too smart, though. They get so quarrelsome.”

Skix takes notes on his tablet. “And from your own species, I assume?”

“Yes! Of course. My mother would accept nothing less— no, wait!”

“Boss?”

I look up at the infinity of space projected on the domed ceiling. I just had an idea. “How *real* does this marriage have to be?”

“It will be real. You will be really getting married. In front of your mother and your family and a lot of guests.”

I think hard. “What if I got married before then? To a female of my choice? Someone who has no emotions for me,

someone we could bribe to marry me and then get to divorce me a suitable time later?”

Skix blinks in sheer surprise. “Your mother is really looking forward to the wedding, so I don’t think it would work. It would make her very suspicious and disappointed, and I don’t know how she would react. But if you insist on this course of action, there’s nothing to prevent you from marrying this fake wife on Xaokui. In front of everyone.”

I nod to myself. “Then I think I found the solution. Find a female with no emotions for me, bribe her to marry me on Xaokui, then live separately until it’s time to get a divorce. She will be paid to go through with it and sign every paper without complaint. Yes, Skix! I think we have it.”

“It fits the terms, I suppose,” Skix reluctantly agrees. “Shall I set up a list of candidates?”

“Yes,” I tell him, then have another flash of inspiration. “No! Stop! I have a better idea.” I walk fast to the tube and dial for the cabin section.

I enter Selma’s cabin like before, but she’s not there. There’s only a watery hissing from the bathroom.

I walk over, open the door and walk in.

I’m suddenly dumbstruck. There she is, taking a shower while wearing... nothing. She has her back to me, and thus also her remarkably round behind. Water cascades down her smooth skin, making it shiny. It drips from her hair and runs down into the deep, mysterious crevice that splits her roundness. Sweet depths of Xaokui, I never imagined she would look like this! I knew she had curves, but this is beyond anything I’ve ever fantasized about. Her body is so luxurious! So decadent! So... scandalous!

My crotch swells uncontrollably, to a painful extent, unlike anything I've ever experienced. I'm completely unable to keep a deep growl from escaping me.

Selma whirls around.

Then she screams as piercingly as the youngest baby when confused under the ice of an ocean. "What are you *doing* here?!"

She tries to hide her charms with her hands, but it's no use — I got a good look at it all. And it was as wonderful as I expected.

We stand there staring at each other for a moment.

I clear my voice. "You are going to marry me seven days from now."

Then I stagger out of the bathroom, dizzy with arousal.

- SELMA -

I'm stunned with anger and shock. Caladin just barged into the bathroom and stood there, staring at me while I was showering.

Doesn't he have a sense of decency? Of tact? Of how to behave towards women?

And what the hell was it he said? Marry him? In seven days?

He must have lost his mind.

On shaking legs I go into the drying compartment and let the warm breeze in there dry me off.

I should be furious with Caladin and demand that he take me back to Earth.

But a part of me enjoyed his intense yellow stare. And I can't deny the tingles that started down below. I even had an urge to drop my hands and let him get a good look. He can be as grumpy and weird as he wants — he makes me feel attractive like no other male ever has.

“But sneaking up on me in the shower is *not* okay,” I tell myself, trying to keep the anger burning. “That's where I draw the line.”

Dried off, I put on my uniform and sneak out of the cabin. The closest transport tube only allows me to go to the galley, the sick bay, and Caladin's office, none of which are that interesting right now.

Instead I walk to the other tube that took me down to the strange warehouse. But it's the same there — it will only take me to those same places.

I keep on walking the corridors until I find yet another tube. This one also gives me the same three options, so it's obvious that Caladin and Skix have made the system Selma-proof. But I have an idea, so I press for Caladin's office and arrive there the next moment. The tubes work with astounding speed, and when I step into one it's like a crazy blur in front of my eyes before I land at the destination.

Caladin is not in his office. I'm alone.

For a short moment I consider going over to his desk and rifling through it, but I abandon the idea immediately. I don't know what important alien documents look like anyway. I could come across a signed confession of murder and not even suspect it. I could find a fortune in alien money and never realize.

But I wonder if this tube isn't one that will take me just about anywhere. Because he wouldn't expect me to come here on my own, would he? He knows I hate the glass floor.

Indeed the tube tablet seems to have a full range of options. I know what some of the symbols mean, but I land on a hollow octagon. I can only hope it won't be anywhere too deadly.

It turns out to be another hangar, just smaller than the first.

This is ideal! I can find a ship and make my escape. Not to go back to Earth, but to go further into space and see if my plan

works.

I have to hurry. Last time, Caladin came running only a minute after I got to the storage room. He must have some kind of alarm set up that will tell him when I go to a special place in the ship.

I jog towards the only craft I can see. It appears to be the same type as the shuttle we used before, which is not ideal. This thing looks more like a ship that would be used inside a solar system, but not one that would be used to travel between the stars. Oh well, it's not like I can pick and choose here.

I get into the craft and sit down in the huge pilot's seat, much too big for my frame. The good thing about this shuttle is that I paid attention to what Caladin was doing. So even if I don't understand the symbols and writing in here, I might be able to get it flying.

The shuttle has a windshield, and outside it I see a big, black hole in the ship. That must be space, which is what I'm aiming for.

I flick a couple of switches, then take a second to think about how smart this is. I don't think this thing can take me to another star. But maybe that's not important. Maybe it can take me to the Bululg station, and I can get a better ride from there?

No, this is not very smart. I should stay the hell away from the Bululg. Are there other stations around here, maybe? Even so, being an Earth girl on a space station close to Earth can't be healthy. If someone found out or guessed I don't have an owner, I might be abducted again. And not by someone who just wants me to be their secretary.

Or who demands I marry them in seven days. That's too weird for words.

And yet, this is too risky. This close to Earth, I have nowhere to go. I need a better ship, a bigger one, one that can travel between stars.

Trying to climb out of the deep, giant seat, I have to turn around and back out of it.

My butt hits something hard, and the engine starts humming. And then the whole shuttle starts turning to the left, while still on the ground. It drags the bottom on the metal deck with a terrible scraping sound that resonates through the craft.

“Shit!” I exclaim, throwing myself around and trying to find a way to turn it off. But it’s to no avail — the shuttle keeps going left and scraping the deck. It’s going faster and faster, too, and the engine keeps spinning up. It sounds like a giant vacuum cleaner going out of control.

I struggle to get out of the seat and throw myself out, but the hard and erratic movements of the shuttle make it impossible. I’m being shaken, my hips hitting seats and controls and the floor. Getting down on the floor of the shuttle, I try to cling to something, but I’m not strong enough and my grip is easily shaken loose.

Crawling on the floor, I manage to get a grip on the hatch release and pull it. The hatch opens, but that’s not a big help — it swings inwards and is now a major hazard, a thick piece of metal slamming wildly back and forth in the cabin.

The shuttle has tilted itself up on its side and is still scraping along the floor, while also spinning really fast.

I start to panic. I can’t keep myself still in here — it’s like being tossed around in a giant rock tumbler.

“Caladin!” I scream, just needing help from someone, and his name is the closest in my mind.

But he's not here — that storage room was maybe the only place they have an alarm.

The shuttle's engine is giving off its own deafening scream, the hull screeches on the metal floor, and as I hold on for dear life I realize that this is my last moment alive. The shuttle is only spinning faster and faster and moving more and more wildly. If it spins out of that hole and into space with the hatch still open, I'm dead. I'll suffocate in the vacuum. There is some kind of force field holding the air in the hangar, but Caladin's other shuttle passed through it like it wasn't even there.

Bitter tears burn at the corners of my eyes. I really didn't want it to end yet. I still have things to do!

"Sorry, Cora," I whimper, then desperately have to get out of the way of the wildly swinging hatch. It could actually kill me before space does.

The dark hole in the ship flashes past, coming quickly closer. One more rotation and I'll be flung out into space.

A huge shadow dives in the hatch, black and white all over. The next thing I know I'm inside a hard, smooth cocoon, the engine's sound is dying down, and the shuttle is moving less violently.

I stay still, crouched up inside a thick coil of warm skin. A slow, strong heartbeat thunders through me, and I know I've never been safer.

With a metallic shriek the shuttle finally falls over on its bottom and stays there, right side up.

Only then does Caladin uncoil his body and crawl out of the shuttle with me in his arms.

Outside, he holds me up while he checks me for injuries.

“That shuttle is broken,” he rumbles. “It was going to be repaired. This is the workshop hangar.”

I just cling to him. “Oh my God.”

Finding no broken bones, he still holds me out from him like a rag doll. “You’re safe now.”

I wipe some panicky tears off my face. “Did you know I was here?”

“We got an alarm, but I didn’t hurry to get here because I didn’t think you could do much damage. Then I remembered the broken shuttle and your constant urge to escape.”

“You scared me with that marriage thing,” I tell him in a shaky voice. “And you made me interpret between you and the Bululg about stripping my home planet for everything of value.”

He looks away. “Perhaps some mistakes were made.”

We stand like that until my heartbeat calms down.

“Sorry I broke your shuttle.”

“Those things are cheap and disposable,” he scoffs. “You wouldn’t have been able to go far, even if it had worked perfectly. They don’t have the best range. Let’s get you to sick bay. You have some bruises on you.”

Without hesitation, he lifts me up into his arms and carries me to the tube. I don’t try to protest — after what I went through, it feels really good. As I lay one arm around his thick neck, I catch our reflection in a blank panel we pass. We look good, too. His killer whale colors are more striking than my drab brown, but our difference in size is less obvious like this.

He takes my weight like it’s nothing, and that has to be quite a feat of strength. His scent fills my nostrils — there’s an

oceanic note, sure, but there's also something dry and clean about it.

In sick bay he uses the wand again, finding small bruises and bumps, but no fractures.

"There's not much we can do about your injuries," he says as he replaces the wand. "Your body will heal by itself."

I grab his hand and look up at him. "Thanks for getting me out of there. I would have died."

"That's very likely," he agrees, yellow eyes glinting. "Thankfully I enjoy diving through narrow openings."

I get an image in my mind of real orcas jumping through hoops at SeaWorld, and it makes me smile. "I had a feeling you did. It must have been a difficult jump. That shuttle was spinning really fast."

"It took some judgment," he says modestly. "Now, about the marriage."

I tense up again. "What about it?"

He sits down in a frame opposite from me, struggling to fit his dorsal fin into it. "First of all, it's not a real marriage. My family insists that I find a wife, but I'm not at all ready to settle down and give up my independence. I value it a great deal."

"No kidding," I mutter.

"What I propose is this. I will pay you a large amount of money to marry me. It will be a formally correct wedding, and we *will* be legally married. However, you and I know that we're not married in any *other* way. Right after the wedding, we will go our separate ways and not spend any time together. After one year of being married, we will get a divorce. You get

paid a large amount of money, and we'll go live our lives the way we want."

I glance down at his crotch. "And you'll insist on sex, right?"

"Sexual contact is not a part of this deal."

His reply comes so fast that I'm not sure if I should be relieved or offended.

"You want me to fake marry you," I sum up. "We'll be fake married for a year. Then we get divorced. What is the point of all this? What does your family care about whether or not you're married?"

He sets his massive jaws and grinds his teeth, and with teeth like his it's quite a scary thing to hear. "My... *kind* has certain traditions and laws, allowing mothers to make very detailed decisions about their children. My mother is not only the matriarch of our whole clan, but also the president of the Oumi Corporation. She's quite possibly the most powerful person on Xaokui. She's now threatening me with loss of privileges and great loss of independence unless I get married. And it has to happen in seven days. On Xaokui."

I lean back in the seat. "So this is really why you kidnapped me. That thing about keeping the Bululg off balance, the secretary thing — that was just a ruse to gradually entrap me and give me no choice in this. Am I close?"

His eyes flash yellow. "You're distant! This wedding thing is new. I just learned of it when we returned to the ship! Ask Skix."

"Hm. And I was the first person you thought of."

"No, but you're the closest."

“Ah do declare, Mister Caladin, you sure know how to compliment a girl.”

He frowns. “What was that?”

I give him a quick smile. “Never mind. Just Earth stuff.”

My mind reels. There are so many red flags here that a May Day parade in central Havana would look grayscale by comparison. But there’s also a distant speck of blue sky. Because if this offer is real, if he’s serious, it could give me more freedom than any Earth girl has ever had in space. It would be a real boost for my real plan. I could travel in space in my own spaceship, I could try to find that Resistance movement everyone’s muttering about.

“How much?”

“A hundred thousand spong,” Caladin says after thinking for a moment. “You like multiples of ten, I notice.”

“A thousand weeks’ salary for a secretary? That doesn’t sound like a lot.”

He tilts his head to the side. “You’re an extremely highly paid secretary. A hundred thousand would buy you a spaceship about half the size of this one.”

“So a hundred thousand is about half of what I would need, then.”

“*Two* hundred thousand?” Caladin grits his teeth again. “Between the two of you, you and my mother will bankrupt me. What do you need a ship like this for? This is a corporate headquarters with several smaller ships in it, a large water tank, room for heavy digging equipment in the base of it, cabins for many employees, and a thousand other things. You won’t need it!”

“I won’t need a ship *just* like this,” I tell him primly. “But I do need a big spaceship. A fast one. And I need money to live on for maybe the rest of my life. And there’s another thing.”

“Oh blasted *shallows*,” Caladin groans. “Females will be the death of me. What is it?”

“I may need your help for certain things. I don’t know what yet. I’m not familiar with how things work here in space. But you seem to be resourceful, and I want to be able to draw on your resources if I need them.”

“That’s a vague term,” Caladin says. “It would never stand up in any court.”

“Who’s talking about going to court? I guess what I’m really asking is that even after this is done, after the divorce is final, we won’t be enemies. We’ll still be in touch. And you’ll still help me if and when I need it. You brought me out in space, Caladin. It’s the least you can do not to leave me to fend for myself in a tough galaxy.”

“A hundred and forty thousand,” he offers, jaw tight. “And that other mysteriously vague term.”

“Two hundred,” I tell him, knowing I have a strong position here. “And a mild friendship afterwards.”

He draws his hand across his forehead. “Very well. Two hundred thousand, payable when the divorce is final.”

“Half up front,” I tell him. “I have to know that you’re serious. That I’m not being drawn into something that’s not real. That you will stand by this deal. Of course I don’t doubt that,” I add quickly when I see his eyes flash dangerously. “I’m sure you will. You’re a man of honor, I’m sure.”

He gets to his feet and starts pacing. “It’s a large amount,” he frets. “A hundred thousand could buy all the artifacts in my

collection.”

I’m starting to think that this is a real deal. He wouldn’t negotiate if he had no intention of going through with it. And I think he’s too direct and too principled to even think of cheating me.

“It’s a big thing you’re asking of me, Caladin. I’m frankly surprised aliens can marry each other. We’re clearly not the same species. What will your family say?”

“We’re definitely of different species,” the killer whale agrees. “But probably we’re closely enough related that there could be offspring without any artificial help. And even if we were more different, there are ways to ensure conception. Not that we’ll be doing that,” he says when he hears me draw breath to speak. “But creating offspring is the main point of marriage. At least in my mother’s mind, and that’s all that matters. If a year goes by after the wedding and there’s still no heir, I think she will suggest divorce herself.”

I think about it. It’s tempting to accept. Still, I am being railroaded into this, because he knows I have nowhere else to go. And because he just saved my life from my own recklessness.

“Caladin. If I say no to this strange deal, what happens?”

- CALADIN -

I think Selma is going to decline the offer.

I *could* force her into this. I *could* say that unless she agrees, I will hand her over to the Bululg for auctioning. I *could* threaten to auction her off myself. Or just sell her or give her away. She would have no choice but to accept.

But the truth is, I'm not going to do any of those things. While slavery is common in the galaxy, neither I nor my kind have ever been a part of it. We don't keep slaves, and we don't trade with them. I will have nothing to do with such an abhorrent practice. And there's a part of me that wants her to agree to my proposal without being forced. If she declines, I can find another female. It will be easy and definitely cheaper. But now I want it to be Selma.

"Then we continue like this," I tell her, "with you working as my secretary for as long as that suits both of us."

Selma looks up at me, her face open. "You won't get revenge on me? You won't fire me or put me back on Earth?"

"I wouldn't see the point."

She nods. "Me neither. So, half up front. Do you have a ring?"

“A... ring?” I have no idea what she means.

“On Earth, it’s common for the man to give his fiancée a ring when they get engaged. It’s called an ‘engagement ring’.”

I’m confused. “And this is a crucial factor? How big is this ring?”

“It’s my own weight in gold,” she chirps. “In a ring shape.”

My mind struggles with the concept. “What do you need it for?”

“I’m just joking. The ring has to be very small, so that it fits my finger.” She raises her hand and shows me which one.

“I doubt your weight in gold can be compressed to that size,” I tell her weakly, trying to imagine it.

She smiles, making her face light up and those dimples appear. “Then any amount of gold will do. Uncompressed. I must be able to wear it with perfect comfort at all times.”

I think hard. “I don’t think I have a ring like that available right now. I don’t even think I have gold. It doesn’t have many uses.”

“Then for now, we can use any kind of metal ring. Until you can get me a proper ring made of gold. Oh, and with a nicely ground diamond in it. If you happen to have one”

“Engagements on Earth are ludicrously complicated,” I groan. “But very well. Come with me.”

I take her hand, pull her out of the chair, and push her into the tube.

In the hangar we walk over to the machining area, and I start rummaging through the scrap metal bin. “Let’s see what I have. Magnesium. No, too flammable. Tungsten? Hard to

grind. Steel? Oxidizes too easily. How about aluminum?" I hold up a piece of the dull, gray metal.

"Not a big fan of aluminum engagement rings," Selma says. "Silver could do in a pinch."

I keep searching, taking out pieces and examining them one by one. "Copper. Tin. Zinc. This is wood, I think. Stone. Stone. Copper. Chromium. Palladium. Copper. Copper. Copper. Ah!" I take out a shiny cube of metal that I vaguely remember sawing off the end of a momentum turbine in a race craft I once built. It looks like aluminum, but it's much heavier. "Platinum!"

"Nice," Selma says. "It looks pretty, but I don't know that word. It doesn't give off radiation, does it?"

"No, no. It will hold a shape and it won't oxidize. It can be polished until it shines." I hold it up to the light. "Good enough?"

"I think so," Selma says. "All right. Can you melt it, or...?"

"I think I'll do something else. It's quite a soft metal."

I bring Selma over to a lathe and fasten the platinum cube to it. "It's been a long time since I did this," I tell her. "These days I'm always too busy to do any of the fun stuff. Here, protect your eyes."

She accepts the simple transparent screen I give her and places it on her head.

"Ah. Let's fix that..." I gently take hold of the screen and place it properly in front of her face, deliberately running two fingers along her silky, long fur she has on her head instead of an ordinary fin. She's incredibly exotic. "That's better."

Putting another screen on myself, I grab a turning tool and examine it. “I hope it’s still sharp.”

“Have you done this a lot?” Selma asks, taking a discreet step back.

“In the old days,” I tell her as I start the lathe. The platinum cube starts spinning very fast, held perfectly in place. “This is quite a primitive tool, but I used to race home-built spaceships. When you build and service them, you’re not allowed to use tools that are any more advanced than this.” I place the sharp edge of the tool against the support bar and push it slowly towards the spinning cube.

“I would never have figured you for a mechanic,” Selma says. “You’re more complicated than I thought.”

The cutting edge catches the platinum and shaves off a millionth of a finger’s breadth. “We all have our interests. This used to be one of mine.” I push the tool a fraction further in and shave off a little more metal from the edges of the cube. Glittering slivers of platinum start flying.

Selma goes up on her toes to get a better look. “If you have time some day, I’d like to see your self-built ship. If you still have it.”

Her words make a strange warmth appear in me. I lose concentration and withdraw the tool. “I still have it somewhere onboard.”

“*Cool.*”

I push the tool to the metal again and continue until the cube has become a squat cylinder.

Then I turn off the lathe and hold out my hand. “How wide is your finger?”

She holds it out, and I measure it, then mark its width on the platinum. Starting the lathe again, I drill a hole down the middle of the cylinder and ream it out to a little smaller than her size.

Then I grind the outside down until the platinum is a suitable thickness.

I stop the lathe and take the ring out. "Is this getting there?"

"Very nice," Selma says. "It's a little too long, though. It would cover half my finger."

I saw off the outer three quarters of the ring and show it to her. "Like this?"

She smiles. "One quarter of that would be perfect."

I saw off the final quarter, then find polishing tools to finish the ring to Selma's satisfaction. It's quite shiny by the end. "Unfortunately the only diamond I have is the floor in my office. Should I chip a piece off it?"

"No need," she says. "This will do fine. It's only a fake engagement."

"Try it on," I suggest and take off the eye protection screen.

She puts her hands behind her back. "There's a special way to do that."

"Oh?"

"Yes. You have to get down on one knee."

"You have to?"

"No, *you* have to."

I frown. "Is this another joke, like your weight in gold?"

Selma takes off her protection screen and pushes some hair behind one ear. “No. This is a real tradition.”

Sighing with how cumbersome this is, I slowly get down on my right knee, so that my face is only slightly above Selma’s.

I hold out the ring. “Try it on.”

“You have to say, ‘Selma Hudgins, will you marry me?’”

“What’s Hudgins?”

Her dimples appear again. “It’s my last name. My first name is Selma, my last is Hudgins. My full name is Selma Hudgins. I just think it’s a good idea if we both know the name of the person we’re going to marry.”

“It’s a tradition?”

“Sure. Do you have a name except for Caladin?”

“My full name is Caladin of the clan Beeom,” I tell her, mildly confused. “Except that’s only my air name, while my water name is what we consider my real name. You heard the first part of it before, but air doesn’t do it justice. When I refill my tank I can speak it properly.”

“Oh. Then I guess Caladin of the clan Beeom works. Shall we try?”

Still down on one knee, I offer the ring to Selma. “Selma Hudgins, will you marry me?”

“Yes, Caladin of the clan Beeom,” she says in a voice that sounds gruff. “I will.”

Still she doesn’t take the ring, but she holds her hand out suggestively, so I slide the ring onto it and gently push it all the way down. “There.”

“Perfect fit,” Selma says and wipes some moisture from her eyes.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, alarmed. Did I botch the procedure?

“Nothing’s wrong,” she snuffles. “It’s just... I know this is a fake engagement. But still it feels kind of nice. You know? I’m sorry, I didn’t know I would react this way.”

“Me neither,” I confess. “It is a nice feeling. Can I stand up now?”

She takes my hand and pulls me up. “Yes.”

I turn off the lathe and activate a small cleaning robot to sweep the floor and the lathe.

“So, I assume from this unusual experience that you accept my offer. I will pay the first hundred thousand as soon as possible. I don’t have that much in cash, and I assume you don’t have an interstellar bank account.”

“All right,” Selma says, admiring the ring. “As soon as possible, please. Well before the wedding.”

I brush the final specks of platinum off my chest. “Then that’s the next point on my agenda. Now, Selma the secretary, I’ll go and inform Skix of this, and you can go get something to eat. Did you work out the food machine?”

“It’s easy,” she says and starts walking towards the tube. “I like some of the food it makes.”

“Good. Come to my office at six. We have work to do.”

Selma points to her bare wrist. “I don’t have a watch, and I left my phone in the truck.”

“Ah. Skix will get you, then.” I dial the galley and push her into the tube, and then I go to my office.

Standing in the middle of the floor, I stare up through the dome. The blue-white planet that produced Selma hangs right above me. It looks a little bit like Xaokui, except there's far too much dry land.

I should be feeling angry and frustrated about this. My mother is turning into a micromanaging dictator, threatening to give Taledak everything I have.

But being fake engaged to Selma doesn't feel so bad. Especially now that I know what she looks like under her uniform. Of course I'll stick to my promise to not add any sexual things to the deal. Still, if I'm going to be engaged, having a fiancée with a rear end like that seems appropriate, fake wedding or not. Certainly my cousins will be envious when they see her. We must make sure her wedding attire shows it off as much as possible. Would it be proper if she wore a garment with that whole rear section cut out? Or perhaps less is more, perhaps all that's needed is a hint, a slit, a carefully placed hole in the fabric, in the shape of a crescent... my crotch swells.

I call for Skix and he appears right away, *shvupping* his way across the diamond floor. "Yes, boss?"

"I'm engaged to be married," I tell him as I sit down behind my desk. "Please let my mother know. She does not have to find a bride for me."

"Oh. But... ah. Now, I wonder... Hmm. I see. Right. That's quick."

It's rare to see Skix flustered, and I enjoy it a great deal.

"And please prepare to withdraw a hundred thousand spong from my personal account."

“Pricey fake engagement,” the green lawyer says, tapping on his old tablet. “You could buy a fancy ship for that.”

“It’s the first installment,” I inform him. “The second half to be paid after the divorce is complete.”

“The *second half*?” he splutters. “You’re paying someone *two hundred thousand* for this?!”

I smile at his outrage. It’s so rare I manage to bring him out of balance. “I am. You keep telling me how badly I need to overpay you so that you can stand being around me. And you’re only my lawyer. Imagine how my fiancée and fake wife must feel!”

“Well, point taken, but... All right, you’re the boss. Where do I send this insanely generous amount?”

“It must be withdrawn in cash. The party in question doesn’t have a bank account.”

He makes some notes. “Ah. So not royalty, then. Or the heir of a business empire.”

“Correct, Skix. Although I suppose she could be. I’ll ask her when she comes to work at six.”

Skix freezes in mid-scribble. “She comes to work at six?”

“Yes.”

“*Here?*”

I grin. “Yes.”

The office is quiet for several heartbeats while he processes it.

“Now, boss... when we talked about this earlier today, you gave me certain requirements for this fake wife. You stated she should be beautiful. Presentable. Yes, she clearly fills those requirements. You also said she should be cultured. Well, she

might be. She's not a total savage, anyway. But you also demanded that your fake wife be submissive and not too smart. Are those words you would naturally use when talking about Selma? A small alien female who has been running you ragged in your own ship, who is fluent in the impossibly difficult Bululg language, and who has landed a two-hundred-thousand-spong deal with you a little over a day since she met you?"

I wave his objections away. "Nobody can satisfy *all* requirements. The perfect female doesn't exist, and it's time we faced that. Selma is my fake fiancée and future fake wife. I gave her a ring and promised her two hundred thousand spong in total."

Skix makes some final notes and closes his old-fashioned tablet. "Well, this will be a doozy to report to your mother. You'll marry your own secretary, whom you abducted from her home planet less than two days ago."

I take out some documents and start scanning them. "Surely you can skip the secretary and abduction part, and also the two-day part? Simply say I've fallen in love with a wonderful humanoid female, probably aquatic, from an ocean planet. A very smart and independent one, unusually cultured and presentable. An asset to our whole clan. It's true love, and I can't wait to marry her on Xaokui in seven days' time."

Skix sighs. "All right. Will do. The matriarch may want to see a picture of the female."

"Send her a generic and blurry picture of an Earth female. But first she needs new garments. The Bululg must have that on their station, yes?"

"Probably," the lawyer says, walking over to the tube. "But I would recommend getting any garments straight from her

home planet, while we're still this close to it. The Bululg are bound to only have clothing fit for a slave, not a secretary or fiancée."

"Very well," I tell him as I get to my feet. "We'll land on the Earth's moon and unload the digging machines. I can do that by myself. Get her here at six, would you?"

- SELMA -

“No, that’s not right, Selma. The amount is wrong. See this?”

“Sorry. I thought it meant... oh. Yes, I see. That’s a seven.”

Working as Caladin’s secretary is a struggle. Not that he’s a terrible boss, although his grumpiness is back in full force. But he uses a written language that looks nothing like the Interspeech one, although it is that language when read. It’s all confusing, and it doesn’t make things better that there’s a lot of numbers involved in his management job. And numbers, alien or from Earth, were never my thing.

To top it off, his number system isn’t based on ten, but on fourteen. That makes it hard to count and calculate. Of course he has advanced alien computer stuff to do most of it, but it would still be useful for me to understand what I’m seeing and add simple numbers in my mind.

There’s also the issue that I’m not at my sharpest right now. Being this close to Caladin is both exhilarating and frightening. He’s like a mix of George Clooney and the xenomorph monster from the *Alien* movie. He’s all jaw-droppingly attractive man and also all icy predator. My primitive brain is on high alert around him, making me flinch

at his slightest movement. And my even more primitive body keeps creating tingles and urges at the most improper times.

After several hours of trying to instruct me, Caladin sighs. “I suppose accounting isn’t your thing, Selma. Now, then. I will take you back to Earth.”

I go cold. Going back to Earth could mean being sent right into the claws of the Bululg. It could mean the end of my life, and almost certainly the end of my plan.

“I’m... I’m sorry,” I stutter. “I’ll do better. I’ll try harder!”

He looks at me empty. “Back to Earth to get you some more clothes. Since we’re in the neighborhood. Then we set course for Xaokui. We will find other things for you to do. For instance, deal with my other employees.”

Relief washes through me. “Oh. I thought...”

Caladin gets to his feet and stretches. It’s a mind-boggling display of muscles, shimmering in pure white and deep black. “I won’t set you back on Earth unless you want it. But while Skix finds your brown uniform the height of elegance, I don’t. And my family will expect you to be decently dressed when we arrive on Xaokui. Do you have any suggestions for where on Earth we might go to dress you? Not your old home, of course. You will get new clothes.”

“Like a... store?”

“Somewhere they have clothing in different sizes, so that we can be sure to find something that fits you. I’m not good with needle and thread. My hands are too big.” He shows me, spreading his colossal, calloused hands in front of him.

“So a mall? A shopping center.”

“Somewhere we can get this done quickly,” he stresses. “The Bululg don’t hate me anymore, but they do want to decide who comes and goes to this planet that they own. We can’t stay too long in any one place.”

I look up at the Earth, hanging over our heads. It’s a blue and white crescent, because we’re right now orbiting exactly where the day meets the night. “Looks like it’s night time in my home country. The stores will be closed.”

Caladin looks at me. “Do you need them to be open?”

Of course. He’s a predator alien who’s used to just taking what he wants, be it antiques or girls.

“I guess not,” I tell him. “We can just break in, I suppose. Probably nobody’s going to resist you.”

He marches to the tube. “Then let’s go. By the way, are you a royal? Or from some powerful clan? Or a rich one?”

I can’t hold back a dry laugh. “I’m not any of those things. *Really* not.”

“Ah. Good. Good.”

We get into another spaceship, bigger than the shuttle and pitch black on the outside. Then we fall to Earth on the night side. The planet is in darkness, except for small points of light here and there.

I put my face up to the side window to look out. “Before the Bululg invasion, the cities would be lit up brightly at night. Now, there’s barely any lights at all.”

“They’re plundering it,” Caladin says. “The native population will get badly demoralized. Your planet is as good as dead, Selma. I don’t think it can be saved.”

“I hope it can,” I tell him quietly. “Some people talk about a Resistance movement, that there are Earthlings in space that are fighting the Bululg and winning great victories. Some say they destroyed the Bululg home planet.”

“Oh, was that them?” Caladin asks, piloting us down into a small cluster of lights that’s probably quite a big city. “I heard they lost their homeworld recently, but I didn’t know it was your people doing it.”

I turn to look at him. “It’s real? The Bululg lost their own planet?”

“Attacked by a swarm of fierce aliens, they say. Totally ruined. Never heard that Earth was involved, but your species certainly has reason to be miffed with them.”

“Yeah. Could be just a rumor.” But hearing it confirmed cheers me up a good deal. Maybe there’s really hope.

“Ah, but it’s a new rumor,” Caladin says. “Not an old one. New rumors are more likely to be true, in my experience. I should mention that even if the Bululg are forced off Earth for some reason, there are many waiting to take over and plunder it further.”

I give him a glance. “People like you?”

He doesn’t look away from his flying. “I think I’m done dealing with the Bululg. Except for the ancient artifacts, I mean. Which is not so much plunder as a treasure hunt.”

“You didn’t make a deal with them for the bulk stuff, the plastic and metals. But you weren’t that far apart on price. It would have been easy to find an amount in the middle, which they tried several times. But you didn’t budge.”

He puts the ship into a steep bank, and there’s a sucking motion in my stomach as we plummet towards the ground. I

grasp a handhold and cling to it.

“Not my best negotiation,” he says. “Well, perhaps I lost interest in that deal about midway through. I got the ancient artifact deal, which I still wanted.”

“Was it because of me?”

The cabin is quiet as Caladin pilots us towards a cluster of mostly dark skyscrapers in the distance. I can only see them on the large screen on the dashboard, not out the windshield.

Before I know it we’re zooming in among the buildings only a hundred feet above ground. It looks like the downtown of a big city, so even though it’s all dark and it looks deserted, there should still be shops here.

Caladin finds a big park and lands on what was probably a lawn once, but which is now more like a mismanaged meadow, overgrown with tall weeds.

“Perhaps,” he says after he cuts the engine and unsnaps his seatbelt. “Perhaps I got a distaste for the whole plunder business. Perhaps nobody should have to take an active part in the destruction of their own homeworld. But I hope you can still take an active part in a small break-in. You don’t want me to pick out clothes for you. It would be all sheer and transparent.”

I unsnap my own seatbelt and follow him out.

It’s a chilly night. I’m not sure which city this is, but it could be somewhere in the Midwest. It’s not that strange to be back on Earth — it’s been only a couple of days. But I’m not a city girl and I’m not sure where to go.

Caladin seems confident, though. He marches out of the park and straight across the deserted street to the nearest building. It’s a boarded-up restaurant, obviously long out of business.

We walk along the street, passing broken windows and graffiti-filled plywood boards. Finally we find a storefront with some mannequins wearing relatively modern stuff. It's a big international chain.

"Would this suit you?" Caladin asks and goes to the window, peering in before he grabs the door handle and pulls.

"It's closed," I unnecessarily point out. "But sure, if you can get us inside."

The muscled orca-man changed his stance and winds up as if to give the window an almighty haymaker. I wince — he's going to cut himself to shreds.

But he relaxes again and gives me a little smirk, takes an alien device out of his utility belt, and slides it along the door's top, side, and bottom. Then he pulls at the door, and it opens like it had never been locked.

"Non-destructive break-in tool," he explains as he holds the door open for me. "Banned in many solar systems. Probably this one, too. But the door will work fine after we're gone. I know how you hate destroying things on Earth."

It's a big store with a big selection, almost fully stocked. My size was never the easiest to find, but I'm able to snag a couple of jeans, some tops and skirts, a couple of dresses, and a bunch of underwear. I don't want to be too greedy, acutely aware that this is plunder good as any.

Caladin goes to the swimwear section and takes down a tiny, beige bikini. "How about this?"

I look at the thin strings and the barely-there slivers of thin fabric. "I might as well be naked."

"Hmm. I agree." He looks me up and down, his intense gaze starting tingles again.

I search the aisles for things I like, wanting to get it done fast.

“That’s all?” Caladin asks when I tell him I’m done. “I thought you would need more.”

“It’s all I need,” I tell him. “Provided there is such a thing as a washing machine in your ship. How will you pay for this?”

He looks at me for a moment, then starts searching his pockets. “Pay... ah. Yes. This.”

He takes out a small blue crystal and places it carefully in the middle of the glass-topped counter by the cash register.

“What’s that?” I ask.

“That’s thirty-five spong, which should be enough to pay for your little heap of cheap fabric twenty times over.”

“Nobody uses spong on Earth,” I point out. “It has no value here. We’re not allowed to use space money.”

“Then it’s time it came into use. And it’s the only money I have.”

I look down myself. My little ring is probably not worth nearly enough to pay for the clothes.

“How would they spend it? If they wanted to?”

“Any non-Earthling would immediately know what it was and would happily accept it as payment for goods. Do aliens come here from time to time? To trade, I mean. Not to harvest women.”

“I think so,” I tell him. “We sometimes see them walking around.”

“Then buy something from them using spong. Or have them change the amount into Earth currency. It should be easy enough. And of course the Bululg won’t like it if their slaves

start using spong. I think it will irk them a great deal. Real money is only for free people.”

I guess that’s the best I’m going to get. Searching under the counter, I find a chipped mug with pens and pencils in it and a half block of light blue Post-its.

This is thirty-five SPONG, I write on one little sheet, then rip it off and keep writing on the one under it.

Any alien will know what it is.

It’s money from space.

It’s worth about five thousand dollars.

You can trade with aliens using this.

Sorry!

I arrange the six Post-it sheets in a readable row, then place the small blue crystal in the middle of them. “That’ll have to do.”

Caladin leads the way out of the store, carrying two big bags.

As we walk out the door I see movement out on the street.

I freeze. “Security guard,” I hiss.

Caladin grabs my wrist and pulls me with him. “Hello, little uniform man,” he says in Interspeech. “Don’t mind us. Just out shopping in that unmanned establishment.”

The security guard backs off a couple of steps when the giant orca alien walks past him. Then he gives a half-practiced salute. “Good evening to you too, sir.”

He gives me a curious look, but Caladin is so obviously an alien that I must be his slave. And the way things are on Earth now, that’s perfectly acceptable.

Back in the ship we stow the bags in the lounge area.

Caladin raises his white eyebrows. “Anything else?”

This would clearly be the time to just go crazy and steal anything I’d ever want from any store. But the idea repels me. I’m not going to plunder my own planet.

I sit down in the co-pilot’s seat and buckle up. “Let’s go home.”

Back at the ship we go straight to the control room, where I’ve never been before. It looks a little like Caladin’s office, with the same dome above a triangular arrangement of seats, with many mysterious consoles around them. I guess that dome is fake and that the image is a projection, but it looks phenomenal.

“Imax has nothing on this,” I mumble as I peer up at Earth. It looks so peaceful and perfect up there. But being there, it’s just depressing. “Can we leave now?”

Caladin points to a big three-dimensional display that curves around one section of the wall. “We’re already underway. It takes a while for a ship this size to get going. The drive is too cold to run at full power.”

I get up and walk over to Caladin’s seat. The display shows the ship seen from the side, with lots of alien writing around it. They don’t tell me much, but I should learn to understand them if I want to fly my own spaceship.

“I will learn those letters and numbers,” I tell him.

“Of course you will,” he says easily. “You’re *my* secretary.”

“And your fake fiancée,” I remind him.

“Precisely,” he rumbles.

Then it overwhelms me. I’ve fought it all day, but being this close to such a remarkable male for this long has to drive me a

little crazy.

“Thank you for what you’ve done for me.” I lean in and place a little kiss on his cheek.

And, as if he expected it, Caladin smoothly turns his face so that his lips touch mine.

His lips are soft and warm, but I know they hide huge, sharp teeth, and that gives me an extra thrill. This mixture of fear and arousal is addictive.

I gently disengage and turn away, worried that if I don’t, I’m going to throw myself at him.

“I’ll go to my cabin and try the clothes on. When do I work next?” My voice has a tremble in it.

“At zero,” Caladin rumbles, half turned in his seat so he can see me. “In my office. I want to get a lot of work done while on the way to Xaokui.”

I walk over to the tube, unable to suppress an extra swing in my hips because I know he’s looking. And I know he likes what he sees. That comment about what he would buy me if it were up to him has to mean that, right?

Back in my cabin I lean my back on the door and drop the shopping bags. Yes, he’s special. Yes, he commands all my attention. And yes, he’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen.

But he’s also my abductor. And my boss *and* my fake fiance.

God, how did I get so deeply entangled in his crazy life in such a short time?

- CALADIN -

I lie down in my stateroom and try to get some rest. But my thoughts keep going to the female down on the cabin level. Is she showering right now? Is she curled up naked on the bunk? Is she writhing in some secret feminine ecstasy, eyes closed, her hair spread out like a dark cloud around her head, moaning in her alien language?

No, I have to pull myself together. It's a fake engagement, and she's only an employee. That's how simple it is. I wanted freedom and independence, and I have to cling to that as hard as I can. I can't give in to my lusts and my desires, but keep Selma at arm's length. It can be strictly a business relationship.

But that kiss... so soft, so *real*. It will be a struggle.

The voyage to Xaokui takes five days, and I'm just about able to keep my distance to Selma. Even when we're in

my office and going over documents, I make sure to be perfectly cool and distant.

Not that it works — my restless nights are filled with thoughts of her. Every night I seriously consider going to her cabin and checking if the reality is as good as the fantasy. I'm able to control myself, but the nights are uncomfortable. Not only does my dorsal fin prevent me from sleeping on my back, but now there's also an insistent protrusion at my front too, that forces me to sleep on my side.

She spends a lot of time learning to read and write several types of writing, and she also makes progress with the numbers. She and Skix spend a lot of time together, seeming to enjoy each other's company. I don't mind that, and Skix is probably a better teacher than I am. He is completely asexual, as is his entire species. He won't tell me how they procreate, only that knowing the process would disturb me.

We make a short stop in a semi-civilized star system to get the cash, but Selma is strangely unimpressed by the shimmering, translucently red crystal that contains a hundred thousand spong.

“This is it? All right.” She casually puts the crystal in the front pocket of her blue pants instead of reverently wrapping it in fabric and carrying it off cradled in both hands like a baby, which is what most people would have done.

“Take better care of it,” I snap. “That's a lot of money.”

Selma puts her little hands at her hips. “You know, there's no need to be this grumpy. Do you think you're impressing anyone with that nonsense?”

I take a step closer, towering over her. “What was that, little female?”

She flinches, but doesn't look away. "You heard me. We all respect you, you know. That crankiness just makes you seem... silly."

Rage flares in me. What the *beach* does she know? At the same time, her bravery makes me want to rip her clothes off and ravage her here and now.

"Go to your cabin,» I command in a voice that's gone raspy. "You have work at six." My fingernails are digging hard into my palms.

She gives me an angry glare and takes the crystal out of her pocket. "Yes, *Sir*."

She turns on her heel and marches off, carelessly tossing the valuable money crystal in the air and catching it with one hand all the way to the transport tube. It's a blatant display of insolence.

When she gets into the tube and is sucked away, the room still echoes with my furious growl.

- - -

On day five, my mother calls.

I have her projected on the smallest screen in the office, not wanting a giant image of her towering over me.

"Hello, mother."

"My dear Caladin! I heard the wonderful news some days ago, but it has been mysteriously impossible to contact you."

“Yes, well. We’re in hyperspace. It can be unpredictable.” *But not unpredictable enough, so I turned the receiver off for a few days.*

“Of course it can. The important thing is that you’re on the way now. Arriving tomorrow, I hear. How wonderful.” She’s going a little gray, both the white and the black parts of her skin losing their depth and their luster. Her head fin is hanging to the side, decorated with the golden filigree mesh that is the sign of a matriarch. She’s wearing a black robe that flows from her shoulders.

“Yes, tomorrow,” I confirm. “So I hope the preparations for the wedding are proceeding well.”

“Oh, everything is ready, Caladin. Everything. I’m so glad you finally found a female to share your life with! I can’t wait for the wiggling of little fins.”

I force a little smile. “She is a special one. Her name is Selma. She only has an air name.”

“Selma? But that’s fine. Curious, though — I understood she’s an aquatic from an ocean planet?”

“Yes, yes. But her species has lived on land for eons, much longer than ours has.”

The matriarch beams, showing artificially whitened teeth, ground square as the fashion is for the females of the upper classes. “Then I’m sure she’s perfectly suited for you. Now, the ceremony will be well attended. I expect you at your best behavior, Caladin. And make sure you practice with your fiancée. She may not be used to the way we do things. She’s with you in your ship?”

“Yes, of course. I want her close to me always.”

My mother pretends to wipe a tear from her face. “It’s so wonderful to see young love. You know, I wondered when you’d settle down. And here you are, doing the right thing at last. You will carry the clan, Caladin. You and your no doubt extraordinary wife. I can’t wait to meet her! And talk to her at great length. Perhaps she will tell me how you two met, since you’re being very quiet about all the details that concern the love of your life. And since you’re being quite hard to get hold of.”

“Perhaps,” I reply.

Yes, the matriarch is deeply suspicious about this. She’s going to make sure this wedding is real.

“We will use a standard ceremony in the Cathedral at Crouy. No wedding gifts, of course — that would be ridiculous. A Journey would be expected, though.”

I sigh. “So noted.”

“Well, I sense that you’re extremely busy, Caladin. Go and be with your fiancée now, And practice, please. There will be a lot of press. Goodbye, my dear son. See you soon.”

“Goodbye, Mother.” I cut the connection.

Well, she’s right. We should practice the ceremony. And we should practice pretending that we love each other deeply. I’m not sure that part will be hard.

“Skix,” I say into the comms. “Can you get Selma to my office, please?”

“*She’s right here, boss,*” Skix says. “*On the way now.*”

Shortly after, Selma is walking towards me on the long, white carpet that she needs to not get dizzy. She’s wearing a dark gray skirt that reaches to just below her knees and a white shirt

with interesting things going on at the shoulders, making them look rounder and fuller. It's quite fetching.

"Hey, boss. What can I do for you?" She's holding a frosted bowl of some kind of chilled dessert. She must have been in the galley with Skix.

"Selma. We will get married in two days. Fake married."

She sits down across from me and eats from the bowl with a small spoon. "I know."

"And so you should know about how wedding ceremonies are performed on Xaokui."

She pulls the spoon out of her mouth. "That would be useful. How does it work?"

I think about it, realizing that while I have attended a good few weddings in my time, I didn't pay much attention. "Skix, could you join us?"

"*Sure thing, boss.*"

The little lawyer appears and *shvupps* his way to my desk.

"Skix, Selma and I have to practice the wedding ceremony. Do you know all the details about it?"

"I have read up on it, yes. There aren't that many details in the first place," Skix says. "It all depends on you, on how elaborate you want it. Or how the matriarch wants it done, in your case. The essential part is only the vows. If you want to go through it now, you should be standing up. Side by side."

I sigh and get out of my chair. Selma gets up, too, but stays on the carpet.

Skix consults his tablet. "Now, the cleric officiating will say a great deal about love and loyalty and the importance of the

ocean. And in your case, you can expect her to talk a lot about family and respecting one's matriarch. But you don't have to respond to it. The crucial part is when she asks you, boss, if you're ready to take your vows. You say 'I am'. Then she will ask you if you solemnly swear to be Selma's trusted husband, her support, her protector, and so on. This part varies in length. Your clue is when the cleric asks you to confirm. Then you say, 'I, Caladin of the clan Beeom, solemnly swear in front of the ocean and my matriarch that I will be all those things to my wife.'

"And then?"

"Then it's Selma's turn. The cleric will ask if she's ready to take her vows. She says 'I am.' Then the cleric will say many of the same things, and then Selma says, 'I swear'."

I groan. "Why does she have to say so much less than me?"

Skix taps on his tablet. "I don't know. Could be because she is now in line to be matriarch of the clan and it's taken for granted that she will be responsible. Does it matter?"

"It's fine," Selma says. "The less I have to say, the better."

"Then comes the final part, which is the kiss. The kiss seals it and finalizes the ceremony. Let's practice. I'll be the cleric. You two stand in front of me. Beside Caladin, Selma."

"I don't like standing on the glass floor," Selma says and clenches her jaw.

I sigh and move so she can stay on the narrow carpet. "Come on, Skix."

"All right. I'm the cleric, but I'll skip most of the harangue. Blah blah blah, respect the ocean, respect the matriarch more, blah blah. Caladin of the clan Beeom, are you ready to take your vows?"

“I am,” I grunt.

“A little bit of enthusiasm would be good here, so it’s not blatantly obvious that this is a fake marriage. But all right. Do you solemnly swear to be Selma’s blah blah blah and so on? If so, swear it now.”

“I, Caladin of the clan Beeom, solemnly swear in front of... what was it?”

“The ocean and my matriarch.”

“The ocean and my matriarch that I will be all those things to my wife.”

“Good! Try to sound less bored. Selma, are you ready to take your vows?”

“I am.”

“Then blah blah blah and so forth. If so, swear it now.”

“I swear,” Selma says, giggling with the weirdness of it all.

“No laughing, please. Crying is fine. Then I declare in front of blah blah blah that you are now husband and wife. You will now merge your destinies and seal them. That means ‘now kiss’. You probably don’t need to practice that.”

“Oh, but we do,” I decide on a whim. “It’s the most important thing. Have you ever kissed anyone, Skix?”

“Certainly *not*,” the little alien scoffs. “Thankfully my kind can do *just* fine without such barbarisms.”

“Then you don’t know how hard it is! It’s the kind of thing that must be practiced.”

I turn to face Selma. She looks up at me with laughter in her clear eyes.

Bending down, I place my hand behind her slender neck and pull her face to me. Then I kiss her right on the mouth, enjoying the warmth and the scent and the flavor of her clean mouth, with a hint of sweetness and coldness from whichever frozen dish she was eating.

Oh my, this is special. Her little teeth against my tongue, the smoothness of her hair under my hand, her chest, her closed eyes, the wetness, the movement of her tiny tongue...

"I think that's enough," Skix says. "Very convincing. Well done."

I keep it going for several heartbeats, then slowly pull my lips from Selma's. She looks up at me with big, glassy eyes, breathing deeply.

"That should work," I manage. "Not difficult at all. But so important to practice."

"Maybe," Selma pipes up, "we should do it again. Just to make sure."

"Good idea," Skix says. "Blah blah blah, the ocean, the matriarch—"

"No," I interrupt him. "Just the last part."

"Oh. You will now merge your destinies and seal them."

I gently pull Selma to me again, repeating the kiss, but taking my time and learning her reactions and movements. My crotch swells so much I have to pull my hips back to not poke her in the stomach.

"Ah," I say when we finally disengage. "We're getting there. Maybe just one more time."

"We can't leave this part to chance," Selma agrees, her voice raspy. "It must be perfect."

Skix fidgets. “You probably don’t need me for this.”

I exchange a smirk with Selma. “Probably not.”

He leaves as quickly as he can.

I lean in and pull Selma up to me again. She lays her head back and lets her mouth fall open, eyelids fluttering. I let my lips graze hers, enjoying the soft, tickling sensation. My nose touches hers before I make contact for real, losing myself in it and not caring if my hardness is poking into her. It’s fair, she should know how much she turns me on.

My other hand rests lightly on her hip, but now I slowly bring it up to hold her waist. She’s firm, but soft there too. The luxuriousness of her body makes it hard to concentrate, but I slide my hand higher along her side, towards the shoulder. There’s a strap of some kind under the thin fabric of her shirt, and out of curiosity I let one finger follow it down to a much softer part of her.

Selma whimpers, eyes only narrow, clear slits.

Too late I realize why — I’m caressing the side of her breast. Through two layers of fabric, but still.

She’s not complaining, though. If anything, she’s leaning more into me and opening her lips more.

Sweet depths, it’s tempting to see where this could be going.

No, I have to control myself. This is supposed to be a fake kiss, but I don’t think it is anymore. It has turned real, and that’s the one thing I can’t allow.

Disengaging, I slowly pull away. “I think we got it.”

“I think so too,” Selma says breathlessly. “We won’t botch it when everyone’s watching.”

I walk back to my chair and sit down. “That’s right. Selma, if you’re done with your meal, get me the chief of department seventeen on the viewer. I have to talk to him about the output issues.”

She stiffens, then sends me a strange look.

I ignore it. We’re back to business. Business is all this is.

She takes her empty bowl and spoon. “I’ll just put this back in the galley.”

My cock stays hard when she walks to the tube, round behind jiggling under the skirt. Her gait is quick and tight on the carpet, her head held low, betraying her hurt feelings.

Beach. I let that go too far. I must remember that this wedding is going to be as fake as a ten-spong crystal. I have to stay on top of it.

It’s just business.

- SELMA -

I spend the last night before the wedding alone in my cabin, hearing the various humming noises change their pitch as we get closer to Caladin's planet.

I'm nervous, but I'm also determined. There's a lot of money in this. There's a lot of *freedom* in this. Freedom to choose my own path in space, a freedom that no other Earth girl has ever had.

I have to remind myself of that. Because I have trouble thinking of anything other than those kisses.

They were good. They were incredibly good. I've never had anything like it.

They were so good that they didn't seem fake. Not at all. I did hold back in the beginning, but I couldn't help losing myself in the moment. It was just overwhelming.

It hit me in a sensitive place, I guess. Caladin was cold and distant for days, not smiling, just doing business with me as his assistant. His grumpiness was back in full force.

Then this kissing stuff happened, and I enjoyed seeing the playful part of him again. It made me think the ice had thawed, and it made me want to go with the flow.

And then he withdrew and reverted back to my steely boss in the blink of an eye.

Fine, that's what he is. And this is just a fake wedding. But if so, maybe he shouldn't try to make parts of it seem so *real*.

Whatever. I'll kiss him once more, at the wedding, and then never again.

It's fine. This is just business. And I shouldn't be kissing my abductor anyway.

Skix uses the comms and asks me if he can enter my cabin.

"Come on in," I tell him.

He puts his big head through the door. "Ah, there you are. Dressed and ready, I see."

I'm wearing jeans and a shirt, not too fancy. The rest of my clothes are in two plastic bags on my bunk. "Pretty much. Where will I stay while on this planet?"

"Oh, right here in the ship. If that's all right with you. I'm staying here, too. Caladin as well, at least for now. But the wedding will take place outside, of course. In fact, it's about time for you to get ready for it. The team is waiting."

"The team? I thought we still had time."

"Yes, but the bride is the most important person at any wedding. With the possible exception of the groom, but there's some disagreement about that. Some even say that in an ideal wedding, both of them should be present. We need you to be prepared, so that you look the way a bride should. It usually takes a while, they say. Here is a piece of jewelry that you might need."

He holds out a thin, silvery chain with a small pendant, shaped like the back fin of an orca.

“What’s that?” I carefully take it.

“You need a place to keep your money. This is what most people use, just a small item you can put any crystal into for safekeeping. The chain is much stronger than it looks, and the pendant will only open to the touch of your finger. Press the sides.”

I do, and the pendant pops open, revealing a padded little compartment shaped like the red crystal Caladin gave me. I get it out of my pocket and place it in the pendant, then close it firmly and open it again. “Very clever.”

“Put it around your neck and don’t take it off. Shall we go?”

I put the thin necklace on and get to my feet. From now on, I’m just an object, passive and in the hands of others. It’s not the best feeling, but I did agree to this, and I have to keep my focus on the prize. “I’m ready.”

Skix takes me out of the ship, then gives me a few minutes to recover from what I’m seeing.

The spaceship has landed on an immense ridge, sticking out of a turquoise ocean. The ridge is a mile high and stretches from horizon to horizon, looking like an infinite, white wall built on a blue glass floor. It’s like the Cliffs of Dover plummeting down on both sides of an endless, fertile strip of land. It’s easily ten miles wide, filled with plants and trees in various shades of green.

A bright yellow sun shines in an azure sky, reminding me of Earth. But this is clearly not my home planet.

“Welcome to Xaokui,” Skix says. “Not my favorite planet in the galaxy, to be honest. It’s too wet for me. But maybe you’ll like it. It’s somewhat similar to your own.”

“This is Caladin’s home planet?”

“And the home of his clan and all his kind. They’re called Louluani, by the way. The species, I mean. There’s about ten million of them, most of them right here on Xaokui. It’s an ocean planet, as you can see. The only dry land are small islands and these big ridges, which form a rough network all over the planet. This particular ridge is called Crouy. You can see another one over there.” He points with his three-fingered hand.

In the far distance there is indeed another ridge, much like this one. It’s like a thin, white line that separates the ocean and the sky, and when I follow it with my eyes I see it connects with the ridge I’m standing on, just on this side of the horizon.

“The Louluani is an ocean species, right?”

“Partly,” Skix says. “They mostly live on land now. As you can see from Caladin, they’re quite similar to you humans. Though I would say their predator roots are more obvious.”

The air is fresh and fragrant, with a comfortable temperature. There’s a distant hiss from where the rock hits the surf, hundreds of feet below us. This place would be a hit with tourists from Earth, but chances are I’m the only human who’ll ever see it.

I fill my lungs with fresh air and spot a shuttle that seems ready to go, hatch open. “Well, I’m only here for a couple of days. Shall we get going?”

- - -

kix wasn't kidding about the team. As soon as we set the shuttle down on top of a low building after a ten-second flight, the hatch is opened and I am whisked away by two louluani females. They're a lot smaller than Caladin, and much more slender, with female shapes. But they still tower over me, dressed in flowing robes that get me thinking about ancient Rome.

Not making much smalltalk, they take me into the building and then place me in a cubicle, telling me to stand up straight.

"We have to take our measurements," one of them says in heavily-accented Interspeech. "The dress has been mostly prepared, but we want it to fit you as well as possible. The groom had some unusual wishes for it. Stand still." They leave the cubicle.

Robotic arms swish around me for a second, and then the female not-orcas come and drag me out, setting me down in a chair they've clearly had to modify with a bunch of cushions so that it will fit my smaller, non-finned frame.

I'm surrounded by dark walls and strange alien devices, starting to worry about it all.

A flying cylinder comes hovering into view, glinting in silver. "Oh hello, darling. My, my, what a beauty you are. It's your big day today!"

My skin creeps, and I push myself back in the chair. "Um. Hello."

The floating cylinder is the size of a big thermos, smooth and featureless. It dips one edge as if in greeting. "I'm Drupili, your makeup artist. And your stylist. *And* your bridal assistant for this whole process! You're Selma, yes?" The voice is chipper and definitely female.

“Yes,” I creak, not used to dealing with flying robots.

She zooms around my head. “And you’ll be marrying Caladin, the most eligible bachelor in the galaxy! Do you have any idea how jealous everyone is? Lift your chin a little. That’s it. Oh, this will be fun!”

“I don’t know about jealousy,” I offer weakly. “I just like him.”

“Of course, of course,” the robot says and gives off a metallic click. It’s suddenly looking like a giant, hovering Swiss army knife with every tool folded out. “Everyone likes him, despite him being always so brooding and dark. Or maybe that’s why.”

I push myself harder into the chair, not liking the look of most of the strange appendages Drupili is suddenly sprouting. “Maybe.”

She starts getting busy with my face, the touch from her gleaming tools and brushes so gentle and soothing it makes me relax right away.

“You can just lean back. I got this. What I’m doing now is making some of your features more prominent. There’s nothing here we need to hide. You’re blessed with fine features, despite your alien roots. Tell me, how did you meet our Caladin?”

It’s one of the things we’ve talked about, so that we’ll both tell the same story. “There was a party,” I begin. “On a space station close to my home planet.”

“Which planet is this, dear?”

“It’s called Daneb,” I tell her. Caladin didn’t think that a lot of people on Xaokui would know that Earth girls in space are always someone’s property, but he didn’t want to take chances.

So we made up a name that nobody will recognize. “We started talking, and then... well, I liked him.”

“Look straight ahead. Good. Caladin went to a party? That’s not like him, if everything I hear about him is true. It must have been a business-related thing, yes?” Her various tools are like a metallic blur around my head, moving faster than the eye can see. There’s an occasional spray of liquid and an unfamiliar smell of otherworldly cosmetics.

“I think so,” I say carefully. “He didn’t look like he was comfortable, so I went over and... well, I must have said something right. We saw each other a lot after that. Then he proposed, and here I am.”

“A whirlwind romance,” Drupili says. “I wish it were me. That’s the face done. Now the fur on your head. Oh my, it’s silky! But there’s no fin underneath it, I notice.”

“My species doesn’t have fins,” I tell her. “We only have hair on our heads.”

The robot pauses for a second. “It’s exceedingly... *exotic*. Let me see what I can do. Would you be willing to wear a loose fin on your head? Just for the ceremony.”

The thought makes me grimace. “Is it strictly necessary?”

“Not really, I suppose. All right, I sense some resistance. That’s fine, Selma. I want you comfortable. We’ll do the hair only. Tilt your head to the side.”

I’m starting to dread what the result of this will be. Am I going to end up looking like a circus clown?

It takes maybe ten minutes in total, and then Drupili withdraws a couple of feet as if giving her work a last look. “That should do it.” She holds a big mirror up in front of my face.

My jaw drops. “Is this... me?”

“That’s what you look like right now,” Drupili says. “The makeup will last for maybe three days, the hair for a full day if you leave it mostly alone. Or so I think. I mostly do fins.”

I can hardly believe my eyes. I’ve never looked better. My lips are a tasteful crimson, my eyes look really big and soulful, and she even brought out both my cheekbones *and* my dimples, something I never thought would be possible. And my hair is incredible, with long corkscrew curls cascading down beside my face. There’s even a discreet golden tone to my otherwise lanky, mid-brown thatch. She was right — she only brought out the good things about my face. But she’s also added a few things that I don’t remember being there, but which maybe could have been? If makeup can be flattering, then this is a masterpiece. My confidence rises a couple of solid notches.

That clown thing I worried about clearly didn’t happen.

“Th-that’s incredible,” I stutter from sheer surprise. “I thought things would be done much differently on Xaokui than on Earth.”

Drupili withdraws all her myriad tools into her body. “Oh, this isn’t the Xaokui way, Selma. This is just a neutral style that makes you look objectively good without following whatever happens to be in fashion on any particular planet. It’s kind of my thing.”

“You’re a genius,” I tell her sincerely. “Can I keep you with me always?”

She chuckles. “I have so many clients, Selma. I don’t want to show favor to just one of them. I promise you that the females on Xaokui are plenty jealous of you already. But thank you for

the compliment. Stay here.” She zooms out of the room, leaving me the mirror.

I can’t help admiring myself. I never thought I could look this good. Probably the light in here is extra flattering, but this makeup really works.

Drupili returns, holding out a gray garment in a thin metal clamp. “Your wedding dress. Put it on for final adjustments. I’ll leave the room if you want, but there’s nothing you have that I haven’t seen a million times before. Also, I’m a machine, so I don’t really care.”

I carefully take hold of the dress and hold it up. “It’s pretty sheer.”

“Not when worn, Selma. It’s an illusion. What do you have under that curious... outfit?” She nods towards my jeans.

“Not much,” I confess. “Just the smallest pieces of underwear I could find.”

“Let’s see. If you don’t mind.”

Not too bothered by the robot’s presence, I drop my jeans and unbutton the shirt. I’m wearing a lacy bra and a pretty thin thong, because I had no idea what they were going to dress me in.

“Well, that’s... hmm,” Drupili says. “I see why Caladin insisted on this design. Shall we try? Other way around.”

She holds the dress up for me above my head and then slowly lowers it onto me, as I help with my hands.

“Pretty snug,” I comment when the thing is finally on. “Is this color common for weddings?”

“On Xaokui there’s no particular color for the wedding dress,” the robot tells me. “It can be any color, but Caladin picked this

one for you.” She holds up the mirror, then folds it out to a half-circle with me inside it so I can see all sides.

The dress follows my curves, but by some miracle of tailoring it makes me look almost slim and hourglass-shaped. There’s a modest cleavage going on, helped by some invisible push-up effect, and the sleeves stop right above my elbows. The dress shimmers with a deep opalescence, making it look many-layered.

“That’s actually really nice— oh my God!”

The front of the dress is pretty conservative and elegant, but the back is different. Not only is the back open way down past my bra strap, it also has an additional, oval cutout right at the top of my butt. And beneath that, the dress cuts deep into my crack. The gray color emphasizes the size and shape of my behind to an almost comical degree. It fits as tightly across my cheeks as a pair of all-spandex yoga pants with a deep scrunch. I didn’t even know you could do that with dresses.

“Nice, isn’t it?” Drupili says with satisfaction. “Caladin wanted to show off that part of you especially. And I must say, he has surprisingly good taste.”

“Half my butt is bare!” I point out. “And the other half might as well be!”

“Exactly!” Drupili agrees. “You’ll be the most eye-catching bride I can recall assisting. If I weren’t a machine, and if I were male, I would be drooling right now. But of course the effect would be even greater if you were to remove that small piece of underwear. Right now, it’s a little bit disturbing to the intent of the dress.”

I take a deep breath. My ass was never the smallest, and also never the bounciest. But if Caladin wants to show it off the

way it is, then whatever. He is the one paying for this whole charade. In a couple of days I'll be off this planet for good.

"Fine." I shimmy off my panties under the dress and put them in between my jeans.

"And maybe also the other thing?" Drupili suggests, pointing.

- SELMA -

“Turn around, please.” With a bit of fumbling I’m able to remove my bra as well. “All right, you can look.”

“Yes, much better,” the hovering thermos coos. “Now the dress is doing all the work, just as intended. And it seems no adjustment is necessary.”

I twist and turn in the curve of the mirror. I actually look better than I thought I would. A cutout that bares half my ass to the audience would not have been my preference, but it does make me feel pretty damn naughty. And this is only a fake wedding, so maybe I should just enjoy it. It’s not like my parents will be watching.

“As for shoes,” Drupili says and zooms out again, returning with a pair of silvery and delicate two-inch heels. “These are very alien to the Louluani, but I thought it would be nice to stress your other-ness in a way that they will understand. Also the high heels will bring out your behind more, the theory goes.”

I step into the shoes, and they fit perfectly.

“The theory was correct,” Drupili decides. “Even rounder now. I like that money necklace you’re wearing. Tasteful and small.

Well, you're done. I'll send the message that the wedding can start. Come with me, Selma. Leave your old clothes here."

I follow the hovering robot out of the fitting room, through otherworldly corridors until we get to a transport tube of the same type Caladin has in his ship.

Drupili lets me go in first. This time the journey takes several seconds of blurry motion before I step out on a black stone floor.

It's the start of a tunnel with black walls. Male orca-like Louluani are lined up on either side, wearing white robes. At the other end of the tunnel I spot blindingly bright light.

"Let's go," Drupili says. "Normally your matriarch would accompany you on this final walk as a single woman, but since she's not here I will do the honors. If you want."

"I want," I tell her quickly. This looks like a big freaking deal, and I'll need all the support I can get.

The robot hovers ahead of me into the tunnel. I follow as fast as I can on the heels, but the shoes are comfortable and don't chafe at all.

Still blinded by the glare, I can't see what's ahead until I'm at the end of the tunnel. I stop and marvel.

Drupili zooms in behind me and gently nudges my shoulder. "Go on. It'll be obvious where to go."

On legs that feel stiff and soft at the same time, I walk on.

It's a cathedral of light and colors, an immense transparent dome under the ocean, so clear that it feels like I'm in an air bubble.

Above and around me there's movement from thousands of sea creatures, there's coral reefs in every color of the rainbow

and gently waving seaweeds that must be dozens of feet long. Sunlight beams down and lights it all up in ever-changing shadows and spectrums. It's absolutely breathtaking.

The circle of the floor must be hundreds of feet in radius. It's filled with Louluani, all wearing white. They stand in concentric circles around a small, round podium in the middle. On the podium there's a female Louluani dressed in bright red, and at the foot of it is my fake fiance.

The giant dome is filled with a wistful sound of something that has to be whale song from many throats. Turning my head, I notice a big choir of orcas dressed in blue, standing outside the dome. Many small bubbles rise to the surface from their mouths.

Ah. Of course these people will only sing in water, not in air. And the sound is hauntingly beautiful, reminding me of Enya, but with many more voices.

I walk over to the podium, feeling all the alien eyes on me.

Shit. If I thought being stared at by one grumpy orca was tough, having thousands of yellow predator eyes follow my every move really gets my heartbeat up.

I keep going until I'm standing six feet from Caladin.

He smiles and makes a point of stretching his head to the side as if to admire my ass.

I swing my hips a little bit towards him to give him a glimpse, then turn back.

The whalesong slowly subsides, and the female orca on the podium starts to talk. Not in Interspeech, I notice, but who cares. It's a fake wedding, and I don't need to know what's being said.

Caladin keeps his eyes on me, an amused little smirk on his face. He's in a wide stance, looking powerful in his tight blue shirt over black pants. If I didn't know better, I'd say he was looking forward to this. To the kiss, anyway.

I know I am. I don't care how fake this is — we'll give this crowd the most amazing kiss they've ever seen.

There's a pause in the cleric's speech, and Caladin takes my hand. Together we walk up the short steps to the podium, small blocks on each step having been clearly put there to make it easier for my short legs to climb them.

I add a little bit of sashay on the way up — if I'm going to show off my ass to the crowd, there's no better time.

Then we're standing in front of the Louluani officiator. She's clearly an older female, her black and white pattern faded and grayish under her red robe. A red spiral is curled around her head fin, probably to show her role as a cleric.

The choir starts again, this time in a lower key. Their intricate tones are plainly just meant as background music.

Caladin's hand is tight and dry around mine, and I quickly run through the procedure in my mind. It won't be hard.

I look out over the crowd. They're all Louluani not-orcas, all wearing white except the female closest to the podium. She's wearing all black and has a very visible gold dressing on her head fin, so heavy the fin is bent to the side. She's staring right at me, not a hint of a smile on her alien face when I lock eyes with her.

Beside her I spot Skix's green head. When I look at him he blinks once. I give him a little smile. Well, he's my only friend in the crowd. Apart from Drupili, of course.

When I look back at Caladin, he has a big grin on his face, showing off perfect rows of predator teeth.

I swallow in a dry throat. I don't know what happens after the ceremony. For all I know, maybe they all feed on the bride in some kind of frenzy. I should have asked.

The cleric switches to Interspeech and starts the final part.

When the time comes, Caladin looks at me with mirth in his eyes. "I, Caladin of the clan Beeom, solemnly swear in front of the ocean and my matriarch and all these people, most of whom I've never met before, that I will be all those great things to my beloved wife, Selma. And many other things besides."

The cleric frowns, then gets on with it until it's my turn to say "I swear".

The butterflies in my stomach flap their wings harder. The next part is the good one.

The cleric makes a dramatic gesture, raises her chin, and looks out over the crowd. "You will now merge your destinies and seal them!"

We turn to face each other. The choir lowers their voices to deep, solemn tones.

Caladin takes my hand and pulls me to him so I have to take two short steps to not fall over. He adjusts our position so the important people can see every detail, then puts his hand behind my neck. With the heels I am very slightly taller, and it feels less awkward than the practice session.

He looks into my eyes, but there's no laughter in them now. Just... fire. Grabbing my hip, he leans me back, and his lips graze mine.

My lips fall open, I and close my eyes, letting him control this. And he does, starting gently and then becoming demanding with his lips and tongue. His razor-sharp teeth run smoothly across my lips, reminding me of his nature but also holding promise that he won't use them on me.

The choir warbles in every octave, giving the whole thing a dream-like quality.

Tingles shoot to my crotch — I'm here in front of this crowd with only a thin layer of exotic fabric covering me, and I'm being kissed so well I'm not sure how I'll stand up straight later. As far as I'm concerned, this could go on forever.

A hush goes through the crowd when Caladin slowly raises me back to vertical and pulls me tight.

"My beloved wife Selma," he says calmly, looks me in the eye, and places another soft kiss on my mouth.

The choir sings loudly and cheerfully, light tones dominating, as we walk down from the podium.

At the bottom of the steps my new fake husband grabs my butt and then doesn't let go.

The music reaches a high crescendo and goes silent. The crowd starts making whale noises themselves, much louder but less pretty because they're not in water, like the choir was.

Caladin raises one hand and waves to the crowd, a shit-eating grin on his face.

They all pipe down, and the little flying robot Drupili zooms over to hover beside me.

The black-clad female regally approaches, towering over me. She's dragging an entourage of younger males, looking

sheepish. She has to be Caladin's mother-slash-matriarch-slash-boss.

"This is Balanoa, the matriarch of the Beeom clan," Drupili whispers to me. *"Your mother-in-law."*

"Congratulations," the matriarch says in smooth Interspeech. "I can't tell you how happy I am that Caladin has finally found his soulmate." She gives me a cool smile. "And I hope this union will be as *profitable* for you as for us of his clan."

"I hope so too," I say weakly. "I am already profiting greatly from Caladin's love and care."

"Of course," my mother-in-law says. "I'm sure he's capable of greatness in those areas, as in every other. Be nice to your wife, Caladin. Most people enjoy the company of others, and I'm sure she does too. Help him open up, Selma. He spends too much time alone."

She turns around and withdraws as regally as a queen, followed by a dozen males that act like servants and lackeys. Then we receive the congratulations from the others, given with enthusiasm that varies from cheerful to stiff and formal.

A tall, thin male fights his way to the head of the line. "Cousin, I can only hope it works."

"That what works, Taledak?" Caladin says coolly.

"Taledak," Drupili whispers to me. *"A cousin of your husband. Deeply involved in the running of the company here on Xaokui."*

"This marriage scheme, of course. Do you really think you can hold it together?" The stranger has a barely-contained anger in his eyes, and his jaw is clenched.

I make sure to put Caladin between him and me.

“All marriages have problems from time to time,” Caladin says calmly. “But our chances are as good as anyone else’s.”

“Perhaps,” the other male says, looking me up and down. “When the love is *real*, that’s all that matters. When it’s not, it always becomes obvious. It’s the kind of thing that can’t be *faked*.”

“Very true,” Caladin says and reaches past Taledak. “Oh, Grand Uncle Halamious. I’m so honored you could make it...”

Taledak gives me a final, angry look, turns on his heels, and stomps off.

He’s clearly suspicious. I wonder how many of these guests actually think this is a fake wedding.

A chubby, elderly female is glaring at me from the side, making no attempt to congratulate us.

“*Geleouni*,” comes Drupili’s whisper. “*Taledak’s mother. Next in line for the matriarchy. But probably too old to ever get there.*”

Finally her presence becomes so awkward that even Caladin notices.

“Hello, Aunt Geleouni,” he says as he turns to her. “I’m so glad to see you.”

“That is *alien*,” the female seethes in broken Interspeech. “Not even *aquatic* alien! What is water name? Does not have! Air name only. What kind of aquatic has not water name?”

“It’s been a long time since her species lived in water,” Caladin explains patiently. “And we Louluani can marry non-aquatics, too. She’s a mammal, after all. And she’s extremely beautiful, don’t you think?”

His aunt trembles with rage. “Do not think! Is pale and small. Is alien! How you dare, bring alien into clan? Alien is now in line to be matriarch! And is not aquatic! Beeom clan is laughed at! Beeom clan is ridiculed! This marriage not real. This marriage sham!”

Caladin’s face goes dark and tenses up.

I quickly put a hand on his arm. We can’t have him mauling elderly aunts. Not at his own wedding, anyway. “It’s all right, my love.”

An older male comes and hooks his arm under Geleouni’s. He glares at me too, but at least he drags the angry aunt away. “Let’s go, dear. If it is a sham marriage, it will be revealed.”

I let my breath out. “Yikes.”

Caladin puts an arm around me. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. Not all the guests are, though.”

“Never mind them. They’re just jealous. Ah, Arch-chief Rumoiun. How wonderful to see you...”

Drupili discreetly informs me about every one of the guests. There’s a surprising number of planetary celebrities and big-shots among them. Many of the females glare openly at me, then ignore me and focus on Caladin. I guess many of them had their sights on him. And I get it. Even here, among his own kind, he stands out with his obvious strength and aura of danger.

The congratulations last for maybe another ten minutes before Caladin loses patience and drags me away, waving happily at the crowd.

As we walk fast through the tunnel, he once more cups my butt and squeezes. “That’s an incredible dress. It’s just what I

was hoping for. Did you see the way they looked at you?”

“Like they wanted to eat me,” I reply, trying to keep up in my high heels and long dress. “I’ve never been so nervous.”

“No, no. Only the females wanted to eat you. Well, most of them did. The males wanted something quite different.” He squeezes my butt again.

“Hmm. Well, I’m just happy it’s over and done with.”

Caladin pulls me along. “It’s not quite over, Selma. There are certain things we have to do. To make it all seem as real as possible.”

“Such as?” I ask, worried.

“You know I want this to be over, too. But my mother is being very suspicious. And my cousin Taledak as well. They are both going to make absolutely sure that our marriage is real.”

“I noticed. So the kiss didn’t work?”

He gives me a quick grin. “It certainly worked on *me*. And it was persuasive. But I don’t think it’s enough. Now, it’s tradition that the wedded couple go on a Journey together. On Xaokui, not in space. They’re supposed to visit every ocean and mate in each one.”

“Uh-huh,” I reply as we’re nearing the transport tube. “I don’t think that’s part of the deal.”

“Not the mating, no. And nobody does the full Journey anymore — it would take years.” Caladin pushes me into the tube.

“But we must take a short Journey,” he says when he catches up with me at the top of the ridge. “My mother insisted on the destination — the home of my cousin Taledak. He will host us for a few days. And we will make sure everyone thinks our

marriage is real.” He takes my hand and leads me towards his spaceship.

My heart sinks in my chest. “So we have to act like we’re really married. In the home of a really suspicious and unpleasant clan member. For how many days?”

“Probably two at most. You may like it — he has a nice home, and the ocean there is one of the more beautiful ones on Xaokui.”

“And then we’re done?”

“After two days we’re done. We’ll go back into space, and everyone will think we’re together. Whereas in fact you’ll be off on your own.” We reach the base of his ship and enter it.

“What happens if your cousin doesn’t go for it? If he becomes convinced that we’re only fake married?”

Caladin sets the transport tube and guides me into it. “Then he has to convince my mother, too.”

We emerge in his office.

“Would that be hard for him?”

“Probably not. She won’t like it if she thinks I’ve tricked her about something this big. She was being remarkably cool with me today.” He walks to the middle of the floor and stops, staring down at his empty tank. “Her rank as matriarch is never secure. All the other females want to be in her position. If she’s seen to give me favors only because I’m her son, it would be the end of her reign. She can’t favor me over Taledak. She’s gambling a lot on this marriage, Selma. But if she has to choose between remaining matriarch and stripping me of my job, then that choice will be easy for her.”

Damn it. Family politics was never my thing. “Was she pressured into forcing you to get married?”

“It does look that way.”

I look up at the blue sky outside the dome. “If this doesn’t work, Caladin. If they don’t go for it, and if you lose your ship and job and everything...”

He walks over to his display cases, running a big hand along the glass. “Then you’re off the hook, of course. You have your hundred thousand, and you can be on your way. I won’t be able to give you much support, but Skix will do what he can.”

So I can’t completely lose, whatever happens. But now I want to win the whole prize. Not just for the money, but also to rub it in the faces of those unpleasant people back there.

I take a deep breath. “Then let’s go and convince them.”

- CALADIN -

On an impulse I go over to Selma, bend down, and place a kiss on her head, getting a good sniff of her hair. “Thank you.”

I take off my wedding attire, placing the blue shirt carefully on my desk. Everyone will expect me to keep it and display it forever. Or rather, until the divorce.

“You should know that our Journey starts now, and there’s only one way to do it. Skix, you back yet?”

“*Coming, boss,*” the green lawyer says through the comms.

I look Selma up and down, mostly because I enjoy it. “That dress of yours was made especially for the Journey. There’s no need to bring anything more. Your tailors were the best on Xaokui. When we get to Taledak’s house, more clothing will be waiting for you.”

She runs her hands down her hips. “I like it. But it’s pretty revealing. From the back, I mean.”

My crotch stirs. “It really is.”

Selma half turns and tries to see her own behind. “I should demand extra pay for having to look like this.”

“You really don’t like it?”

She sighs. “That’s just it. I like it more than I should.” She arches her back, making arousing images appear in my mind.

“You have an extraordinary body. Why not show it? Why not enjoy it?”

Skix arrives, carrying a box that he drags behind him over to my desk. “Congratulations, both of you. If that’s appropriate.”

I walk over to the desk. “Thank you, Skix. It’s not, but my fake wife and I appreciate the sentiment. You have the item?”

The little lawyer opens the box and takes out the object we need. “The banquet is underway. There’s some puzzlement about where the newlyweds are, but I told them you two couldn’t keep your hands off each other and so you can’t attend. That was met with some knowing chuckles and a lot of muttering. Yes, boss. This should be all you need. Shall we go?”

I walk over to Selma, putting my hand on her thin shoulder. “How are you feeling, dear wife? Hungry? Thirsty? Tired?”

She shrugs. “I’m fine. What happens now?”

“Our Journey starts,” I tell her. “We’ll go to the banquet and start it from there. It has to be done in public.”

She takes a deep breath. “I’m ready. Oh, wait.” She reaches up to ruffle her hair. “Better look as if we’ve been... busy.” She tries to make wrinkles in her dress, but short of putting it on back to front, there’s not much she can do to make it look anything but pristine.

“Maybe we... never mind.” I nearly suggest that we can get ‘busy’ for real, but I catch myself at the last moment. My crotch has been in various states of swelling since I saw her enter the cathedral, and it makes my mind fuzzy.

I take her hand. “No time like right now.”

With Skix in tow, we make our way out on the ridge to the white domes where the banquet is taking place. “This is a traditional place for weddings,” I tell Selma. “It has everything that’s needed for both the ceremony, the banquet, and the journey. Is it anything like weddings on Earth?”

“I’m actually surprised at how similar it is,” Selma tells me. “A ceremony, someone to officiate, vows, a banquet, a trip right after, angry relatives, jealous exes — it’s much the same. If this banquet includes a drunk uncle or two, I’d say it’s identical.”

“None of those were my exes. They only wish they were.”

“Oh? You’ve never told me anything about your previous relationships.”

“I can’t be expected to tell you *everything*. Do some research yourself. You could have asked Skix. Do *you* have a lot of exes? If this wedding took place on Earth, would I have to fight them all?”

“Maybe,” Selma says, making her voice deep. “I can’t be expected to tell you *everything*.”

“Ah, mockery. Now you’re acting like a real wife.”

“It’s my job,” she says and grins, making those dimples appear again.

As we get near to the domes, she hangs onto my arm with both hers, looking clingy.

I smile down at her. “You’re being extremely convincing.”

“I’m really good at my job,” she agrees. “Wait. Stop.”

Coming to a halt, I look down at her. “Yes?”

Selma gives me a mischievous smile, then reaches over with both hands and loosens the drawstring in my pants. “We want everyone to know what we’ve been doing.”

Heat surges in my crotch, and my mind goes blank. Is she going to...

She ties the drawstring again, but only loosely, letting the ends of the string hang casually down my front.

I grin. “Ah! *That’s* convincing.”

There’s some scattered cheering as we enter the domes where all the guests are enjoying the sensationally expensive banquet. There’s a good amount of glaring, too. But I find that I enjoy it. My own position as manager of the clan company is one many here want, but now that I’m married and I seem to have my mother’s favor, that door has closed for them.

With Selma clinging to me and looking like we’ve been rolling around on the floor for a good while, I go to the speaker’s spot. A ray of sunlight is directed towards me by attendants above, controlling mirrors.

“Dear mother! Dear guests and not-so-dear guests. Some of you are happy to see us happy, and to those Selma and I direct our sincere thanks. We are beyond happy, in fact so deliriously overjoyed that we couldn’t even eat at this banquet. Instead we had an urgent need to... um... sleep! Yes. That’s it. We slept deep and hard. But not for very long.” I pretend to adjust my pants.

There’s spreading laughter at my clumsy innuendo. Selma looks down, acting charmingly embarrassed.

“My wife and I can’t wait to get started on our new life together. And as you all know, that life is a common journey, because we have merged our lives. And so it starts with a

shorter Journey, as tradition commands. Our Journey is about to begin. Goodbye for now. Don't look for us!"

There's more scattered laughter and cheering as I step out of the sunray. They've started drinking, and the atmosphere is loosening up.

I grab Selma's hand and walk her over to the edge of the ridge, where Lover's Cliff is located. Lining the edge is an honor guard of white-clad young males. This place was carefully chosen when the reception domes were built. The cathedral is one reason — it's the oldest and most beautiful one on the planet. The other reason is this cliff. It stretches far out from the ridge, like a natural platform. A long way below is the deep ocean.

"Our Journey starts now," I tell Selma. "It's an unusual Journey, but you will be perfectly safe at all times. If you'd been a Louluani, we would have been side by side. As it is, you have to wear this."

Skix hands me the transparent mask, and I gently place it over Selma's head.

"Wait," she says and puts her hand on mine. "What's going to happen?"

"Our journey starts," I tell her. "And you'll need this to keep you safe." I make sure the mask is securely fastened, then place a finger under her chin and raise her face. "Remember — you're perfectly safe. Trust me."

I lift her into my arms. She looks around, not at all sure about this.

The ring of honor guards splits in half and withdraws from the edge.

Only then does she realize what's about to happen.

“No no nooo!” she squeals, kicking her legs wildly in an attempt to get away from me, but I’m ready for it and easily keep her steady.

Then I sprint as fast as I can and throw us off the cliff. Selma screams, a piercing screech of deathly fear.

The wind thunders past my ears, and I find myself enjoying the fall immensely. I can barely hear the cheering from up on the cliff. All the guests have a perfect view of our dive — that’s why the dome was placed where it is.

It’s a long, long fall. Selma stops screaming.

Seeing that we’re getting close to the surface, I curl up with Selma on the inside, protecting her from the impact that’s coming.

I concentrate on holding on to her. My dorsal fin pierces the surface first, preparing the way for the rest of me.

There’s a loud bang as we cross down from air to water. Then we sink fast, and I get the old euphoria that I always get when I dive into seawater. This is my home. This is where I’m supposed to be.

As the descent slows, I beat my feet so we’ll come to a stop and then start to rise.

Selma starts to writhe and make noises, so I uncurl and grab her hand.

Her eyes are panicked inside the mask.

“You can breathe,” I tell her. “Just breathe normally.”

She immediately gulps a lungful of air and calms down.

I drag her with me towards the surface, glittering in the sunlight above us. “You have all the air you need.”

When we break the surface, I grab her and hold her high, completely out of the water. “You’ll be safe.”

I wave to the crowd up on the ridge. Their distant cheering is mostly taken by the breeze.

Selma is busy wiping sea water from her hair. “You could have warned me,” she mewls inside the mask.

“I thought it better if you didn’t know exactly how the Journey starts. For me, this was a trivial fall. But you’re so afraid of even the modest height of my diamond floor that I didn’t want you to worry about this.”

Selma breathes fast inside the mask.

I gently take it off her. “You won’t need this right now. We have a long way to go. Hang on to me. Is your dress comfortable?”

“It’s fine. It feels like it’s not really there.”

“Then it works as designed.” I roll around and place her on my back, behind the fin. Then I beat my feet as if they were a tail fin and propel us through the waves, exhilarated about finally being in a real ocean again.

Selma clings to my dorsal fin, but I think she will soon realize she doesn’t need to — I won’t let her slide off.

Using my hands to steer and to give an extra forward push, I feel the water becoming my ally, my servant. I zoom through the waves as fast as I can, tingling all over with the sheer pleasure of it all. My mind goes blank and fills with sunlight, every worry gone.

Finally I slow down and turn my head to the side. “Are you all right, Selma?”

“It’s amazing,” she enthuses. “It feels really fast.”

“This is why I like to race spaceships,” I admit. “I was always the fastest swimmer, and the space races were the closest thing to this.”

Selma lets go of my fin with one hand. “You never showed me your racing ship.”

“I wanted to, but I had to keep my distance to you,” I explain. “But I can show you before we leave.”

She turns around on my back, folding one leg under her as she sits up. “We’ve gone so far already! I can’t even see the dome on the ridge.”

“Told you I’m fast. Is it tiring for you?”

“No! It’s fun.”

“Then let’s go on.” I speed up, stretching my hands out in front for minimal resistance as I beat my legs up and down. Directing the stream of water correctly, I can keep on course with small corrections with my head fin, which pierces the surface. The dorsal fin isn’t much use right now, except as a handhold for Selma, but I absolutely plan to make use of it later.

I find my cruise speed, which is faster than most male Louluani can go at their fastest. I pierce the waves and feel the spray of my passage wet my flanks. I could go even faster if I didn’t give Selma such a smooth and dry ride, but speed isn’t really the point here.

I check on her from time to time as we zoom towards the sunset. She seems to be enjoying herself, or at least not suffering too much.

Well before the sun touches the horizon, I spot our first waypoint and speed towards it.

“There’s an island!” Selma yells. “Is that Taledak’s home?”

I slow down. “It’s not. That island is where we’ll spend the night.” I speed back up.

Just as the sun touches the horizon, I wade ashore on the slippery boulders with Selma in my arms. She’s light and smooth, moist and warm.

I let her down. “This is the island Woiro. Not a very important place for most of us, but it is for me.”

Grabbing her hand to keep her steady on the rocks, I take her to the grassy part. Tall, slender trees grow here, and in the distance are the huts that belong to the natives.

“People live here?” Selma asks.

“The people here are different from us, but they’re harmless. There’s one of them now.”

- SELMA -

There's movement over towards the strange huts. And it looks like... I have to squint against the low sun.

"Oh God," I exclaim and grab Caladin's hand. "Are they..."

"They are exactly what they look like."

It's just that the creature making its way towards us right now looks like a giant squid, walking on its tentacles.

"They're not dangerous?" I ask to be absolutely sure.

"They're harmless when not provoked. Unfortunately they were provoked a great deal in the old days, and it didn't end well for anyone. Greetings, Lady!" He holds up both his hands and waves them around. "They don't have the best eyesight when they're on land."

"Greetingsss," says the giant squid as it comes closer. It's as tall as me and much bigger in volume, with a large, bulbous, and pointed head and many thick tentacles holding the head up. There's one big, clear eye on each side of the head. The voice is melodious and clear, but breathy and very low in volume. The creature is clearly struggling to form sounds so foreign to its small, round mouth. "Who are you who seek our land?"

“I am Caladin of the clan Beeom. This is my wife, Selma.”

“Caladin,” the squid says. “You’ve been long absent from our shores.”

“I have. And my visit is only short, if you grant it.”

“You will always be granted a visit, Caladin. And of course your wife, too. Selma. Which clan is she?”

“She’s not from any clan,” Caladin says slowly. “She’s not from Xaokui at all.”

Two big eyes roll towards me. “Not from a clan?”

“She’s now of the Beeom clan, but she doesn’t have an original clan. She’s from another planet.”

“That is well,” says the squid. “Because not all clans are welcome on our land. It gladdens me that you have found a wife, Caladin. We understand that pair bonding is the way with your kind. Until later.”

The talking squid turns smoothly on her tentacles and slithers away, back to where she came from. Her speckled body reminds me of a lava lamp, seeming to always slowly change.

“That was a Lady of Woiro island,” Caladin says. “I can’t tell them apart, and they prefer me not to.” He takes my hand, and we walk further into the island. Apart from the strange, conical huts, the place doesn’t seem inhabited.

My dress has dried out completely and is as supple as ever. My hair has regained its shape too, after the long trip with lots of seawater spraying and strong wind. Drupili really is a genius. “She seems to know you. What’s the story?”

“The story with the Woiro natives... They live under the ocean, as you probably guessed. So did we Louluani. And there were always conflicts. Partly because the body of a

Woiro native contains a certain amount of *gur*, which is greatly sought and treasured by us Louluani. We would hunt them for profit, kill them just to drain their dead bodies of *gur*. *Gur* is a color that we find especially beautiful because we found it nowhere else in the ocean. You could call it dark red, probably. The cleric's robe at our wedding was colored with *gur*. Old *gur*, I hasten to add. We don't hunt the Woiro anymore. Not in any organized way, at least."

"It's outlawed?" I ask.

"Not really. But we've realized that the Woiro are sentient, and it would be wrong to kill them. And also we can manufacture the *gur* color in other ways now. Anyway, sometimes the Woiro would get revenge on us, killing entire communities. That would lead to revenge actions from us. The whole thing was messy. As time passed, we Louluani started to live more on land than under the ocean. We discovered that the Woiro had been living up here for even longer, forced to surrender their ocean villages and seek refuge in the air above. There was great tension. Still is, but there's less fighting now."

"Two sentient species on the same planet, being enemies," I ponder. "It can't be good."

"It can't," Caladin agrees. "It wasn't. Anyway, I enjoyed swimming when I was younger. Still do, of course. And I would sometimes swim all the way out here. I was curious, you see. And I had the innocence of youth. After a while I was able to befriend the natives here. They allowed me to come ashore and rest before I swam back. I got to know them and their ways. Now they allow me to bring my wife, too."

We reach a high point on the island. It reminds me a lot of the Caribbean islands I've seen in pictures and on videos, with deeply green woods edged by curved, beige beaches and

turquoise waters. The trees are now tinged with red from the sun setting in a sky that appears to be on fire. “It’s very beautiful.”

Caladin smirks at me and leans back to glance at my ass. “Very.”

I punch his massive shoulder playfully. “I meant the island! Let’s go down to the beach.”

He looks away. “Beaches are not a favorite of mine. Or any Louluani. I prefer sheer cliffs or some decent boulders.”

“Oh.” It makes a weird kind of sense. I know the whales on Earth sometimes get stuck on beaches. “So, do we stay here for the night?”

“That’s the idea. We’ll reach Taledak’s home tomorrow.”

“Will we borrow a hut or something?”

“We can sleep under the stars, can’t we? It’s not going to rain. I know a place. But first we both need something to eat. The Woiro diet is mostly seaweed and plankton, so I’ll go and find something better.”

We walk back to the huts. There’s maybe two dozen of them, looking like enormous, pink conch shells with the thick end down.

Some of the natives are sitting in a ring in the middle of the village. There’s no fire, but there’s a big oyster-like shell in the center, and it seems to be glowing coolly from within.

Caladin approaches them without hesitation. “Honored ladies. I, Caladin, will go searching for food in the deep. My wife, Selma, asks if she can stay here while I’m gone.”

“Granted,” one of the squids says. “The wife of Caladin is of the clan Beeom and thus welcome on our land.”

“You’ll be all right here,” Caladin tells me. “They’re all females at the end of their life cycles. And I’ll be quick.”

He squeezes my hand, lets go, and walks towards the boulders, moving like a panther on the prowl.

And I’m alone with the giant squids. They all direct big, round eyes towards me.

“Um. Greetings,” I try. “I am Selma.”

“Selma is a female,” one of them says. “But young.”

“Aliens are strange,” says another. “A *young* female!”

“It’s a big galaxy,” offers a third. “It has room for even that.”

I clear my voice. “Are there no young females of your kind?”

“There are not,” says the first. “All start as males. Then, when old enough to be wise, they grow into females, as is only right.” With one tentacle, she points to a spot on the grass. “Do join us, Selma. We’re fascinated by you. And you have married Caladin. We were confident he was famous all over space, and we were right.”

I sit down on the grass. It’s clean and dry, and the squids look pretty clean, too. “He might be famous. I don’t really know. I think he’s getting food for us right now.”

“He’s a hero,” one of the squids says. They haven’t introduced themselves, and I’m not going to ask for names. “He *must* be famous.”

“Certainly he’s famous here on our land,” says another. “Do you know the story, Selma? He wouldn’t tell you, but perhaps you want to know what kind of male you’ve married.”

The cool light from the huge oyster plays over their tentacles. It must be some kind of bioluminescence that makes it glow.

“He hasn’t told me much,” I admit. “Did he do something here?”

“It was several years ago. He must have been young, like males usually are. He came here, swimming. And we were wary, because his kind were often cruel to us. But he wasn’t. He came to our land and simply sat on the boulders, looking at us. This happened many times. Then one day we went to talk to him, curious about him always coming to see us. We feared a trap. But there was no trap. There was only him, and he asked us questions about our huts and our land. He always stayed on the boulders. We finally let him further into our land, and he was gentle and respectful.”

“We realized,” another of the giant squids takes up the story, “that he was different. That he wasn’t here to kill us and take the gur inside us. He was here to befriend us, nothing more.”

“One day,” says yet another of the native ladies, “others of his kind came. They were *not* here to befriend us. They came from the other direction and were here to kill. There were three of them, big and fierce. We defended ourselves, keeping them away. But one of our young — a male, of course — had been out in the ocean and was just returning home. The hunters spotted him and trapped him.”

“At about that time,” the first squid goes on, “Caladin arrived as usual. He sat on the boulders when he realized that there was a fight on the other side of the land. He ran and threw himself into the water. He then attacked the hunters. We were highly surprised. They were of his own kind, and he attacked them! First he gave off a mighty yell that rattled our bodies and cracked stones on the bottom. Then he swam up to the hunters at great speed and fought them furiously, chasing them away and saving the young male. He was already a large

Louluani, bigger than some of their adults. Caladin was badly bitten by the hunters, bleeding the ocean red. But the hunters left, and we did our best to heal him. He stayed here for days, recovering. Then he left, and it was some time before we saw him again. He only came once in a while after that. But he was healthy, and we were filled with joy. The male he saved grew up to be...”

“Me,” says the second squid lady. “I was that male. And thanks to Caladin, your husband, I still have my gur and my life. He’s a strong fighter and a highly decent male. A hero, as we said.”

I’m stunned. I would never have figured Caladin for someone who’d befriend another species and then stick his neck out for them. To me, he was always a grumpy predator who just wanted to make a buck, regardless of morals. He even deals with the Bululg.

“Yes, he clearly was. Thank you for telling me. I didn’t know about this.”

“He wouldn’t tell you,” says the second squid. “To him, it was simply the right thing to do.”

“And so you see we are happy that he has found a wife. We know his kind finds it highly important to marry. They bond for life, you know. And only once.”

“They do?” Just another little fact that nobody’s told me until now.

“Whereas we bond for only a little while. That’s our way, you see — ah. There is the hero now.”

I turn. It’s getting dark, but I can see a big shape sauntering towards us from the shore, the sharply contrasting orca pattern on his torso unmistakable.

I get up and go to greet him. “Hello, husband. What did you get?”

He holds up a cluster of round things that could be sea urchins without the spikes. “It’s food. There’s a lot of it here. Let’s go and prepare it. Good evening, ladies.” He waves both hands to make sure they see him.

“Good evening, Caladin,” the natives say as one, sounding a little bit like old ladies thrilled by some handsome young man giving them attention. Which I suppose is exactly what they are.

We walk to another grassy patch in the middle of the island.

“It’s kind of dark,” I observe. “Maybe we could borrow one of those oysters they have.”

“Those oysters are battery-powered lamps,” Caladin says, pulling grass and straw off an old ring of stones. “We’ll do it the old-fashioned way. Using fire.”

“That *is* old-fashioned,” I agree and go to gather firewood.

After a little while the catch he came back with is hissing on their skewers. They smell great, like a mix of fried salmon and beef.

“They’re not shellfish,” Caladin assures me as he turns the skewers. “They have no shells. And they can’t be fish, because they are fruits.”

“Fruits from the ocean?” I inquire. “Do they grow on trees?”

“They do,” he says seriously. “Short, stubby trees that grow under water. They’re distantly related to the hondokonk we used when cooking the shomp. Remember that nut?”

“Yes, and now I remember that shomp, too. And the delicious flavor I know I’ll never find again. So thank you for *that*.”

He grins, teeth shining white in the light from the fire. “It’s a cruel dish, the shomp. It makes you addicted. Because you think, maybe next time you’ll find the flavor you seek. You won’t. And then you’ll be forever hunting for two of them. Or more. By now, I have about thirty ghost flavors I’ll always be searching for.”

It doesn’t take long for the ocean fruits to cook. When they split open, Caladin takes them off the fire and lets them cool down. “They’re sweet and salty. It’s simple fare, but sometimes that’s exactly what we need.”

“You like it out here, huh? Way out in the ocean, far from your clan.”

He shrugs. “It’s a nice change.”

I look at him sideways. “They told me, you know.”

He takes the first skewer and hands it over to me. “Blow on it to cool it down. Use your fingers to pick out the fruit meat from inside.”

I gingerly accept the wooden skewer and smell the steaming insides of the fruit. “They said you’re a hero.”

Caladin gets his own skewer and splits one fruit in half with his fingers. “They say a lot of strange things. They’re very weird, if you didn’t notice. Their sex changes as they grow older, and they look like I don’t know what.”

I pick out a small piece of fruit with my fingernail and chew it. “None of it sounded strange to me. Except that Caladin the icy and grumpy businessman would stick his neck out for anyone.”

He chuckles. “I was young and stupid. I’ve learned more about the world since.”

“It didn’t sound stupid to me,” I tell him. “It sounded... real.”

“Considering we’re fake married, I’m not sure either of us is an expert on what’s real.”

The fruit is both nutty and savory, with a hint of sweetness that gives it an extra appeal.

I finish the first one and grab the second. “Maybe. But I liked hearing about you when you were young.”

Caladin finishes his first fruit and tosses the empty husk in a high arc back into the ocean. “I did stay away from the clan, it’s true. As much as possible. In our clan, young males are considered servants of the matriarch. I could never deal with being a servant. It was a different matriarch back then. Great Aunt Soueloua was lazy, and she was an absolute tyrant. She would have us do the most menial, degrading tasks that had no meaning. We must not be idle for a moment. If we had completed a task, we’d be commanded to do it again, just to fill the time. I hated her with a passion. And so I stayed away as much as I could.”

“Are all clans like that?”

“In the old days they were. Today, ours is the only clan that sticks to the old traditions. Some say that’s why it’s the richest clan on the planet. I’m not so sure. Maybe I’ll like hearing about *your* youth, too.”

I sigh. “It’s nothing that exciting, I promise you. No heroics in my past. You’ll fall asleep from sheer boredom.”

He bites into the second fruit. “Try me.”

I think back. “There’s nothing to tell from when I was much younger, really. My most heroic deed ever was getting a job at the delivery company. You saw the logo on my cap?”

“Oh? Why was that?”

“Because there were a lot of alien abductions. The Bululg were harvesting females. And female delivery drivers were vanishing faster than other groups. I don’t know why, but that’s what everyone was saying.”

“Must be the uniform,” Caladin says drily. “So you signed up as a heroic deed, sacrificing yourself to the Bululg because Earth was in desperate need of delivery drivers.”

“Not really. Actually...” I think fast. I’ve never told anyone this, but this situation puts me in the mood. “Someone I knew was abducted. And I thought, if I get myself abducted too, maybe I can look for her and see if I can free her. Stupid, I know. But there’s not much hope left on Earth. Most people just get drunk and stay depressed. So getting away from that seemed better.”

“Even as a slave? Auctioned off to the highest bidder?”

I finish the second fruit and try to toss the husk into the ocean, but it falls twenty feet short. “I figured that I would probably get taken sooner or later. The abductions are increasing fast, and now they’re taking just about anyone. And if so, I wanted to have a little bit of power over when it would happen. Silly, I know. But that’s how I felt.”

“It’s not silly,” Caladin says calmly. “Sitting and waiting for the inevitable is not good for the soul. Better to face your dangers and your fears, at least partly on your terms. Going right at them with an intent to at least do *some* damage. So you actually wanted to be abducted? Then I’m *sincerely* grateful that it was me, and not the Bululg.”

His words warm my soul. “Is that how you felt when you attacked the Louluani hunters? You were facing the dangers?”

He chuckles. “No, no. I didn’t think about it. I just got outraged and followed my instincts. Thank the deepest *depths* they were such cowards. If they hadn’t been surprised, and if they had decided to fight, I would not have survived.”

“Mhm. I’m not so sure. I think you’re a fierce fighter.”

He shrugs and licks his fingertips. “Sometimes.”

I lean back, support myself on my arms and look up at the sky. The stars are coming out, in a totally different pattern than on Earth. There are also two moons, one blue and one red. Together they light us up pretty well. “It’s a nice planet you come from.”

“This is the nicest part of it,” Caladin says. “There are less ideal places. Both over and under the ocean.”

“There’s no slavery here, right?”

“That’s right. Owning another person is not the Xaokui way. Even the matriarch’s servants are not slaves, strictly speaking. But it’s considered a good career move to serve her.”

The fire crackles and throws its flickering light over his face and his orca pattern.

I’m tingling like crazy down below. I knew he was strong, and I knew he has a protective and possessive streak. But this place reveals another side of him. He’s a billionaire who dives to the bottom of the ocean to get a simple dinner, who’s as at home with lighting a campfire as with negotiating with other species in space. And making metal objects from scratch. He’s considered a hero by some and an arrogant jerk by others. I think they’re both right, but he’s much less of a jerk than I would have thought just a few days ago.

I get to my feet. “You don’t like beaches, you said.”

He looks away. “That’s right.”

“You know how you forced me to face my fear of heights by jumping off that cliff with me in your arms? What if I return the favor and help you face your fear of beaches? Because I really like them.”

“They’re sinister,” he grumbles. “Why must they be so shallow so far out? Can’t they just go straight down? When you come towards the shore at high speed, suddenly the bottom sneaks up on you. I don’t trust those things.”

“That’s too bad,” I purr and stretch my arms skywards. “Because I see a really nice one right there. And there are two moons in the sky. I love a moonlight bath, don’t you?”

“Well...”

I pull the wedding dress over my head and toss it on the ground, then turn my naked butt to him and walk down towards the beach in the semi-darkness. He has seen it before, and I know that he really likes it. I want to reward him for being so nice, all of a sudden.

I really liked the story those squid ladies told me about him. It fits his protective nature and his predator instincts, which is a really addictive combination. How many times has he saved my life by now? He beat up the yeti, and he got me out of that crazy shuttle. So at least twice. And it could be argued that abducting me from Earth saved me from the Bululg.

A little shiver goes through me, but not from cold. This whole deception is pretty exciting. It’s almost got me feeling like a secret agent on a mission. It’s worked really well so far, and I can’t help being exhilarated and turned on by it all. Caladin is playing his role well, too.

When I get to the sand, I check over my shoulder. To my joy and arousal, he's on the way, walking slowly, but surely.

The sand is wet under my feet, and small waves rise up to my ankles. The water is just a degree or two below body temperature.

Caladin takes off his large boots, revealing big, black feet with webbing between the toes. Then he walks towards me.

"No fair," I call to him. "I'm not wearing pants."

He stops, puts his hands on his hips, and seems to think. Then he pulls his pants off, tosses them onto dry land, and comes back towards me. There's new movement at his middle, a thick metronome wagging sideways in sync with his steps.

A hard surge goes through my stomach. In the moonlight it's hard to tell, but I think that thing is really big. And unusual.

I wade out into the surf, enjoying the sensation of him staring at my butt. As always he makes me feel attractive, and that's starting to get addictive, too. I wasn't really spoiled with *that* on Earth.

Oh my. It's going to happen, isn't it? That thing that wasn't a part of the deal. I don't see how it can't. Because I really want it. And he... well, he sure *looks* like he wants it.

The waves wash up to my knees, and I bend down to wet my hands. "Such a nice evening."

"It's our wedding evening," Caladin points out as he draws up beside me. "So it's only fair."

I glance down at his crotch, then swallow nervously. It's a big thing he has there. It casts two shadows, one red and one blue, from the two moons. The details are hard to make out, but

there are thicker parts and ridged parts. It's so stiff it stands up along his stomach like a thick flagpole.

"How are you feeling?" I ask him, my voice suddenly hoarse. "See? It's just a beach."

"Just a beach," he repeats with distaste. "I wonder how many lives this one has taken."

I look down at my feet in the clear water. "Are there dangerous things in the oceans here? Aside from you, I mean."

- CALADIN -

“Many,” I tell Selma honestly. “The oceans brim with deadly creatures. But they can all sense my presence, so they will not come close. Can you swim?”

“A little bit,” she says. “Is it safe?”

I look her up and down, enjoying the sight of her heavy chest and that unspeakably enticing patch of fur at her crotch. “When you look like that, you’re not safe from *me*.”

She gives me a look that twinkles. “Good.” She lies forward and swims a few cumbersome strokes that no Louluani would ever dream of ever trying, other than as a joke.

‘Good’? She must have misunderstood. If not... My cock twitches hard.

The beach is far too shallow for me to swim, so I stay and admire Selma’s round shape as she struggles her way through the water. I lick my lips at the sight of her. Despite her clumsy swimming, this is the most erotic experience I’ve ever had. Her skin glows in the moonlight, her shape so alien and so irresistible.

She turns around and puts her feet on the bottom. “You’re not going to swim?”

“Not on a *beach*,” I tell her firmly. “I have my principles.”

She walks towards me, looking to the side. But I’ve seen her glancing at my crotch.

“They said you got injured by the hunters,” Selma says, her voice creaky. “Do you have a scar?”

I point at the faint line that stretches from my shoulder down my chest to my hip. “Can you see it?”

She comes closer and squints. “No.”

I take her hand, extend one of her slender fingers, and put it on the scar. “But you can feel it.”

“Yes.” She runs her finger down the scar, all the way down. “It must have hurt terribly.”

“Not right away,” I tell her. “I didn’t even know I’d been injured until I saw that I was leaving a dark cloud of blood in the water.”

My cock stands up between us like a third presence.

“I’m glad,” Selma gulps, “that you healed so well.”

My cock twitches again. Her finger is very close to it.

“And you?” I ask. “Any scars?”

She takes my hands. “Just here.” She puts my finger on her upper chest, where her skin is clearly as unblemished as everywhere else. There’s no sign of a scar at all.

“Oh yes,” I play along as I slowly drag my finger lower, towards her breast. “So there is. Does it go far down?”

“Yes,” she gasps as my fingertip slowly slides towards her nipple. “Does yours?”

“Mine goes to the side, towards my middle,” I lie. “It’s not so easy to find there.”

Her finger slides straight over my cock. “About here?”

“Even further. Down a little.” My rod twitches again, hoping for a touch.

A small, female finger runs slowly down and to the side until it stops against the shaft. “Sorry.” But she keeps her finger there.

“You found it.” I let my finger slide right across her nipple.

She gasps at my touch, and the nipple immediately contracts.

“Maybe you should check that whole area for more forgotten scars,” I suggest. “Like I am doing.”

Selma acts on the encouragement and slides two fingers up the side of my cock, making it jerk. “Like this?”

“Like that,” I confirm, lifting my other hand to stroke a crooked finger around her nipple.

A tremble goes through her, and she looks up at me. The blue moon Yuai is reflected in her clear eyes.

But she’s too far down, so I go down on my knees in the surf so our faces are about level. Gently cupping a soft, heavy breast, I put my hand behind her head.

“This is not a part of the deal,” I growl, giving her a chance to pull away.

But she stays. “Maybe something like this should never be.”

Her words open untold possibilities in my mind, some of which are absolutely dizzying.

“I agree. Because there’s nothing fake about it.”

Her eyes have a glassy look to them. “This can be real, you know. This Journey. I never agreed to fake *that*.”

Leaning in, I place a kiss on her soft lips and stroke her hard, little nipple with one finger. “It *is* real, whether we want it to be or not. We don’t get to choose.”

Unable to control myself, I kiss a slow trail down her chin, along her jaw, down the side of her neck. When I’ve fantasized about this, I’m always in a frenzy. But now, taking my time feels much better.

Selma’s scent fills my nose, mixed with the salt and the familiar smell of the ocean. The result is heady, and if I weren’t already on my knees, I might have had trouble standing upright during this onslaught on my senses. I wish to focus on it all at the same time — the feeling of her smooth skin under my hand, her fast breathing, her quick heartbeat, the scent, the flavor of her skin, the little noises she makes. But just like when eating a shomp, it’s impossible to enjoy the whole symphony of delight at the same time. My brain just can’t do it.

Before I know it I have one of Selma’s nipples in my mouth, marveling at the rubbery hardness of it.

She moans and puts her hands on my head, pulling me closer.

Squeezing both breasts, I close my eyes and lose myself in the experience. I have wanted this since I first saw her on the ground on Earth, looking up at me with fear in her eyes.

Still, being on the beach is making me uneasy. Anything could sneak up on me here. Standing back up, I lift Selma into my arms and carry her to the grassy patch by the fire before I lie her down. “This is safer.”

She glances in the direction of the village. “Think they can see us?”

“They don’t see well above water. And do we care?”

She adjusts her position, getting comfortable. “I don’t. They’re total strangers to me. But you’re a hero to them.”

“Then maybe seeing this will cure them of that delusion.” Back on my knees, I dive to her breasts again, finding the nipples still fully stiff. But now I want more. Placing a trail of little pecks down her front, I keep a steady course for that furry patch that must hide something exceptional.

“Oh,” Selma exclaims when I get close, her hand on my head trying to push me further down.

But she’s not in charge here, so I veer to the side and go down one thigh, then back up the other.

She tenses up as I get closer. There’s an elusive scent on the air, one that makes my cock twitch hard. A female scent that gets closer as I approach the juncture of Selma’s thighs.

“Ahh!” She jerks under me when I run my tongue lightly up the inside of her thigh and into the furry part. The fine hairs tickle my tongue, and I spend a little while playing with this thrillingly exotic feature. The scent of her is strong now, and I dare a small excursion down along the pink little slit that half hides behind the fur. It’s slippery and wet, smooth and delicate, small and unbelievably arousing.

Selma twitches at the touch, her hands on my head again, making sure I stay here.

Well, I have no intention of leaving. Experimenting with my tongue and lips, I find the spot that makes her respond the most. She reacts immediately to any small move I make.

I smile to myself. This could be fun. Teasing her with the tip of my tongue in her slit, my fingers caress her breasts, and I work her up until she's only a heaving, groaning mess, writhing on the grass.

Her taste fills my mouth and nose, and I'm curious to find out just how far I can push her. Does she have a limit; does she have a breaking point? I must know.

I start circling the most sensitive part of her that provokes the most reactions, a tiny little nub at the top of her depths. My touch is light, but deliberate and determined.

Selma's noises intensify right away, and aroused with my power I move further down, licking lightly up and down. Her hands on my head have no effect — I will decide what happens here.

As if she understands it, she withdraws her hands, surrendering to my decisions.

“Good girl,” I growl and slide my mouth back up to the nub.

This time I don't stop the light circles until her breath stops, she goes stiff and then starts thrashing and jerking and whimpering while her female flesh clenches rhythmically at my lips. There's more slippery fluid, and I lap it up, craving the flavor of her sex. This is better than any shomp.

I slide myself up along her and lie down. She's breathing hard, eyes closed.

“That sounded interesting,” I tell her, satisfied with myself. “I didn't know aliens could climax.”

“Now you know,” she pants. “That was... insane.”

I look up at the sky, for once feeling completely at one with the universe. “Or maybe those experiences are the only ones

that are truly sane.”

“That’s deep,” Selma says groggily. “But sure, I agree. Oh my. What a wedding night. A real one.”

“The realest night I’ve had.”

She’s quiet for a while, just breathing.

“Caladin. When we made the deal to fake marry, you said it was because I was the closest one.”

“You *were* the closest one,” I tell her. “But not the easiest one. Skix had many alternatives that would have appealed greatly to my matriarch. Girls that would have been overjoyed to play the part. That would have been much easier. And cheaper. But I didn’t want them. I wanted *you*.” I reach over and stroke a long hair off her face.

She sighs deeply. “I’m glad you did. Just wait a little bit. I want to show you something. Maybe you’ll like it.”

After a short while I realize she’s asleep. Her eyes are closed, her mouth is half open, and she’s breathing calmly, face peaceful and innocent.

Sweet dark depths, she’s a special one.

I place a soft kiss on her hair, then get up and leave her there, not bothering to add wood to the fire. The most dangerous thing on this island, by far, is *me*.

Diving into the ocean, I take a short night-time swim, enjoying the coolness of the water and the beauty of the sky above. And being *real*.

I return and lie down by Selma’s side, ready to sleep.

But I stay awake the whole night.

““**T**here it is.” I slow down and turn my head so I can speak in the air.

Selma sits up on my back. “It’s all white! You must be able to see it from space.”

“Probably. It’s carved out of a coral reef. The White Palace is one of the wonders of the planet, but most people will never experience it. Taledak doesn’t want tourists, and he prosecutes trespassers with unusual force.”

“What kind of force?” Selma asks, worried.

“Let’s just say it’s not uncommon for unscheduled visitors to never be heard from again.”

“He *kills* them?!”

“That would be my guess. He’s the type to do that, you see. But reefs are treacherous, and these waters are hard to navigate. Accidents are possible. Although there are thankfully no beaches nearby.”

“Are we going to be safe here?”

“I’ll keep you safe,” I assure her.

“It looks like Cinderella Palace in Disney World,” Selma mysteriously concludes. “Except it has more towers. What’s the story about this palace, anyway? Someone just built it in the middle of the ocean?”

“To us, there’s no such thing as ‘the middle of the ocean,’” I explain. “We live a good portion of our lives under the surface, and a long time ago, this part of the ocean was one of the busiest places on the planet. This coral reef was probably

always populated, but carving it out into a palace was a big project. It was deemed necessary.”

“It looks like a castle more than a palace,” Selma says. “Like you’re afraid someone will come and attack you. There must have been a lot of war back then.”

“There was,” I tell her, impressed by her observations. “You’re right. This was a defensive structure. It has big storage rooms for food, in case of a siege. There are even cells to hold prisoners of war, deep down.” I speed up again.

We got an early start from Woiro, saying goodbye to the native ladies right after sunrise. It’s been a long swim, but a pleasant one.

When we reach the White Palace reef, the wall is flat and tall above us.

“Taledak is in charge here,” I remind Selma. “He will stop at nothing to prove that our marriage is fake.”

“And he’s someone who’ll kill people just for trespassing. Now you got me nervous.”

“I don’t know for a fact that he’s killed anyone. And anyway, everything about us is real.” I place a soft kiss on her adorable nose.

“I hope he sees it that way, too.”

I place the mask on Selma’s face. “Just to get us inside.”

With her in my arms, I dive deep and find one of the underwater tunnels, swim in through it, then rise up until we emerge in the pool of the inner courtyard. Along the way I’ve been conscious of several electronic surveillance systems. It never used to be like that. Taledak must be really afraid of having surprise visits.

A tall stairway curves from the pool up onto dry land. As I lead Selma up the tall steps, I see activity up above.

“Cousin!” comes a booming call as we get up to the upper step. “You’re finally here! And your lovely wife, too.”

“Taledak,” I greet my cousin. “It was a long journey, but a pleasant one.”

He comes towards us, tall and thin for a Louluani, wearing a long, red cape that must have been colored with real gur. And not a long time ago, either. “Of course a journey must be pleasant in the company of such a lovely lady. Welcome to the White Palace, Selma of the clan Beeom!”

Selma straightens beside me, offering my cousin a chilly smile. “Thank you, Taledak. And thank you for inviting us. You have a beautiful home here.”

I nearly do a double take. She speaks like a matriarch, dignified and formal. She radiates authority. It’s far from the Selma I know, but on the other hand, why shouldn’t she have this side to her, as well?

“Oh, ah...” To my joy, Taledak is also taken aback by Selma’s cool greeting. “It was my pleasure,” he says, collecting himself. “I will give you a full tour later, of course. This is in fact the home palace of the Beeom clan, but it has fallen to me to take care of it. Now, you must be famished after your long journey. I have prepared a little meal for you.”

Taledak goes ahead. I give Selma an approving smirk and take her hand.

She tries to stay cool, but she’s clearly impressed by our surroundings. The palace is a blinding white, so bright that the parts that are in direct sunlight look like polished silver, shining so dazzlingly that you can’t look at it. It’s only the

color that does it — the walls have not been polished, and when you study the structure up close, you see the rough surface of the ancient corals.

The palace has slender towers and fat turrets, as well as arched halls and elaborate decorations everywhere.

“I seem to recognize the style of this palace,” Selma says regally. “Your mother’s headdress is styled after this, I think.”

I look down on her, impressed. “That’s right. Her head fin decoration was made at the same time as this palace was carved out of the coral. For another matriarch, of course. Many centuries ago.”

“The style of clan Beeom,” she concludes. “Finely crafted, but solid. Impossible to miss.”

Taledak half turns as he walks. “You have a perceptive wife, Caladin. It took me many years to make that connection.”

We keep climbing wide stairs and cross narrow, finely-sculpted bridges. I’ve been here many times, but now that Selma is with me, I see the palace with new eyes. The carvings are intricate and fine, but ultimately tend to repeat. There are too many stairs where there wouldn’t need to be any. The rooms we pass are beautiful, but most of them are too small to be anything other than decorations — they can’t fill a function. It’s a wonderful place to play hide and seek, but there’s a coldness to it all, as if it’s all made to be admired, not to be lived in.

“Now then,” Taledak says, leading the way into a tall arcade where the endless expanses of the blue ocean can be seen in every direction. It’s about halfway to the top of the palace, a place where smaller meals are usually served. A gentle breeze flows through it, setting in motion the many thin curtains that

hang from every arch. Above us there's a canopy of loose, white fabric. From far below there's the constant hiss of the crashing surf.

In the middle there's a big table, filled with all kinds of food and drink. It's set for four, so I imagine Taledak's wife will also be here.

"Do have a seat," my cousin says and gestures with one hand, sitting down himself.

Selma and I get comfortable, facing each other across the table.

"Now, cousin," Taledak says with an evil smile. "I can't hold it in any longer: Your wife has a remarkable ass."

- SELMA -

My hand shoots across the table like a rattlesnake, grabbing Caladin's arm before he can explode. The snarl tells me I was just in time.

"I think Cousin Taledak may have used the wrong word," I suggest quickly, feeling Caladin's muscles tense under my hand. "After all, why should he have to speak a foreign language in his own home?"

"Ah, of course," Taledak says, calmly loading up his plate with exotic dishes. "I must have used the wrong Interspeech word. I said 'ass', when what I in fact meant was 'behind'. Or 'butt'. That is, your wife's superb rear end, Caladin. I thought that's what 'ass' means, but I suppose not. Anyway, I noticed she likes to show it off. And as a host, it's only polite to point out the parts of a guest that the guest in question clearly wants pointed out."

"Some say a big butt is feminine," I tell him coolly, not letting go of Caladin's arm. "And with Caladin being so masculine, it seems only natural that he should want a wife who both looks and is as womanly as possible." I think I get what's going on here — Taledak wants to bring Caladin off balance, so he'll be provoked to give away the fact that we're fake married.

“In truth, it was her remarkable behind that attracted me to Selma in the first place,” Caladin says, relaxing and starting to pick out dishes from the table. “And so we decided that she should have a wedding dress that would show it off to its best advantage.”

“It was shown off, certainly,” Taledak agrees. “Some would say it was shown off to an inappropriate degree in the holy cathedral, but one can’t expect aliens to understand these things.”

“Oh, Selma wanted a more understated dress,” Caladin says, giving me a little smirk, signaling that he’s in control of himself again and that he understands what’s going on here. “But I insisted on the one she’s wearing right now. You haven’t seen the last of her ass, Taledak, so I’m glad you enjoy the sight. But hopefully you can provide her with some more conservative attire. Her dress has served us well during the wedding and the Journey.”

“Of course,” Taledak says. “My wife has taken care of it. Where is she, though?” He looks around, then snaps his fingers.

Immediately two young servants come out from the arches where they have been out of sight.

“Find my wife and ask her to join us,” Taledak orders, and one of the servants trots off while the other retreats to his hidden position.

I pick out a couple of items of food that don’t look too exotic and carefully bite into one.

“Be careful with that,” our hosts says when he sees it. “The flavor can be challenging. Where did you two meet?”

The thing tastes like caviar with a little bit of sriracha, and it's actually really nice.

"There was a party," Caladin says, taking a bite out of an elaborate heap of food that looks like a sandwich without any bread. "And you know how much I love parties."

"I don't," Taledak says. "You don't like people in general, so parties wouldn't be your thing at all. I remember from our youth — you would always vanish from any gathering."

"Exactly," my fake husband says, chewing cheerfully. "And this party had barely begun when I started to look for a way out."

"And I saw him do that," I add. "And I thought, '*that* is the most handsome male I've ever seen. I can't let him leave.' So I put myself between him and the exit, and then I asked him several strange questions."

"Questions about my teeth, as I recall," Caladin invents.

"I'd never seen teeth that sharp." I grin, enjoying the game. It's us two against the world, and that feels good. "It was the first thing that came to mind."

Caladin gives me a smile. "I found her crazy questions entertaining, so I played along. Before I knew it, I was enjoying myself. And that was it."

A female Louluani appears at one of the arches. She's wearing a blue dress, long and loose-fitting. She's thin and has a frail look to her.

"Ah, Aouana!" Taledak exclaims. "There you are. Selma, this is my wife, Aouana."

She ignores me and sits down next to her husband.

“Welcome to our home,” she says in a thin voice, not looking at either me or Caladin. “We hope your stay will be comfortable.”

Caladin gives her a smile that’s as warm as he can probably make it. “So good to meet you again, Aouana. It’s been years.”

“Caladin and Selma were just telling me how they met,” Taledak recounts. “It seems they agree that they met at a party. Which seems strange to me. Caladin at a party? I can barely imagine it. Where was this party, cousin?”

Caladin takes another item from the table. “This is a good selection of *zogo*, Taledak. I’ve missed that. Oh, it was somewhere close to her planet. A space station, I believe.”

“Which planet do you come from, Selma?” Taledak looks at me with a crooked little smile on his face.

“You wouldn’t have heard of it,” I tell him. “It’s called Daneb. In our language, anyway.”

“Daneb,” our host ponders. “I’m not familiar with it. *Daneb*. Is it a large empire?”

“Not very large,” I admit. “Just the one planet.”

“It’s not an empire at all,” Caladin calmly says. “Just a few planets. They’re early in their spacefaring era.”

“Ah. Well, we must all begin somewhere.” Taledak gives me another strange little smile, then drops his gaze to my chest.

“Which is why I was there,” Caladin continues. “New spacefaring species sometimes have interesting things to sell. In bulk, of course. But there was nothing good.”

“Except Selma, you mean? Or were you blinded by her ass? Did you see her ass, Aouana? Of course you did. At the

wedding, it was impossible to miss. It shone like a sun, lighting up the whole cathedral.”

Aouana looks down, embarrassed by her husband’s lack of manners.

“Selma is the finest thing her solar system has produced,” Caladin says, chewing cheerfully. “And I saw no other option than to marry her.”

“The timing was great, too,” Taledak says with a mocking tone. “Right after your mother commanded you to get married! Such wonderful *luck* finding the love of your life at that exact time.”

“Love can strike at the strangest time,” Caladin counters. “Or so the poets claim.”

“What did it cost you, I wonder.”

“Cost, cousin? Whatever do you mean?”

Taledak glares at me. “It’s a simple question. What would it cost to get someone like her to marry you? With an ass like that? It can’t come cheap.”

“I hope you’re not implying that money has changed hands in connection with my marriage, Taledak.” Caladin’s voice is mild.

Taledak must realize the trouble he’ll be in if he keeps this going. “No, no. Of course not. Just a thought. Love always costs us something, doesn’t it? We must give up part of ourselves. But of course the rewards are much greater than the cost. Forgive me, I’m just curious about your love story. I’m quite the romantic, you know. Isn’t that right, Aouana?”

Aouana simply smiles weakly at her empty plate, not lifting her face.

“Really? I suppose we can all change,” Caladin says. “Anyway, thank you for this great meal. Remind me to cook shomp for you at some time.” He stands up, and I do the same. “Now I wonder if we may see our room. I think we both need to rest.”

Taledak snaps his fingers again, and the same two servants appear. “Take our guests to their room. Or will you want separate rooms, perhaps?”

Caladin laughs out loud. “Separate rooms? We’re newlyweds, cousin. You can try to keep us apart, but you won’t succeed. See you later, Aouana.”

He takes my hand, and we follow the servant further up in the palace, into one of the higher towers.

The room is big and brightly lit from two arched, open windows. There’s a big bed and a lot of flowing curtains all over the place, waving gently in the sea breeze. The bathroom is small by Louluani standards, but huge by mine.

“What a nice room,” I exclaim. “The air is so fresh!”

“Even Taledak can’t ruin this old palace completely,” Caladin grunts. “This is the room where I would stay whenever I visited before.”

Opening a floor to ceiling closet, I find it full of clothes. “Looks like someone lives here right now.”

“Someone does,” Caladin says, looking out the window. “Us.”

Taking out a flowing dress, I realize it would be too small for any adult Louluani. “Oh, you mean these are *our* clothes?”

“Mostly yours, I hope.” He comes in close, embracing me lightly from behind. “*They are almost certainly listening to us*

with spy equipment,” he whispers into my hair. “*Just so you know.*” He lets go of me.

I just nod, having had the same suspicion myself. In a way, that makes this all easier.

Because I’ve been low-level horny all day long. After he licked me so well during our fake wedding night, I keep losing myself in fantasies about that happening again. Or something even better, maybe, something he can enjoy too. Riding on his back while he raced calmly through the waves at incredible speed was not helping. I had to sit right behind his dorsal fin, holding onto it with one hand. Straddling his back, I couldn’t help the ridge of his strong spine touching me right *there*, waving rhythmically up and down as he beat his feet like a whale tail. It’s not that I’ve been climaxing, but I’ve been pretty close, and the need has been building in me.

Hey, we have to really sell this marriage. While Caladin is too decent to come on strong, or even suggest it, it’s obvious what we should be doing. I can’t help noticing his bulge. And we agree this Journey is real. So we might as well act like it.

I go to one of the windows and look out, enjoying the breeze. I’m really enjoying this. And that’s dangerous. What will it be like when we go our separate ways? That’s the deal we made. What happens when he turns around and tells me to get off his planet? *Thank you for your help, I’ll see you in a year.*

I think I’d be hurt if he did it just like that. Or if he didn’t acknowledge that this whole thing has a real element. If this is just a game to him, that won’t be a pleasant feeling.

But this moment right now — I can let it be what it is. I don’t need to overthink it. Just for now, I can let go.

I turn around and run my hand down my fake husband's massive chest.

"Darling," I ask out loud, playing my part and finding it really easy, "are we safe here? Your cousin seems angry about something."

"Oh, he's always angry," Caladin says and reaches behind me to grab my butt. "Nobody cares that much. He's an insignificant nobody, and he can never be anything else. Let's simply enjoy our stay. Later we'll go diving."

I look up at him, my hand drawing little figures down his chest and hard washboard stomach. "You'll keep me safe, my love?"

His eyes glint. "Of course I will, darling. Our lives have merged; we're joined now. Forever."

He pulls me to him and kisses me, lightly at first, giving me a chance to pull back. But pulling back is the last thing on my mind right now.

I meet his kiss with all the passion and need I've been damming up. And it's a lot. Our lips meet in a fierce caress, with no subtlety and all lust.

Reaching down, I fumble with his pants and manage to loosen the waistband. Unable to wait, I greedily put my hand down and grab the hard, pulsating shaft of his exotic cock. I had wanted to explore it more last night, but I fell asleep instead. Now I want to make up for it.

Caladin steps out of his pants, grabs the hem of my wedding dress, and pulls it up over my head, smoothly and easily. I stretch my arms up to assist, wanting to be naked for him.

And, it hits me with a delighted shudder, for those who might be listening. Or watching through some hidden surveillance camera. I don't care — this is space, this is an alien world.

Nobody I know will ever see any of those images. And I *am* married to this killer whale.

Caladin lifts me and puts me on the bed, furiously kissing and licking, caressing and squeezing and just feasting on me. I've never felt sexier or more attractive. If I can release *this* kind of passion in the otherwise so cool and composed predator male, then surely he has to like my body a whole lot.

I give myself up to him, arching my back as the heat builds in me, really fast. His textured tongue is on my nipples and my stomach and my neck, his fingers are roaming all over me, and his cock is twitching and throbbing so close to my midsection that I can feel the heat from it.

I don't need to check — I'm definitely dripping wet, and I'm pretty sure I can smell my own arousal on the warm breeze.

I try to think rationally about this. He did abduct me.

But then he gave me a job.

All right, but he was a really grumpy boss.

That's his way. It's just a part of him. Am I perfect in the way I deal with others?

Maybe not, but he's paying me to do this. Doesn't that feel weird?

This isn't a part of the deal. I don't have to do this. I can stop this at any time. He's giving me every opening to do that.

Yeah, but do I want a freaking *alien orca* to be my first?

Have I ever met a better man of any species?

Well, fuck. I got me there.

Having lost my inner debate in the way I was hoping, I curl my legs around Caladin's back in a blatant attempt to get him

to focus further down.

He gets it and kisses his way down to my abdomen.

But I want more than that now. I want it all.

“Take me,” I whisper hoarsely. “Take me, my love.” Even in my fuzzy state, I’m able to not groan something that might indicate this is the first time for us.

Caladin growls deep in his throat and gets to his knees between my thighs. I lift them, opening myself to him fully.

His sharp intake of breath turns me on completely. He likes what he sees, and now he’s going to take possession of it. Of *me*.

His cock stands skywards, shiny black with big, white spots. It’s long and thick, and I can’t possibly take it all. But right now, I’m willing to try.

If I knew we were alone, I might remind him to be careful. But as it is, with a possible audience, I have to trust that he will know it. Stretching my hands up above my head on the soft mattress, I surrender to the alien predator.

He gets my need and positions his cock at my entrance, yellow eyes blazing.

Sliding it easily up and down my slit, he wets it with my copious juices. The noise should make me blush — I must be soaked. But I don’t care. I’m horny.

Caladin pushes in, just a tiny amount. I close my eyes, breathing hard in expectation.

He sees my readiness and pushes further, until there’s a narrow point that has to stretch to give way to the intruder.

Calmly pulling out, he adds more of my juice and goes right back in. I hold my breath. With one smooth thrust he breaches me and slides all the way in, growling with satisfaction.

I can't help tensing up and moan with half fear, half delight. My body isn't used to this, and there's a burning sensation in my center as the invader demands my womanly flesh stretch and widen. But it's a sweet burn that quickly fades, leaving only good heat and the thrill of being filled up.

I open my eyes. "Fuck me," I plead.

Caladin stays inside me, letting my sex adjust to him. His sharply contrasted skin shines in glossy black and silvery white, healthy and strong.

When he pulls out, his cock leaves a coldness and a sense of loss, but it doesn't last long before he pushes in again, sliding easily but still demanding my sex adjust to him. And there is a lot of him — all those ridges and knots create a sensory overload in my center, so I give up trying to keep track and just let him do his thing. I don't need to be in any kind of control here. I don't want to. All I know is that this giant killer whale is fucking me hard and deep. All thoughts of fake marriage vanish from my mind — it's just the sex now.

I have nothing to compare this to, but I know that his will be a hard act to follow.

He fucks me slowly, forcing slithering, squelching sounds from my slit. He reaches deep in me, but never painfully so. I'm being possessed in the best way possible. The heat is churning hard and fast, and my pelvis is a molten cauldron of bliss being stirred by his alien cock.

I distantly become aware that I'm being very loud, groaning and moaning and whimpering as he fucks me. And I know that

if he keeps this up, I'm going to come on his dick.

As if he knows, he changes his position so that the thick root of his rod grinds against my clit with each thrust, hard and smooth.

“Oooh,” I groan, “moooreee...!” Because now I want to come. I really want it, and that movement there... “Yeaahhhh!”

I stiffen as he pushes me the last distance to the edge, then scream as his cock hits something deep inside me and ignites my sex. The climax washes over me, and I moan deeply with each wave.

Still he fucks me, but now he goes slower. His breathing changes, his moves go jerky, and then he sprays inside me, roaring out his triumph over several tones and octaves, a deep victory cry that could probably make me come on its own if we were underwater.

My husband collapses on top of me, pinning me down with some of his weight while I ride out the aftershocks. I cling to him and breathe hard, wanting him inside me always, wanting his body heat on me, wanting his powerful heartbeat to always thump through me.

Caladin rolls off me. “You're incredible.”

“We're good together,” I agree modestly, out of breath. “Every time,” I add, remembering that we're supposed to have done this many times before.

He gets to his feet, letting me admire his tight butt, swelling with muscle. It's deep black, but it has an adorable streak of blinding white going across it.

I stretch on the bed. “I like this place.”

“Nothing wrong with the place,” Caladin grunts. “But we could ask for better hosts. If he keeps annoying us with nonsense about money, I’ll bite his head off.” He gives me a little wink, flicking his gaze to the ceiling.

I get it — he’s not talking to me so much as to the microphones in here. Well, we gave them a good show.

“It could get annoying,” I yawn. “But perhaps it’s just his way. I *am* a new addition to his clan. He just wants to know that I’m not some kind of spy, maybe.”

Caladin scoffs. “He knows I would never bring a mole into the clan and the business. But perhaps we don’t need to see him too much while we’re here. You up for a swim, my love?”

I take a deep breath and get out of bed, but my knees are still shaky, so I sit back down. “Um. Give me a moment.”

- CALADIN -

We start walking down to the courtyard. The palace is strangely deserted.

“Where is everyone”? I mutter.

“Are you missing someone?” Selma asks.

“There always used to be lots of activity here. There were clan members and employees of the company and guests from other clans. Even some rich tourists who could pay for a stay here. It was quite a buzzing place. Now, there’s almost nobody around. Only the occasional servant.”

“Maybe Taledak is so unpopular that nobody wants to come. Or maybe he doesn’t like company.”

“I thought I was the introvert of the clan,” I grunt. “But even I would keep the White Palace busier than *this*.”

At the courtyard we turn to the side until we get to the diving spot.

“Put your mask on,” I instruct. “We’ll dive together. I will protect you.”

Selma doesn’t hesitate, and when I leap off the wall with her in my arms she doesn’t scream.

We hit the water and sink deep down, but this time I don't take us back up. The sun is high in the sky, and it should be a good time for this.

"Are you breathing well?" I ask, putting my face close to Selma's mask.

She shows me her little fist, with the thumb pointing up.

"You want to go to the surface?" I ask, urgently grabbing her arm.

"No!" she says, voice muffled by the mask. "I am breathing fine."

"There's enough air for hours in your mask," I tell her and pull her along with me, away from the white foundations of the palace towards where the bottom angles deeper.

I know this place well. It's where I learned to dive properly, to not fear the darkest depths. Because those can be the best places.

The bottom is fine sand, with patches of red and green seaweed spread around. The sunlight is filtered through the clear water and the waves up top, sending down undulating rays and rainbow specters. Here and there little towers of white coral stretch towards the surface, sculpted like works of art, but infinitely more detailed than any sentient artist could create.

"This is all coral," I tell Selma as I pull her along. "It's all still alive, growing slowly."

"It's beautiful," she says inside her mask.

"We'll go deeper," I tell her. "There will be pressure in your ears, but the mask will reduce the pressure on your lungs. You'll have no decompression problems later." My own body

can easily handle the issues that arise from quick decompression after a dive, but Selma's species has lived in air for so long that she'll probably need the mask to deal with it. I will risk no injury to her.

She nods, trusting me. On an impulse I go in close and place a kiss on her head. Her eyes glitter inside her mask.

We pass over the place where the reef dives down into the murky depths that the sun can't reach. I won't be able to speak much, having to preserve air despite my body being perfectly suited for long dives. But I want Selma to see this.

Grabbing her around her waist, I kick off and take us deeper into the clear water. The reef is a pink wall behind us. Already we're deeper than most Louluani are comfortable going these days, but we're almost there now.

Checking on Selma at short intervals, I determine from her breathing and her heartbeat that she's tense, but not scared.

I give her a confident grin, change my grip on her, and take us straight towards the coral wall.

The hole is impossible to see from above, but from below it's obvious. I swim inside and then allow us to float slowly upwards.

"That's incredible," Selma marvels in her mask. And I fully agree with her.

It's a tunnel going straight up. The sides are coated in fine crystals, sparkling in the sunlight that reaches it from above. The hole at the top end is only the size of my hand and impossible to get through, but still it admits enough light to make this a blindingly bright tunnel that glitters with thousands of fine rainbow specters.

Suddenly the crystal tunnel is alive with small swimming creatures that rush back and forth, beating their fins and their tails in alarm at our arrival. Their bodies sparkle vividly in blue and yellow and bright green. It's my theory that they have evolved to live in this tunnel and nowhere else, and that their colors are so bright because they need to be visible against the overpowering play of colors and light from the crystals and the sun. It's my favorite sight on Xaokui and probably in the galaxy. And I don't think a lot of others know about it.

Conscious we're intruding into a peaceful world, and that the air in my lungs won't last forever, I grab Selma again and swim out of the cave.

The outside now looks dull and dark by comparison as we slowly rise up along the coral wall, a little slower than the nitrogen bubbles that Selma's mask expels.

About halfway up, I put my face close to her mask. "I don't want to disturb that place too long. Those creatures don't like to see my kind in there."

"It's a crazy place," Selma says, eyes wide. "I've never seen anything like it."

I pull us further up. "Very few have."

We're about two thirds up when I hear three sharp *pops*, so close together they could almost be one.

Then there's a deep rumbling and the coral wall starts to tremble. The sunlight is obscured by something dark.

On pure reflex I kick hard in the water and pull Selma away from the corals.

But it's too late. A big, jagged rock comes falling and strikes my foot at the ankle, scraping along it as it falls. The pain is

intense, but I can't let it slow me down. More rocks are falling, and we're suddenly in the middle of a landslide.

Making sure I'm the highest point, I swim away from the coral avalanche as fast as I can, being hit again and again by falling rocks with sharp edges. Aiming for the surface, I kick my legs hard. My lungs are starting to need air — I had never anticipated such a fast and tough ascent.

When we surface I gasp for air, just clinging to Selma and holding her above water.

“What was that?” she asks inside her mask.

“Avalanche,” I tell her between deep gulps of air. “Falling coral rocks.”

“I thought they were solid rock,” she says, puzzled and probably not as aware of the danger as I was. “Can they just crumble?”

“They are,” I tell her tightly. “They can't.”

She stares at me. “You think that...”

Those three popping sounds make it obvious. Someone set off explosive charges that were meant to blow up a part of the coral reef and send the pieces hurtling down to us. And it's not hard to guess who that ‘someone’ might be.

I scowl over at the White Palace. “Anything is possible. Are you all right?”

“I'm fine,” Selma says. “How about you?”

If we weren't in water, she could probably see me bleeding. I feel bruised and battered all over.

“I'll survive,” I say tightly and swim towards the palace, determined to have a serious conversation with Taledak.

As we climb up from the courtyard, my cousin comes to meet us. “Had a nice... oh, but cousin! You’re bleeding!”

I look down myself. I have a half dozen cuts, many bruises, and a throbbing ankle. “Oh, so I am.”

“Did you get too close to an angry *kolaou*?” He gives me a mocking smile.

“No, we got too close to a falling coral reef. It was blown up, can you imagine?”

He frowns. “Blown up? You mean...”

“Someone tried to kill us,” I tell him, not in the mood to be diplomatic. “They blew up a part of the coral reef under the water when Selma and I were directly underneath it. Three explosive charges in the corals, carefully placed to cut off a big portion of it. I wonder who could possibly want us dead, Taledak. Any ideas?”

He stares at me, worried about my mild tone. “No, of course not! I mean, of course the clan has some enemies, and you are the most visible leader right now. That wedding was broadcast all over the planet. But that they would attempt murder here, right after your wedding... shocking, cousin. Shocking. I will send out an alert and get the security detail to search the whole area for enemy agents and other possible explosives. Come, let’s get you treated in your room. I’ll get the medic.” He walks up the stairs, and Selma and I follow. I’ve looked her over several times, making sure she’s really fine. Her breathing also sounds good, so I think the mask did its job well.

I struggle to control my anger, but I have no proof it really was Taledak. I have to be smart about this and focus on pretending to be a careless newly-married man. My cousin must be

expecting me to react with fury. But if I appear to react with some restraint, it might confuse him.

The medic is one of the servants. He arrives with a suitcase full of equipment and has me lie on the bed while he tends to my wounds.

“The ankle is the worst injury, sir,” he finally reports. “But it’s not broken. Otherwise you have only superficial bruises. Any internal pain?”

“No, no. Thank you,” I dismiss him. He slinks out.

“So we *are* in danger here,” Selma says and sits down beside me. She’s been quiet so far, but there’s a fire in her eyes that I like to see. “Someone is trying to kill you.”

“Or you,” I tell her with an evil grin. “Well, this is our clan seat. If our enemies were to launch attacks, this is one of the places they’d choose. For all I know, you and I could have set off those explosions just by being nearby. Someone may have rigged a booby-trap a long time ago. Maybe even when there were still wars here and the palace was an active castle.” I say it only for the benefit of the possible spies. If Taledak thinks I’m this stupid, he might relax and make a mistake. There’s no doubt in my mind — those charges were set and detonated by him, trying to kill me.

“Yes,” Selma says, playing along. “It may have been there for ages. And nobody dives there, except for you.”

“Exactly. Anyway, Taledak will investigate. And if it turns out to have been our enemies, then we will get revenge.”

In a way it makes things simpler. I know now — he’d kill to get me out of the way as manager of the clan company. The stakes are clear. And I’m fine with that. I thrive on this kind of stuff — it’s different from tedious business meetings and

negotiations. I will really enjoy protecting Selma against Taledak and his plans.

“Good,” Selma says. “It was very scary, but we can’t let anyone think that our clan is going to take it without fighting back. And winning.”

“Precisely.” I stroke my wife’s leg. She doesn’t seem to be too rattled by this. I think it’s partly because she didn’t realize what was happening, and partly because she’s a resilient little female. “Why don’t you lie down? We’ll take a nap after our terrible experience.”

“I noticed you did what you promised,” Selma says and gently straddles my legs, not looking sleepy at all. “You kept me safe. Even if it meant you got hurt yourself.”

“A husband is expected to be his wife’s protector,” I tell her. “It’s in the vows.”

She drags a finger down my chest, avoiding the small patches where the medic applied a sealing salve to the small wounds. “I remember. Remind me, is it in the vows that the wife should provide comfort and attention when her husband has risked his life for her?”

“Oh yes,” I tell her, heat starting to grow in my crotch. “And she should provide more than that, too. It’s the most important part of the vows.”

“I remember,” she says and runs her finger down to my pants, hooking one finger in the waistband. “She should provide kind words. And a snack.”

I put my arms comfortably behind my head, letting her untie my waistband and unhook the utility belt. “Well, yes. And maybe even more things.”

She impatiently pulls at my pants. “What kind of things?”

I lift my hips to help her slide it off. My cock stands hard up along my stomach, eager and twitching. “Well, the kind of thing you’re doing now. Helping to undress. Helping to... oh... yes, that. Oh, you don’t need me to tell you. You’re doing it right now.”

Selma grabs my rod with both hands. “I’m just doing things I know my husband likes. For instance, I know you like this.”

My eyes fly open when my cock is suddenly enveloped by moist heat. When I look down, all I see is the top of Selma’s head.

“Oh... oh... I...” I stutter, astounded by this development. She’s taking my rod into her mouth! “Yes... I like it...”

I can only stare in astonishment. The tip is in her mouth, and she’s swirling her tongue around it while her lips are engulfing it completely.

I have to lay my head back. The suddenness and the intensity of it almost makes me lose control.

“If you keep that going...” I warn Selma weakly.

She takes her mouth off me and smiles. “Yes, I know. You did it before.”

“Uh... yes,” I confirm, having to keep the pretense going while knowing that I’ve never before had this done on me.

Selma takes her clothes off in one swift move, then slides herself up along my legs until she has her knees on either side of my pelvis. “Remember this, darling?”

Again, it’s new. But I can only grunt in tense expectation. Her breasts shake with a fluid jiggle that makes me ache, her own scent is mixed with the smell of the ocean, and her hair hangs carelessly around her face.

I grab her hips, pushing her back to line her up with my uncontrollable hardness. She smiles and slides back, then forwards again, her wetness split by my cock, trapped between her and me.

Placing one little hand on my chest to support herself, Selma reaches back and grabs my hardness behind her. Concentrating, she places the tip at her entrance and raises her hips.

I have a strong urge to turn her over and take her, but there's something so real and needy in her clumsy moves that I decide to let her do her thing.

Closing her eyes tight and whimpering, she lowers herself and carefully impales herself on my rod, a tiny bit at a time.

I put a hand under her behind to help her go back up, then down again, further this time.

Her female body yields to my hardness, being pressed down on it by its own weight. Wet noises fill the room, as well as her little moans and my own deeper grunts.

Finding a slow rhythm, she slides back and forth now, with me deep inside her. Her eyes are open as glassy little slits, her lips are full and half apart, her long, wet hair paints little circles of coolness on my chest. Oh sweet depths, her beauty is too much to bear.

Just as I have to concentrate to not spray uncontrollably inside her, Selma gasps and then moans deeply, speeding up her movements but becoming less coordinated. She's obviously climaxing. I can't help it — my hips jerk all by themselves, pushing up, wanting to bury as much of me inside her body as possible. Roaring deep in my throat, I give up to the ecstasy

and spray inside her, hard and long, going so deep she gasps again, eyelids fluttering.

She collapses on my chest, my manhood still deep inside her.

Embracing her lightly, I revel in her quick, heaving breaths and the fast rhythm of her heart.

“My perfect wife.”

To my own surprise, there’s no sarcasm in that. I’m starting to think of her as my actual wife. I’m starting to have trouble seeing a future without her. I’m starting to want her around me at all times.

Where is this going? The Journey will soon be over. Then what? Can I just let her take off into space on her own, while I go back to my lonesome job in space? Can I take her with me? Would she be happy living in my spaceship with only me and Skix for company? No, of course not. She’s so full of life, so colorful and sparkling. She’d wither if I tried to force her to fit into my old life.

Beach. This turned out so differently from what I expected. And infinitely better.

It takes Selma a while to recover, and when she does I have to help lift her and straighten her stiff legs.

She curls up next to me. “Still angry about the explosion, darling?”

- SELMA -

“No, I like it when we explode together.”

I laugh. “No, I mean that other one. Under the ocean.”

He stretches on the bed. “Oh, that. I’d almost forgotten. The Oumi Corporation is a successful one. I can understand if our rivals want to fight us like that and not in the marketplace.”

There’s a careful knock on the door. Caladin pulls his pants back on and goes to answer.

It’s the servant who is also a medic. “Still doing well, sir? Host Taledak asks if you would like the tour of the palace before dinner.”

“We would,” Caladin rumbles. “We’ll be right down.”

He comes over, bends down, and kisses me while stroking my hair.

“Stay close to me,” he whispers. “I don’t think he’ll try anything, but I want you safe.”

Taking his hand, I get out of bed and sashay naked over to the closet. “What should I wear?”

It takes us about twenty minutes to get ready, with me modeling various outfits for Caladin and him giving his

opinion.

I sense Drupili's influence in the clothing that fills the closet. None of it is too weird and alien, and all the garments I try on fit me well. It's no surprise that I end up with a pale pink dress that clings to my butt in an innocently naughty way — Caladin has simple tastes.

Taledak meets us at the courtyard. "Recovered from the accident? Very good. My guards found indications of Clan Vaium traffic in this sector not long ago. Perhaps they were behind it. Or perhaps it was some old charge from the old days. You know they used explosives to carve out this palace. Perhaps some were forgotten and left in place. Explosives will become unstable over time. But it all worked out fine."

Caladin rubs his bruised ankle. "Perfectly fine. Shall we start? I'm eager to see how you have improved the palace since the last time I was here." He takes my hand.

"I've changed it all," Taledak says with satisfaction as he walks ahead. "You'll barely recognize it."

It's a pretty palace, but to me it's not all that interesting. It reminds me of a movie set, elegant and beautiful, but without much character to it. It has the feeling of something that was built because someone could afford it rather than because someone really wanted or needed it. Maybe it's because there's no one around. It's an empty palace in the middle of the ocean, no longer needed to protect the clan.

Each room has been decorated using large amounts of money and the tiniest amount of good taste. Everything glitters and shines, and each free space has been filled with furniture and carpets and wall hangings and vases and all kinds of useless knick-knacks. Taledak reels off names that I guess are designers or artists or something. I think he's trying to impress

us, but it's completely lost on me, and Caladin just smiles merrily the whole time, as if amused.

“Why does our clan keep this place?” I ask innocently when we're walking through a banquet room. “Seems more hassle than it's worth.”

Taledak's eyes flash orange at the 'our clan', but he recovers. “I suppose it's a symbol more than anything else. A point of pride for the clan. And it's a pleasant place to live, if you can afford the cost of guarding it and having everything you need brought here from far away. Some would say a beautiful object is worth keeping for its own sake. I suppose you would not see the point of that. This is the number four conference room. The Treaty of Smonoi was signed here.”

He opens the door to yet another over-decorated room with a view of the ocean. There are many overwrought chairs, all arranged around a table that on Earth would be considered too gaudy for any other home than that of a Russian oligarch.

“Oh, it's very beautiful,” I gush, trying to be polite. “Completely marvelous. And historically important, too, I'm sure.”

Caladin chuckles. “The Treaty of Smonoi was broken less than a day after it was signed. Not even historians know about it. Nothing else of historical interest has happened here. It's a nice place when it's full of people, like when we were young. It felt like a living palace then, Selma. I'm sure Taledak intends to return the palace to that. If there's room, that is, what with all the strange objects that fill every room.”

We walk up a winding stair inside a tall tower, all gold and red.

“By the way, cousin,” Taledak says as we climb the tower, “how were the negotiations with the Bululg about the bulk plastics? I read about it in the internal memos.”

“Difficult,” Caladin says. “They had some very firm ideas about the price they wanted. Funny, I don’t remember writing a memo about those negotiations. But don’t worry. We’re not done with the Bululg. We’ll let them simmer and then strike with a lower price.”

I start to get nervous, not liking hearing the Bululg mentioned.

“I don’t think that will be possible,” Taledak says. “They sold the rights to a Renenet company for sixteen thousand per banikweight. Did you really offer less than that rock-bottom price? How could you possibly expect them to bite?”

“The Bululg are getting desperate,” Caladin replies calmly. “I sensed it, and I wanted us to profit from it. Well, we can’t win them all. I commend you on your contacts, cousin. That information could not have been easy to come by. But perhaps you’re in touch with the Bululg yourself? Ah, I remember this view.”

The winding stairs end in a round room with arched windows separated by thin columns. The basically elegant architecture is ruined by the golden furniture that completely fills all available space. There are two different couches, a desk, several chairs by the wall, tables and armoires and a large ottoman-like thing that obscures one side of the room all by itself. It looks more like a storage space than a room to live in.

“Lots of ocean,” I comment, seeing only blue expanse out of every window.

“We Louluani love the ocean,” Taledak tells me. “This is where the guards would watch for attackers.”

Caladin goes over to a window and leans out. “Breezy up here.”

“My love,” I exclaim when I see the intent look on Taledak’s face, “don’t go so close! It’s a long fall.”

But Caladin knows exactly what he’s doing. His stance is steady and tense, his eyes alert when he glances at me. He’s tempting his cousin to push. If he tries, Taledak will be the one who falls.

“What’s that down there?” Caladin asks. “At water level. Did you add a landing platform to the place?”

“I did,” Taledak says. “For easier deliveries. There’s now no need to carry the goods we order all the way down through the whole palace.”

“But the storage rooms are at the mid-level,” Caladin says as he straightens up. “Right by the old landing pad.”

Taledak starts walking down the stairs. “I’m using the lower levels for storage now.”

“Aren’t they all dank and smelly?” my fake husband asks as we follow the host.

“Not anymore. It’s all been renovated.”

“You renovated the dungeons? So whenever you need any goods, you will have to walk down and get them from there, then bring them up. I’m not sure I understand the idea here, cousin. But I’d love to see how you’ve done it.”

“Unfortunately the dungeons are closed at this time,” Taledak says lightly. “There’s a lot of construction going on there, and it wouldn’t be safe to show you. It will all be finished in a year or so, and then I’d be delighted to give you a tour.” Reaching

the bottom of the stairs, Taledak walks straight on. “Ah, Aouana! I thought you were getting dressed for dinner.”

Taledak’s wife is standing by a wall, looking down. “I finished dressing. And I thought maybe I can show Selma the gallery.”

Taledak frowns. “The gallery?”

“There’s a piece in there that I think only females can appreciate properly,” Aouana says quietly, not raising her gaze. “*The Chance* by Halaeu.”

Her husband sighs. “Really? Well, all right. It was expensive enough. And you do spend a ludicrous amount of time in there. I suppose we should get *some* use out of it. Be quick. Dinner’s ready.”

I look up at Caladin. If these people want to harm us, splitting us up might be a first step. But I also get the feeling that this idea comes as a surprise to Taledak. I’m curious to find out what Aouana wants from me.

“It will only be a moment,” Aouana half-whispers.

Caladin shrugs. “Women do enjoy artworks.”

“We do,” I confirm. “I suppose we’ll meet at the dinner table.”

“Yes,” Taledak says and turns his back. “I wanted to show you this, Caladin. The ceiling is now pure quartz...”

Aouana lightly takes my hand and pulls me along, her loose robes flowing in the air and making her seem more slender than most Louluani females.

The gallery is a small, rectangular room with no windows, only a row of big skylights. There’s a row of small sculptures, each placed to make the most of the natural light from above. There’s a completely different atmosphere in this room than in the rest of the palace — this room was lovingly and sparingly

decorated in a simple, but tasteful way. The original architect would have approved.

“I do spend a lot of time in here,” Aouana says softly. “It’s my favorite room in the palace. These are sculptures made by artists from all over Xaokui. My husband says I should only collect works by members of the clan, but I find that there aren’t any. So I’m afraid this is a small display of art from other clans. I can only hope it won’t offend you.”

“Not at all,” I assure her. “They’re very beautiful.”

She walks to a pedestal. On top of it is the only black sculpture — the others are all white or some shade of pink. I recognize a Louluani figure about the size of my hand.

“*The Chance*, by Halaeu. A miniature, about six hundred years old,” Aouana says. “It depicts Prince Colomue when he decided to launch the final assault on the man who had taken his father’s place on the throne. He had a simple choice. Either attack... or *leave*.” As she says the last word, Aouana lifts her gaze and stares right at me. I gasp from surprise — it’s the first time she looks me in the eye, and her orange eyes have a strange urgency in them.

Immediately she looks back at the statue. “He knew that if he attacked, he would be in... *great danger*.” Again she looks at me for a split second.

“I see,” I tell her weakly, trying to make sense of it. “A brave man, then.”

“He really wanted to *leave*,” Aouana says. “But his honor didn’t allow it. He chose to attack. This sculpture shows his only chance to *leave*.”

I swallow. I’m starting to get it. She wants me gone from the palace.

“But he faced the *danger*. And that led to his *death*.” Another flash of orange.

I nod slowly, as if I analyze artworks on a daily basis. “I understand. It’s a beautiful piece. Perhaps we can learn from it.”

“Yes!” Aouana hisses. “We can learn from Prince Columue’s actions! The others are waiting.”

She abruptly grabs my hand and leads me out, which is good. Because as we leave the room, I feel a sudden dizziness that makes me stumble. It must be the shock of the threat.

Okay. All this was to warn me about danger. Deadly danger. And she’s obviously worried about hidden microphones, too. Perhaps her warning should be taken seriously. She seems completely different from her husband. I wonder if she’s in good health.

The dinner is served at the same table as before, and the same servants assist with the meal. I’m starting to get the feeling that this palace is completely deserted apart from us.

The conversation is sporadic while the males eat and Aouana and I pick at the dishes.

“The Matriarch will be here tomorrow,” Taledak finally says, leaning back and chewing on a piece of seaweed. “She wants to have a real talk with all of us, she says. In particular Selma. The two of you left your wedding so quickly, she barely had a chance to congratulate you.”

“I see,” Caladin says. “It’s very good of her to take time from her busy schedule to see us.”

“It is,” Taledak agrees and gets up. “We would all have expected you two to meet her *before* the wedding, not days after. She almost has to chase you down. Everyone is very

mystified about it, especially since your... *wife* is an alien. It did not help the clan's reputation, I have to say. I doubt any other matriarch would have accepted it, but after all, she is your mother."

Caladin reaches across the table and takes my hand. "She is, but she's also the matriarch. She has the wisdom to act from certainty, not from hearsay and rumors."

Taledak's mouth contracts to a smirk I don't like at all. "Exactly. She needs proof, doesn't she? Solid *evidence*."

Caladin ignores the question as we get up from the table and wander slowly to the stairs.

"I'd forgotten how beautiful the moons look from here!"

I squeeze his hand. "It's wonderful." This place isn't so alien that it couldn't have been on Earth somewhere, like Greece or the Maldives or the Caribbean. But the moons make it all look just as weird and distant as it really is.

"Good night," Aouana whispers as she passes us, giving me a split second of intense eye contact.

I think hard as we walk up the stairs to our room. Why did she warn us? Will Taledak try to kill us tonight?

As soon as we're inside the room, I reach up to put my hands around Caladin's neck, then jump onto him, clenching my thighs around his hard, slim waist.

I pretend to bite his ear. "*Aouana says we're in danger,*" I whisper as softly as I can. "*She told me to leave. Several times.*"

"Mmm, my wife is feeling the need," Caladin says loudly and chuckles, cupping my butt and easily taking my weight. "We'll see what we can do."

And of course his presence overwhelms me and I start tingling. I'm not worried about this. Caladin can handle anything.

It's a wonderful feeling to be able to just let go of any worry because he's here. On Earth, everything was a problem I had to solve. Here, with him, even warnings about someone trying to kill me doesn't make me worry too much. Caladin will deal with it.

And anyway, we have to really sell this marriage thing. Just like we're doing.

"I'll keep you safe," he growls into my neck, kissing and licking.

I strip off my dress and walk over to the window. It's dark outside, with only a thin stripe of light on the horizon. The air is balmy and fragrant from the ocean.

Caladin comes over and pushes his pelvis into my butt. "This is an uncomfortable way to do it."

"Well," I sniff, "maybe you can think of a better place^{aaaaieeee!}"

He grabs me by the hips and tosses me over one shoulder, laughing evilly. "You know, I'm sure I can. How about the dinner table? Or that silly tower room we saw? Or that meeting room where they signed the treaty?"

I laugh, half-heartedly trying to escape. "Let me down, you brute. You know there isn't room for our activities in any of those places. They're all full of golden chairs!"

"Hmm," Caladin ponders and lays me down on the bed. "Then let's try right *here*."

- CALADIN -

I let Selma fall asleep after our intense and extremely loud lovemaking.

But I stay awake, spending some time observing the palace and the activities. The whole place feels dead, compared to when I was young. I have a strange feeling that there are things taking place in this palace now that it would be interesting to find out. Taledak wouldn't live way out here with only his wife and a couple of servants for company if he didn't have a good reason.

I don't like that he knew the details about the Bululg deal. That must mean he's better connected with them than I thought. Why would Taledak need to have contact with the Bululg? To my knowledge, he's not even allowed to leave Xaokui.

Well after midnight, I check on Selma. She's fast asleep.

"I'll take a look downstairs," I whisper, in case she can hear me.

She doesn't react.

I scratch my chin. I really should bring her with me. I can't protect her if I'm not right next to her at all times. But she

would only be in the way and double the chance of being discovered.

And she looks so cute when she sleeps, so innocent and vulnerable. Anyway, I won't be long.

I place a soft kiss on her hair, then sneak out of the room.

I quickly make my way down to the courtyard level, using stairs and hallways and alleys that I remember from my youth. I stick as much as possible to the shadows and the hidden utility routes that were meant for servants and not for guests.

I open and close many doors, keeping it as quiet as possible as I make my way down. I have to see the dungeon level and find out the real reason Taledak has built a landing platform there.

The lower levels are a labyrinth. The rooms are smaller than further up because the walls have to take the weight of the whole palace. As a kid, I loved to play here, away from all the hustle and bustle of the higher levels. It's dark down here, but not completely — when the palace was built, small panels of self-luminous rocks were set into the coral. That way, it was always possible to find your way without using a lamp or some kind of external power. Probably that could be useful during a siege.

Before I know it, I spot the wave line on the wall that shows the average level of the ocean. That means I'm on the right floor.

I immediately locate the landing platform I saw from the tower. It's made from a metal grating that looks scorched, as if it has been used by several landing craft.

Going further into the castle from there, I see many signs that this part is in use. There are scuff marks and pieces of trash. It

could all be signs of the restoration Taledak was talking about, but I doubt it.

When I reach the main door to the dungeons, I notice the old seatree-wood portal is gone and replaced with one made of solid steel.

I try to quietly open the door, but it won't budge. Now, why does this place need a door like that if it's only used for storage? I take out my break-in tool, but it only flashes uselessly.

Walking further into the labyrinth, I find the small entrance I was looking for. In the old days, it must have been used for letting the guards out onto the ledge above the row of cells. From here, I have a good view of the corridor with the cell doors, standing a man's height above it.

I expected the whole place to be dark — the luminescent rocks were not put into the dungeon walls. But the corridor beyond is brightly lit and the cells all have new steel doors with small, grated openings in each one.

As I tiptoe onto the ledge, I spot movement. It's a fresk alien, one of the Bululg servant species, big and stupid, barely sentient.

What the shallows is *that* doing here?

I stand still for many heartbeats. There's another fresk there, too, patrolling the corridor.

Crouching down, I stay below the handrail until the two of them have turned the corner and moved out of sight.

Then I quietly step over the railing and drop down onto the floor of the corridor. Running to the nearest door, I bend down and look into the cell through the grate.

I get a sinking feeling in my stomach. Damn that Taledak!

Knowing that I don't have much time, I jump back onto the ledge and get to the other side of the railing. At the same moment, the fresk comes back around the corner and trots along the corridor. Right below me he stops and makes sniffing noises. I stiffen, ready to fight.

The fresk continues his round.

As he turns the corner again, I walk quickly out of the dungeons.

This is worse than I thought. Sweet depths, I hope she's all right!

Running as quietly as I can, I climb the stairs five steps at a time until I'm outside the door to our room. Slowly pushing it open, I dread what I might see.

But she's there, still asleep, looking as healthy as ever.

I walk over to the window and stare out at the night, suddenly feeling a chill.

This explains why the palace is empty. Taledak definitely doesn't want witnesses to *that*.

But he invited my mother. That would seem to be inviting serious trouble to the center of his operation. The risk should be far too great of being found out. Even inviting Selma and me was a great risk. He took the chance, hoping to reveal my marriage as a sham. But that failed.

I think about it. She arrives tomorrow. If I reveal Taledak's activities to her, she'll cast him out on the spot. And my position as the manager of the corporation is safe. It will also strengthen her position as matriarch.

But my cousin doesn't care about any of that anymore. He has tried to kill me once already. He's done with playing politics and hoping. He's going for the whole prize.

My marriage to Selma looks real. So real that it leaves Taledak no choice but to decide it all in his favor in some other way. Our marriage being fake was his only hope of ever becoming manager.

A chill goes down my back, and my fin stiffens. That can only mean that he'll kill us all. Selma, my mother, me. That is his backup plan. We're the ones standing in his way. It would be the only reason to invite us all to the center of his illicit operations, where we could discover his activities at any time. He invited us all here to die.

After all, accidents happen. Tragic accidents where ancient mines planted during a forgotten war suddenly explode and kill three prominent members of the Beecom clan while swimming. Sadly no remains found. All three buried by an underwater avalanche. Impossible to recover.

That will be the story. That or some variety of it. While our real cause of death will be something else. Poisoning, perhaps. A shot to the heart. A long fall.

Of course. Death by fresk. Or some other of the Bululg's servants. There could be more of them on the way.

Taledak was always creative about torturing smaller creatures, I remember. In his youth, he enjoyed hunting Wroio natives for their gur. This is the kind of evil scheme he would think of.

I have to get Selma out of here. With the slaves here, and the fresks, this has suddenly become much more serious. This is not her fight.

I shake her awake, hoping she'll remember to be quiet.

“We have to leave,” I whisper. “There’s danger.”

She sits up, fear in her sleepy eyes.

But she doesn’t ask questions, just gets dressed in sensible garments. I take her hand and lead her out of the room, then back to the diving ledge.

I change my mind and instead go down to the courtyard with the pool. For all I know, the water under that diving ledge could be dangerous now, filled with spikes or explosives. Taledak knows I like diving from there.

We run down the stairs to the surface. Selma puts her mask on, and we slip into the ocean. The water feels warmer now than in the daytime, but it’s because the air is colder by comparison.

I grab hold of Selma and dive deep until we can swim out of the hole in the outer wall.

Staying down, I swim fast away from the palace, going in the direction of Geaeu, the closest inhabited ridge. I’m conscious of surveillance equipment that we must be passing, but that can’t be helped.

When I judge that we’re out of sight from the palace, I surface and slow down while Selma finds her place on my back.

“What happened?” she asks when she’s holding onto my fin and has taken off her mask.

“I went to check the lower levels,” I tell her. “Now we know why the palace is so empty.”

“Why?”

“He keeps slaves in the dungeon. Female aliens.”

“*What?! He’s a slave trader?*”

“So it seems,” I reply between clenched teeth. “There was a girl from Earth in that cell. There could be more. The guards are two fresks. That means Taledak must be close with the Bululg.”

“*Ohmaigahd*,” Selma exclaims. “That’s terrible!”

I keep swimming, using the stars to navigate. “I have to get to a place where I can signal my mother not to go there.”

“Why, you think he’ll enslave and sell her?”

That’s an idea that hadn’t even crossed my mind. “Either that or just kill her. He can’t let anyone know what he’s doing. If anyone knew about his slave trading, he’d be banished from the planet and cast out of the clan. But I don’t think that matters. His plan was to force me to get married and then reveal my marriage as a sham. That didn’t work. So he’s going for the whole prize. With my mother out of the way, there’s not much to stop him taking control of the clan company. His mother would be matriarch then.”

“Aunt Geleouni,” Selma ponders. “Yeah, she didn’t like me much. Or you.”

I speed up. “Well, nobody likes her, either.”

“That’s what Aouana meant. She knew Taledak was planning to kill us, and she wanted to warn us. Does Taledak know that you know? About the slaves?”

“Not until they find us gone. Then he’s bound to suspect.”

I try to estimate how long it will take us to get to Geaeu. The rest of the night, probably. We’ll arrive at sunrise.

“Because,” Selma says, “we still have time to surprise him and free the slaves.”

I beat my feet like a tail and speed up more, ignoring Selma's suggestion. I'm *not* going back to that death trap. And certainly not with her in tow.

"Put your mask on," I call to her as I speed up even more.

Diving right under the surface, I keep the speed up, just at the limit of what I can handle for this long. To anyone we pass by, we'll look like just a round, smooth wave on the surface, going fast in a different direction than the ocean current.

I dive back up at intervals so I can check the stars and the direction, and also check that Selma is all right.

Morning is a red stripe on the horizon when I spot the lights from Geaeu ahead.

On legs that tremble with fatigue I climb ashore on a jagged coast and pull Selma along with me until we're on dry land. In the distance I spot several houses spread out, along with a small spaceport. Geaeu is a small ridge, little more than a long, narrow island. But it should have a full setup of messaging systems.

"Come along." I take Selma's hand and pull her with me. She walks unsteadily, clearly tired.

I lift her up and carry her in front of me to the spaceport. This early only security guards are up, and they give us strange looks as we pass into the main hall.

I locate a communications booth and set Selma down on a bench. "Wait here. Scream if anything at all happens."

"All right." She dangles her legs from the Louluani-sized bench, looking drawn and worried.

To my relief, I'm able to contact my mother's house. A lackey answers and then goes to fetch her.

“Good morning, Mother,” I begin when she appears on the screen. “I hope you slept well.”

“Morning?” she hisses hoarsely. “It’s the middle of the night!” She’s plainly tired, and the head fin decoration is nowhere to be seen.

“Not here,” I tell her. “I heard you’ll be going to the White Palace today.”

“I am, indeed,” she says, collecting herself. “You’re making me pursue you all over Xaokui to be able to speak with you and your new bride.”

“Because I suggest you cancel those plans. Selma and I are no longer there. And Taledak is doing strange things in our clan castle.”

She frowns. “Strange things? What are you talking about, Caladin?”

I tell her briefly what I saw and what I suspect.

“I can barely believe it,” the matriarch finally exclaims. She looks like she’s aged ten years in a few heartbeats. “In our own clan palace, the very center of the family... Caladin, there must be another explanation! There *must* be.” Her tone is almost pleading.

“What would explain the presence of slaves in the White Palace to your satisfaction?” I ask coldly. “Is he just keeping them for a friend? Does he not know that they’re there? Is he as much a victim here as the slaves are?”

“No, no. Of course not. We can’t be involved in slave trading, Caladin. If this gets out, our clan will lose all respect. Our reputation will be ruined. But don’t worry. I will deal with this. It’s not your problem anymore. I will make sure the problem disappears. As quietly as possible. We will get rid of the

slaves. The Bululg have to take them back. I will make sure Taledak is stripped of all leadership positions.”

“Then I am confirmed as manager of the Oumi Corporation?”
I ask for certainty.

“Yes, of course. This must have been very hard on your wife, the poor thing.”

“Selma’s tough,” I tell my mother proudly. “But she’s also a gentle soul, and not invulnerable.”

“Get away from there. Don’t worry about Taledak and his criminal ventures. I will deal with it.”

“Deal with it safely,” I tell her. “From a distance. He will try to murder you if you go there. He almost succeeded in killing Selma and me.”

“Don’t worry, Caladin. I’ll be safe.” She breaks the connection, a determined look on her old face.

I return to Selma, feeling much better. “I signaled Skix to come and get us.”

She looks up at me. “We’re leaving?”

“We’ll have to see my mother after she deals with the slave thing. Then we’ll leave Xaokui.”

She frowns. “What happens to Taledak? To the slaves?”

I wave the problem away. “My mother will deal with that. Probably the simplest solution is for the Bululg to come get them back. I certainly don’t know how to quietly get rid of slaves. At any rate, Taledak is no longer a problem for the company or the clan. He’ll be discreetly given a non-vital job. I’m secure in my position as manager. And you are secure in your position as my wife.”

I reach out to stroke Selma's cheek, but she pulls away.

"I don't like what I'm hearing," she says. "Quietly get rid of slaves — what does that mean?"

"It can't be known that the Beeom clan trades slaves," I patiently explain. "It would ruin our reputation. We must get them off the planet quickly and without fuss."

Again I reach out, and again she pulls away.

"Does it mean killing them? That should be really *quiet*, don't you think?"

- SELMA -

“That’s not the plan,” Caladin says, looking confused.

I get to my feet, feeling how sore my thighs are after riding on his back for half the night. “No, because the plan is to give them back to the Bululg. Which means they will be sold again. Auctioned off for profit.”

He shrugs. “That should be the easiest way. We can’t just let them go. Rumors would spread, the word would get out. Having anything to do with slaves is not allowed on Xaokui. It would be a major scandal.”

A coldness is growing inside me. I can’t believe Caladin can be this callous. He’s talking about actual slaves as if they were simply a problem to solve, illegal goods to hide and get rid of before the cops find them.

My mood has been getting darker ever since we escaped from that creepy castle without even trying to free those slaves. It made me feel like a coward. Right now those poor girls may be loaded into ships and taken to who knows where.

I cross my arms across my chest. “I notice you didn’t tell me about the slaves until we were well and truly out on the ocean.

You knew I would want to free them. And when I suggested it, you didn't answer."

"Free them?" he protests. "They're guarded by fresks! They're locked in cells!"

My disappointment is giving way to anger. "Two fresks, you said. I've seen you fight, Caladin. You could beat up two stupid fresks with one arm bound behind your back! Those doors? Have you *seen* how strong you are? I bet you could rip them off their hinges without breaking a sweat! For that matter, you could have locked your creepy cousin in a cell, taken control of the palace, and freed those poor girls in an orderly fashion! Maybe you're right. Maybe nothing could be done. But you didn't even *try*. You just ran away to tell your mama!"

"The situation is far too delicate for those crude methods! The clan could be banished from Xaokui! *Our* clan, Selma!"

Shit. I was taken in by his charm and the boyish ways that would sometimes break through. And the sex. I thought it was real. Of course the first love of my life turns out to be a coward who's only out for himself and for money. If he deals with slavery as if it were just a business, how will he deal with me when our deal is over?

"Your clan," I tell him, my throat getting sore. "I want no part of your fucking slave-trading business."

"We couldn't stay there," he frets. "It wasn't safe!"

"You know what's not safe? Being a slave. You could have let me decide if I wanted to risk freeing them. Because I would."

His eyes flash yellow. "I promised to keep you safe!"

"This is much more important than *that*. All right, let's go back there now. We won't surprise anyone, but at least we'll

be *doing* something.”

“That’s not possible,” he says flatly.

I sigh, fighting tears. This is a very emotional topic for me. “Then we don’t have much more to talk about. I thought you were better than this. I should have known, after you abducted me. But it wasn’t even your fault. You didn’t *trick* me. It was those fucking *squids*. They told me some nonsense story about how you risked your life to save someone else. But I see now that was totally made up. You would never have done anything like that, back then *or* now. Did you instruct them to tell me that story? It worked. I fell for it. I thought that maybe, deep down, you’re a decent man who can do the right thing when necessary. I thought I could see that in you. But I was kidding myself. It’s just the clan for you. The clan, money, business. Your *job*.”

I know I’m being unfair. But I’m so disappointed in him that it crushes me. And this thing with the slaves is a really sore spot.

The orca-man gets to his feet, head fin trembling. “I didn’t instruct them to do anything! I’ve never brought anyone to that place before. I had no idea they would tell you that ancient story! I can barely remember it myself! Selma, be reasonable. This is too big for us. The matriarch has to deal with this. It’s her job. I can’t interfere with that.”

I take a deep breath and try not to give in to the acid tears that burn at the corners of my eyes. “*If* it’s true that you were different when you were young, then you have to try really hard to find your way back to that boy inside you. The one who’d bleed almost to death for someone not even from his own species. Because this life of yours right now? The business and the company? Alone in space with only your lawyer for company? It’s not worthy of him. That boy you

used to be deserves better than that. *Much* better. No, stay where you are. I have the money you gave me. This is a spaceport, right? I'll find my own way. And don't worry about the second half of the payment. You can keep it. I know how important money is to you. We'll get the divorce any time you want. Just think about this: I come from a planet owned by the Bululg. That could be *me* in one of those cells. Do you understand me now?"

Caladin just stares at me, fists opening and closing in frustration and anger.

But I don't care anymore. He's all bark and no bite anyway. A real mama's boy. That's all.

I turn on my heels and march off to I don't know where.

- - -

Over the next several hours I learn more about space travel than I ever wanted to know. And most of all I learn that actually getting into space is not that easy, even when you have enough cash to buy a ship of your own. There are no ships for sale here, and there's no scheduled transports off the planet for days. But I'm not staying here. The best I can do is a flight to Crouy, the ridge where we got married. It's the last place in the universe I want to go right now, but I don't have any friends here and I have no idea where these other places are. And I sure don't want to stay *here*.

I don't see any trace of Caladin as I wait for my flight. Probably he's on the way to his mother's house, a spoiled boy returning home to sulk.

Well, it was all fake anyway. No big loss for me. Except the orca-shaped hole in my heart.

The transport to Crouy is a small and streamlined craft that looks enough like an airplane that it pretty much has to be one. It goes through the air really fast and quiet, so it's not jet powered.

It sets down on a landing pad near the wedding facilities. After exiting, I check the various ways of getting away from the planet. It looks possible, and not even that expensive. It's a long wait for the next shuttle, though.

I aimlessly wander towards the place where Caladin's ship landed. There are other ships there now.

I locate the building where I was styled for the wedding. It looks like there's one happening today too. There are female Louluani bustling around, running to and fro with an air of urgency as they give me curious little glances.

I tiptoe inside, hoping to find a place to sit down that's cooler than the sunshine outside.

"Oh, come to get a refund?" says a cheerful voice behind me. "No chance, sweetie. You were one of my best works."

I turn to see an upright thermos hovering five feet in the air. "Hi, Drupili. No, I've never looked better than I did at my wedding."

"Oh. Then you must be here to get a redo. Well, maybe. When I'm done with the current bride."

She zooms past me towards the little room where she styled me. "Come along. We'll say you're my assistant."

I follow her into the room. There's a Louluani in the chair, filling it better than I did. She gives me a little glance, and the

robot stylist fires off an explanation in the Louluani language. Then she flies a slow circuit around the client's head, chattering fast.

I jump as all her tools explode out of her body with a loud *click* and she gets busy with this client.

“Let's see if she understands Interspeech. Now, dear, I will cut your head fin off. It's all the rage.”

The girl in the chair keeps her eyes closed and doesn't react much.

“I think it's fine,” Drupili coos as her makeup brushes and combs and little tweezers work faster than the eye can follow, creating a shiny cloud around the bride's head. “Did things not work out with you and that seriously attractive hunk of male?”

“Not really. Turns out he was also a seriously attractive mama's boy.”

“Ah. Yes, they do have that issue, the males on Xaokui. It sits deep in them, I'm afraid. From the old days. The clans were always ruled by a matriarch. Still are, some more than others.”

“I wish I'd known how seriously they take that.”

Drupili speaks fast in the local language, which is all vowels and sounds most of all like a capella singing. The bride replies, and they have a conversation that goes on for a while. I don't mind that — this bride's not getting fake married and she must be nervous on her big day. Talking to her stylist will help her stay calm, especially when that stylist is Drupili.

“This is Pouela, by the way,” Drupili says in Interspeech. “I took the liberty of presenting the problem to her. She agrees that the males here are too dependent on their mothers. She also says that it's a wife's duty to help her husband break that

dependence. It can take years, she says. But she also thinks it's worth it. Something to think about, Selma?"

"I'm not sure mine can be fixed," I sigh. "His mother is a pretty headstrong matriarch."

"She has that reputation. But Caladin has a reputation, too. He's a bit of a rebel, they say. I wouldn't lose hope."

"But I would," I tell her and lean my head on the wall where the bride can't see me. She doesn't need me bringing her down on her wedding day.

"Why don't you wait until I'm done with Pouela, and then we can take a little walk. Well, *you'll* walk. I have better ways of moving."

I leave the cubicle and find a bench outside, looking towards the tube that goes down into the cathedral. I think I can hear the faint sound of singing from the ocean far below, reminding me of my wedding. But it has to be an illusion — sounds can't travel like that.

Shortly after, Pouela exits with a gaggle of other Louluani females. They enter the tube and are gone.

Drupili comes out of the building and hovers in front of me, all her tools retracted. "She won't need me anymore. Her own matriarch will guide her through the ceremony. Shall we?"

I get to my feet and walk alongside the floating thermos.

"It was a fake wedding," I confess. "He just needed to be married to keep his position in the company and the clan. He paid me for it."

"Oh! I see. I wondered why some of his relatives were somewhat huffy with you. They must have suspected it."

“They did. But then... well, it doesn’t really matter anymore. It’s just, I thought it was getting real. You know?” I’m too exhausted to hold it back, so tears force themselves from my eyes.

“It would be strange if it didn’t,” Drupili says soothingly. “Of course I’m only a machine, but I could swear that kiss at the ceremony was full of passion. From both of you.”

“I thought so, too,” I sniffle. “And then it just got better.”

We pass the banquet domes and keep going to a lookout point with a bench and nobody else around. The ocean and the cliffs are probably really beautiful, but I can’t appreciate it.

“What happened that ruined it?” Drupili asks as I sit down, exhausted.

“I’m not sure I should tell you. It’s bad for his clan. Someone in that clan is doing some bad stuff. And Caladin has no interest in doing the right thing.”

“Hmm. It’s a little vague, but I will take a guess. This ‘someone’ is his cousin Taledak. Am I right?”

“Yes. You knew?”

“Oh, he has a bad reputation on all of Xaokui. He’s been involved in all kinds of illicit things, but he’s never been convicted for anything. He’s too smart for that.”

“This thing he’s doing now has some innocent victims that are having their lives ruined forever. In really bad ways. And Caladin is not doing anything about it. Although he could.”

“Leaving it to his matriarch? I’m afraid that’s the usual way on this planet.”

“He knows that she will do nothing to help the victims,” I seethe, wiping tears from my face. “And he’s fine with that.”

All he cares about is his stupid company.”

“What will you do?”

I think about it. I have money; I have freedom. And I have a plan that I’d almost forgotten. “I would like to be able to live with myself after this. So I’m going to help the victims. It has to happen fast. You don’t know where I could get some weapons, do you? And a spaceship?”

“Not on Xaokui,” Drupili says. “But there are space stations in orbit around us that will sell you those things.”

I take a deep breath and wipe my nose. If I’m going to do something stupid that could kill me, this is probably the best time. I don’t care that much if I live or die right now. And I’m pretty mad.

“How about you, Drupili? I could use a buddy. Want to help free some slaves?”

The little thermos slowly turns in the air. “*Slaves?* That’s what we’re talking about? *Slaves* on Xaokui? I thought those victims you talked about had just been cheated out of some money. But they’re actual *slaves?*”

“Taledak is a slave trader,” I tell her, seeing no reason to care about the reputation of the clan if I’m going to attack their palace anyway. “He’s close with the Bululg. And as the citizen of a slave planet, I really hate that. You in? Trade your eyelash curler for a ray gun?”

“Xaokui is my planet,” Drupili says slowly. “I chose to settle here because they don’t keep slaves. I like that. You know robots like me are usually owned by someone? But I’m not. And nobody here has tried to claim me as theirs. I like that. I don’t want that to change. Not on Xaokui. Not ever. Selma,

you found the one hill I'm willing to die on. Will this be dangerous?"

I recall the look in Taledak's eyes and the terror in Aouana's voice. "Very."

She rises a few inches in the air, then sinks back down as if taking a deep breath. "All right. Let's rescue some slaves."

- CALADIN -

“... and so we might stand to profit from this, even. Just a little bit. But it’s the principle of the thing.”

My mother looks at me with satisfaction. She’s recovered from the first shock and looks as regal as ever, head fin carefully dressed in the fine jewelry that shows her status, black robe edged with red fabric that I suspect is real gur.

The lunch terrace overlooks the deep woods that surround her house. She’s rare on Xaokui in that she prefers a view of land and not of the ocean.

“Of course Taledak is out of the management of the company,” she continues. “We can’t have him planning to kill his matriarch. No, he’s completely out. For now, anyway. Perhaps in time we will allow him some responsibilities if he behaves. Your position is safe, of course. You’re married and everything. Yes, that’s very good. I am so looking forward to seeing Selma again. But there’s no rush. If the air on Xaokui is not quite the mix of gasses that her body needs, then naturally I understand that she had to go to space for a while. Health before everything, I say.”

It was the best excuse I could come up with. My marriage status is much less important now than it was, and I could probably get away with saying that we went our separate ways. But I'm not ready to think of her as gone forever.

“Just to sum up,” Skix says, sitting beside me at the matriarch's lunch table and tapping on his tablet, “the deal is that the Bululg will take the slaves back, and any profits from their later auctioning will be split between them and the Beoom clan. Further, Taledak is no longer an executive of the company, but he remains on the payroll for possible later re-activation. Seems a weak reaction for someone who was planning to kill three of your clan.”

“Oh, but we can't prove that he was planning that,” my mother says. “That's all a guess. Isn't it, Caladin?”

I look away. She's handling the issues with calm efficiency, using common sense and being logical. And not so long ago, I would have been absolutely fine with that. But Selma has put a number of new ideas into my head, and they won't give me peace.

“Those slaves are living sentients,” I point out. “They have as much worth as we do. Giving them back is the same as if we had traded them on purpose. We are now a slave-trading clan. When will you buy your first ones, mother? Next time I come to visit you, will your servants all have been bought at auction?”

An array of expressions cross her face as she decides how to react. She settles on dignified restraint. “No, I don't think so, Caladin. We're not more involved in the slave trade than any other clan. We simply must get them off the planet as soon as possible. And the Bululg are used to dealing with slaves. They will pick them up, and then they're no longer our problem.”

“Now replace the word ‘slaves’ with ‘people,’” I suggest. “Which is what they are. Our clan is used to dealing with *people*, too. We could easily transport those captive *people* away from the planet and let them out on the nearest station, completely free.”

The matriarch gives me a kind look, as if speaking to a less gifted child. “You travel a lot in the universe, Caladin. You’ve seen slaves many times. You know they need a master, an owner. How else will they eat? How will they have shelter?”

I easily meet her gaze. “These *people* you’re keeping captive in the White Palace should be taken off the planet in great comfort, given a large amount of money as our way to apologize, and then be freed. They could create their own destinies from there.”

The matriarch chuckles. “Given money? *Apologize*? Do you have any idea how absurd that sounds? And the last thing we want is for these slaves to be *freed*. With them running around the space stations, it will be impossible to keep it secret that they were for a short time kept safe in the White Palace. By mistake, I want to stress. It was a misunderstanding. No, the Bululg will keep them quiet.”

I get to my feet and walk over to the finely built balustrade. The woods are a deep green beneath me. There are very few forests above water on Xaokui. But on Selma’s planet, there’s a lot of woods. Maybe she’d like it here. Maybe it would remind her of home.

I look up at the sky. She must be light years away now, racing away from me in a new ship.

My wife. My fake-then-real-then-not-wife.

I never thought I would like being married. But with her, I absolutely loved it.

And now I'll always look for her, wherever I go. Whenever I see a human woman, I'll give her a good look in case it's her.

I'll never marry again, I know that. If a fake marriage can shake me up as badly as this, then a real one must be a total nightmare.

"Caladin," my mother calls to me. "You should go back to space and continue the business. And see your wife, of course. Keep doing your job up there, opening new markets and making deals. You're our best man, you know that. I will take care of everything here on Xaokui. That was never your preference, anyway." She gets to her feet with slow dignity. A servant comes and offers her his arm, but she shakes him off and he walks docilely behind her.

"Goodbye, Mother," I say softly.

"Goodbye, Caladin. Come back soon. With your wife, ideally." A servant lifts the heavy drapes for her and she walks inside.

"She's good," Skix says. "Very focused."

"Focused on the wrong thing," I fret.

"You got what you wanted," the green lawyer points out. "You kept the job, the ship, your freedom. It worked out perfectly. Indeed better than that, if it's true that Selma won't come back for the second half after the divorce." Skix is the only one who knows that Selma left for good.

"She won't," I tell him as we start to walk down to the ship. "She'll be half the galaxy away by then. Not giving me a second thought."

“Perhaps. In my experience, an amount like that could get just about anyone to find their way back.”

“Not this time.”

“I took the liberty of refilling your ship,” Skix says as he scurries after me on the gravel, the suction cups on his feet making it difficult for him to keep up. “The tank, I mean. With real water from the oceans of Xaokui. Properly cleaned, of course. But the salt is genuine.”

The ship towers over us on the landing pad. Once I was proud of it and its beauty. Now everything leaves me cold.

“Thank you.”

Back in my office, I stare down at the water. It’s crystal clear and has a slight turquoise tinge to it. The last time I dove, it was with Selma. I doubt I’ll ever again enjoy a dive as much as that.

“*Where to, boss?*” Skix asks on the comms.

“Take us into orbit,” I tell him, not really caring where we’ll go.

I sit down in my chair as the engines thunder and the ship lifts off. She doesn’t understand the clan system, of course. The matriarch is all powerful and can both ruin and elevate. That seems right to me, as natural as night following day.

Or rather, seemed. This decision my mother made about the slaves feels wrong. It *is* wrong. Those are people. Not slaves. Victims of kidnapping and a cruel system of auctions and sales.

‘*That boy you were deserves better.*’ Selma’s words resonate in my mind. I was never allowed to go to the Wroio island when I was young. Certainly not just to watch them and talk to them.

But I did it anyway, feeling my matriarch's decree as childish and closed-minded. It gave me pleasure to defy her, and it made me distrust any matriarch, even when my own mother rose to that rank.

I've stayed away from her as much as possible, resenting her power over me and wanting to make my own decisions. That's why I preferred to be out in space. Not because I had a desperate need to be alone, but because I wanted to be free. That freedom was a complete illusion. It could all be taken away from me with a snap of her old fingers.

I can only imagine how much those slave girls ache to be free.

The engines roar, and even the hyper-expensive gravity dampers can't disguise the acceleration.

I look over at the little carpet she needed to be able to walk on the glass floor. Such a silly little thing. But so unique, so innocent and endearing. I can't bring myself to remove it.

Well, she's gone now. It's too late for us.

But maybe it's not too late for *them*.

- SELMA -

It's called Xaokui Portal and is the biggest space station in orbit above the ocean planet. It's clean, and it smells better than that Bululg station Caladin took me to.

"We'll need weapons," Drupili says as we walk down a wide corridor. "Good ones. Have you used a lot of weapons, Selma?"

"No," I reply truthfully. "They're not allowed on Earth."

"Hmm. Maybe only a small one for you. Let's try here." She flies into a shop.

I follow, then stop right inside. There's a lot of stuff bolted to the walls, some that I recognize as weapons and some that are so strange I can't tell what they are.

Drupili zooms over to a small box that looks like an old suitcase. "Hello. We need some weapons for entering a building and freeing captives."

"Ah," the suitcase says with a mechanical voice. "Mercenaries. Will you two be going on this raid?"

"That's right," Drupili says. "So I'll need something I can fit inside my casing if I drop some of these things." She extends

all her makeup tools. “And she’ll need something that’s foolproof and maybe not too powerful. Possibly non-lethal, if you stock that kind of thing.”

“How about this?” the suitcase-slash-storekeeper asks and points at a gun on the wall with a thin arm as long as a garden hose. “It should fit comfortably inside your casing. It’s quite light and shoots magnesium pellets that will penetrate a steel bar this thick.” It uses a two-fingered mechanical hand to show about three inches.

“That could be it,” Drupili says. She drops a brush and reaches out to grab the little gun with a thin metal arm. “Yes, yes. This is good for my use. How many shots?”

“A thousand,” the suitcase robot says. “Enough for a good-sized battle.”

Drupili practices closing up her case so she looks like a smooth thermos, then suddenly thrusting the gun out from it. “I like it. And for the lady there?”

The suitcase stands still and reaches out four long arms to search through the shelves in four different places of the store. “Non-lethal... non-lethal... Hmm. We don’t get much demand for that. But I have this thing. It has a stun function, in addition to the lethal, automatic firing mode. It’s also somewhat small.” It reaches out to me with a black plastic banana.

I gingerly grab it and hold it clumsily in one hand.

“The other way, lady,” the suitcase says. “Don’t want to shoot yourself. Although it wouldn’t fire if you aim at yourself. It’s foolproof, as requested. It’s now in lethal mode. Flick the switch to— yes, like that. It’s in stun mode now. It will work

on any living thing, just about. Simply aim for the center of your enemy and shoot.”

I aim the gun at a point on the wall. It’s light and doesn’t feel too cumbersome to use. It has the feel of a toy gun, and I don’t mind that. “I’ll need a holster to carry it in.”

“Oh,” the suitcase says, confused. “Madame doesn’t have an internal compartment to store it in? With those generous dimensions, I thought perhaps...”

“She doesn’t,” Drupily says. “Her weapons storage is external only. You must have a holster or something?”

“Of course,” the store robot says and picks something from the rear wall. It’s a white belt with a holster that fits the gun moderately well.

“Anything else we need?” I ask as I put the belt on. “Except some practical clothing for me.”

“I think we’re good for guns,” Drupili says. “But of course we need a ship.”

I pay for the weapons, and we find another store that sells military-looking clothes. I land on a set of tight-fitting black cargo pants and a matching top. Wearing it makes me feel even more determined. I’m no longer some kind of doll that aliens can dress up any way they want. Now I have a purpose of my own.

“It’s very... practical,” Drupili says when she sees me in the new outfit. “How about a pink stripe right *here*?” She points to my chest with a spoolie.

“No pink stuff,” I tell her. “No silver, no purple, no holes, no shimmering gray to display my ass better. This is serious.”

“You can be serious and still be stylish,” the robot objects. “But whatever suits you. Those girls are in cells, right? So we should be able to open cell doors.”

The stores won't sell us a break-in tool like Caladin's, but we get a set of really fancy lockpicks that Drupili assures me will work.

We get to the hangar. Along one massive wall there are several vendors of used spaceships.

“How much for a new one?” I enquire when we've looked at a couple. “These are all pretty worn out.”

“New spaceships are hard to come by,” Drupili says. “They're not produced in any huge numbers, so you have to commission one. I don't think we have time for that. What about that one over there?” She points with her gun.

The ship looks newer than most of the others for sale. It's a cool arctic blue with white accents around the edges. It's sleek and streamlined, very different from Caladin's ship that looked most of all like a giant, purple egg.

Inside I'm happy to see it's been made for regular-sized people, so I don't have to dangle my legs from every seat. It looks clean and smells good, and it has a comfortable cabin with a decent bathroom. There's a lounge and a kitchen nook, which is all I need apart from ample seating for probably twenty people, although I don't expect to find that many girls in the White Palace.

Drupili interrogates the seller about technical details, possible problems, and maintenance history, finding them satisfactory. The price is well within my range. And the clincher is that the ship is a decommissioned warship, so it has a strong

camouflage capacity that should make it almost invisible in the sky.

“I think we’ll take this one,” I decide. “It has what we need.”

“It looks good,” Drupili agrees when I pay for the ship. “Both purposeful *and* stylish. Hint, hint. No? Fine. Let’s go and get used to it.”

To my relief the ship has a competent autopilot, and Drupili has some experience in flying spaceships. It appears to be more complicated than driving a car. But not by much, I realize when I ask her to teach me.

After several test runs around the station and around the two moons that orbit Xaokui, I feel that I master the controls pretty well. We enter a wide orbit around the red moon.

“We have to plan the raid,” Drupili says. “Since it’s only the two of us, we have to rely on surprise and stealth. Do we have a map of the place?”

“I can draw one, I guess.”

“Never mind, it’s an old tourist attraction. There must be a picture of it on the holonet. Ah yes. Here it is.” She projects a hologram in front of her.

I push some hair out of my face. “That’s it.”

It’s a picture of the White Palace, hanging in the air.

“I don’t know where the slaves are being kept, except it’s on the dungeon level. Which should be located pretty low in the building— oh, okay.”

Drupili changes her hologram to a cut-through three-dimensional map of the whole castle. “I hope it hasn’t changed much since this was made a long time ago, but if the place is carved out and not built, I think there’s not that much they can

do to change it. Here are the dungeons. And here... are the possible routes to get in there. Two, as far as I can tell. And one looks like it could be open. That helps. Are they awake at night in that palace?"

"I don't know," I admit. "There's not a lot of people there. But Caladin said there were two fresh guards. There may be more. Drones, too, I think. Taledak is afraid of anyone arriving unannounced."

"Ah. So the plan is, we land at the palace, unseen because the ship is practically invisible if we want it to be. Then I sneak in, look around and free the slaves, bring them with me to the ship, and we take off. Sounds good?"

"Umm... what do *I* do?"

"You bravely stay inside the ship and wait."

"I think I understand," I ponder, really wanting to take part in this. "You're a small robot with a powerful gun. And you think that I would only get in your way."

"No bridal stylist wants to work with someone else, Selma. It just ends up as a terrible mess, a furious client, and a divorce shortly after the wedding. Believe me, you don't want that."

"What if I come with you and stay out of your way as much as I can? I've been to this place. You haven't. And maybe the slaves won't trust a flying robot waving a gun in their faces in the middle of the night."

Drupili scratches her shiny casing with the muzzle of her gun. "That is a good point. All right. But I go first. You stay behind me, and you only act if you have to. Or if I tell you to."

Loosening the gun belt around my waist, I lean forwards in the seat. "Fine. Let's go through it in detail..."

We wait until midnight in the part of planet Xaokui where the palace is located. Then we break orbit and zoom through space towards the ocean planet, keeping the ship invisible.

“They don’t guard the planet that well,” Drupili says while I do my best to fly the ship. “I guess anyone who tries to conquer a planet full of those black and white giants deserves what they get.”

“They look more dangerous than they are,” I mutter, not having a lot of sympathy for the Louluani species right now. “But maybe that’s our chance. They’re not used to being on their guard.”

The ship mostly flies itself, choosing the best path towards the White Palace while staying out of sight. At the approach, we’re skimming the ocean, only a few feet above the waves.

“This ship is amazing,” Drupili says. “And it has a cute color scheme. All right, that white spot has to be the palace. We’ll just go straight for it— oh, looks like that landing pad is in use.”

There’s a big spaceship parked on the new landing pad that Caladin noticed.

I zoom in on the display. “Not a good sign. It could mean the slaves are being taken away right now.”

“Or new slaves being put in,” Drupili says. “Either way, it changes nothing. Let’s see if we can’t squeeze this cute little

ship in on that pad, too.”

But there’s no room. The other ship takes up all of it. It’s a saucer-like craft, reminding me of Bululg designs.

“Do we need a landing pad? Can’t we let the ship keep circling the palace while we get out and do our thing?”

“Good idea, Selma. Let me see what I can do…” The stylist robot gets busy with the ship’s computer, pressing buttons and talking to it so fast I can’t follow. “That should do it. It will circle until its instruments see us flashing a signal.”

I check my belt and pockets. “We should have bought a flashlight.”

“Your gun probably has a light.” Drupili demonstrates that hers does, strobing it at the wall.

I draw my gun and examine it. “Which button? I’m afraid to push them.”

“That one,” the flying robot says and points with a tweezer. “Try.”

She’s right — the gun does have a light on it, making a small white circle on the wall. “What’s the signal?”

“Four flashes. Just aim the light straight up. The ship will see.”

I scowl at the White Palace outside the viewscreen. I’m about to go on a raid of that place to free slaves. That’s something that should really be done by Navy SEALs, or someone like Rambo. I’m just little Selma Hudgins with absolutely zero military experience and a crippling fear of heights.

But I’m ready for it. On Earth, nothing I did ever made any difference. We were occupied and enslaved anyway. This raid will almost certainly fail, and there’s a good chance I won’t survive. But it’s *doing* something. It’s fighting back. It’s

something only a free person can do, making the choice to fight despite the consequences. And the way things are with Caladin, I'm pretty dead inside. And anyway, I can't turn my back on these girls.

The ship slowly rises and approaches the main landing platform much higher in the palace. There's a ship there, too — a sleek, black egg-shaped craft with a fine, golden pattern around its upper third. It reminds me of something, but I can't think of what it is.

The ship comes to a halt, telling us it's ready for us to get out.

I give Drupili a mirthless grin. "This could turn out to be easier than styling a bride."

"Oh, I *know*. With the upper-class clients I have? This is like a pleasant vacation away from all the bitchiness and the lawsuit threats."

I walk to the hatch and look out, smelling the ocean air. Then I jump down onto the white stone and walk a few quick steps towards the courtyard. I remember this well — there's a stairway leading down.

The two moons shine from a dark sky, making me throw two shadows. My dark clothing absorbs almost all the light. But my white gun belt shines like a reflexive band you'd use for jogging at night.

"They can see me from *Earth*," I hiss when I discover it.

"I'm afraid you can be seen anyway, sweetie," Drupili tells me, hovering up alongside. "That rear end is hard to conceal."

"Thanks."

"Keep your gun in your hand, please. On the stun setting. If you see anyone at all, shoot them. I'm not joking about that."

Looking behind us, there's no sign of the ship we came from.

I draw the gun again and hold it gingerly out from my body as we go down the stairs and down to the courtyard. If this place is closely guarded, this is a spot I would expect at least one guard. But there wasn't one when Caladin and I escaped, and there isn't one now.

I let Drupili fly ahead of me — with her computer brain, she can find the way to the dungeons as easily as any navigation system in a car can find Las Vegas. I can only hope she picks the safest route and not the shortest.

We walk down winding stairs and along narrow corridors.

“This is the servants' way,” Drupili whispers. “I suppose they were expected to stay out of sight as much as possible.”

We make our way down into the foundations of the castle. The only light comes from small squares in the wall, a weak and ghostly green light.

Then we go down another set of stairs and find a corridor that's brightly lit.

“This should be the dungeon level,” Drupili says. “Aren't dungeons supposed to be dark?”

I'm tensing up. It can't be this easy, can it? Just waltz right into the prison and get the slaves out of there?

The metal thermos flies ahead of me along a narrow corridor with no light at all. It winds and turns around sharp corners, the floor rough and unpolished compared to the nicer parts of the palace. She comes to a stop, her front half reflecting white light.

“WE FOUND IT,” she displays in hologram letters behind her so I can read it. Thankfully she uses the normal Interspeech

letters, not Caladin's silly squiggles. "THE CELLS."

Sneaking up behind her and clutching the gun, I try to keep my nerves in check. We're on a wide ledge above a corridor, and on the other side there are indeed metal doors that look like they lead to cells.

Drupili flashes me a series of lockpicks. "NOW THE YEARS OF METICULOUSLY STYLING BRATTY LITTLE RICH BRIDES PAYS OFF," she displays. "I MUST BE THE MOST DEXTEROUS ROBOT IN THE GALAXY."

She flies over the tall railing on the ledge and to a random cell, hovering for a moment in front of the small, grated opening in the door. Not making a sound, she inserts lockpicks into the keyhole and starts working the locks.

I itch to get out of there. I can almost smell the Bululg on the cool air. Those fresk guards could be really close.

The door swings open, into the cell. Drupili flies in and stays there for an unreasonable amount of time. I can hear her whisper inside the cell.

Then she flies out with someone in tow. It's a big, tall Louluani, but much thinner and more delicate than most of them. It's clearly a female, but there's something familiar about her...

"Aouana!" I exclaim.

- SELMA -

The flying robot zooms up to me. “That’s one. But she says she’s not a slave.”

“That’s Aouana,” I tell her. “Taledak’s wife!”

“Oh, that’s her? Why is she in a cell?”

“Ask *her*, not me!”

Drupili flies back to Aouana. They have a short talk, and then Drupili gets busy with another door.

She has barely started when strong arms reach around me from behind and lift me off the ground. I yelp in surprise.

Drupili stops her work and flies quickly towards me, aiming the gun. “Let go of her!”

But the fresk alien holding me is keeping me between him and the gun. “Drop weapon!” he brays.

At the same time, two other fresks round the corner and come trotting towards the robot and Aouana.

Drupili aims at them, but doesn’t shoot, probably because the two guards are unarmed.

“Stay away!” she says loudly, making her voice echo from the walls.

They don’t even slow down. It crosses my mind that if she’d gotten a stun gun like mine, that would have taken care of this just fine.

As the two fresks reach Aouana, one of them grabs her and starts dragging her away the same way he came. The other tries to grab Drupili, but she easily evades him and rises to the ceiling, out of reach.

I kick and writhe and try to yank out of the fresks’s grip, but he’s strong and sinewy. And his stench isn’t helping, nearly making me retch.

“Don’t worry,” Drupili says loudly. “I’ll fix this.” She comes closer to me and aims the gun at the jailer behind me. “Just a little closer...”

The fresk holding me grabs my hand with the gun in it. He’s so much stronger than me that I can’t stop him from raising the gun.

“Get out of the way!” I squeal when I understand, trying to block the trigger guard with my fingers. But the fresk simply puts one of his long, thin fingers on mine and forces me to pull the trigger.

There’s a loud *zzzzt* sound, and a blue beam joins the gun to the flying robot for a moment. Drupili freezes in mid-air, then drops straight to the floor with a hollow *clang*.

“Come,” the fresk brays and drags me back through the narrow corridor. “To the overseers.”

Still kicking and trying to get away, I have no chance but to follow. These guys are experienced in dealing with Earth girls.

The other fresk is having even less trouble with Aouana. As they drag us up the stairs together, I urge her to resist.

“You’re stronger than that creep,” I tell her urgently. “Get away from him! Run! Escape! You can beat him up! Aouana! Hey!”

But she comes along quietly, not even looking at me. She seems to accept her fate.

We’re dragged high up in the castle until we’re pushed into the room where Taledak said some treaty was signed in the old days. Now, the gaudy chairs are occupied.

There’s a lot of people here. Taledak is sitting at the end of the table, looking imperious. There’s three Bululg in the room, looking a lot like the same three that Caladin negotiated with in that space station.

Six girls are lined up against the wall. Two of them are Earth girls and the others are alien females, judging from the clothing and their humanoid anatomy. They’re clearly slaves, bound with thin chains.

My heart does a somersault in my chest, and my knees almost buckle under me. I have to really pull myself together to not give it all away.

Oh no, I scream inside. Not that. Not that!

Getting a hold of myself, I tear my gaze away from the slaves. They all look down, conditioned to be submissive at all times.

At the closest end of the table sits Balanoa. The matriarch of the clan and my mother-in-law. Her golden headdress gleams in the warm light, contrasting against her dark gray skin. That’s what that black spaceship reminded me of. Behind there are four young male lackeys, looking out of place.

“More company,” Taledak says. “That means more profit, I think. Possibly a lot more. Imagine seeing you again so soon, little alien. Trying to make trouble for me?”

“You do that fine yourself,” I scoff, having no reason to not speak my mind. “Slave traders are like that.”

“Can we get to the point?” Balanoa snaps. “I’m not sure what this theatrical nonsense is about, Taledak. But you’re keeping me from other business.”

Taledak gets to his feet, slowly walks over, and stares down at me. “This is not theater, dear aunt. This is very real. Selma is not invited. But it’s a strange coincidence that she’s here now. I wonder what Caladin has to do with this. Did he send you?” The last words come hard and fast.

I don’t reply, just glare at Balanoa. She looks stiffly away.

Then I see stars as Taledak slaps me across the face with a big hand. The sound echoes through the room. “Slaves answer when spoken to.”

“I’m not a slave,” I snap angrily, my cheek burning. “Those girls aren’t either.”

“Respond! Where is Caladin?”

“I don’t know where your cousin is,” I snarl. “Do you need him to tuck you in at night?”

“You insolent bitch!” Taledak draws back his hand as if to slap me again.

“Stop this idiocy,” Balanoa barks. “Get to the point!”

Taledak lowers his hand and gives me a little smirk. “Trouble in paradise, eh? I wondered about that wedding. We all wondered about it. And that’s why we’re all here now.” He walks to the head of the table.

“Dear Aunt Balanoa. Our beloved matriarch. You must have known that Caladin’s wedding to this alien was fake. There’s no emotion between them, no passion. It was all arranged.”

The matriarch frowns and gives me a side-eye.

“How can I be so sure?” Taledak continues. “Caladin was secretive about where he met his wife. They gave me the name of a planet that does not exist. But I knew. Selma is a human female. She comes from a planet called Earth.”

“Never heard of it,” Balanoa scoffs. “Get to the point.”

“You haven’t heard of it, dear matriarch, because it’s far away and completely insignificant. It is also a slave planet. It’s owned by the Bululg. They harvest and sell the young females because of their unusual beauty. Here’s one.” He walks to one of the Earth girls, grabs her chain, and drags her out on the floor. She’s wearing loosely flowing robes in several layers.

“Notice how similar she is to Selma! The uniformly pale skin, the fur on the head, the size of the limbs, the eyes, the shape. Everything! How much does this female cost, Chief Overseer?”

A translation machine on the table asks the question in the Bululg language.

“That one should fetch about two thousand spong at auction,” the chief Bululg says. *“A good purchase at the price.”*

“Two thousand spong,” Taledak repeats. “For a female just like Selma. It would have been so easy, wouldn’t it? Caladin only needed to buy a slave and promise her freedom if she’d pretend to marry him. Aunt Balanoa, it was a fake marriage! It *is* a fake marriage! Caladin lied and cheated, dear matriarch. He lied to *you* and cheated *you*, defying your order that he get

married. The wedding was a sham, as my own mother said at the time.”

Balanoa is shaken. She holds her head stiffly, and her jaw is clenched. And if orcas can go pale from shock, that’s what she’s doing right now.

“I... I can’t believe it,” she stutters. “He can’t have faked it all!”

“He did. But it gets worse.” Taledak walks over to the second Earth girl.

My heart jumps in my chest, and I have to restrain myself. This could get really, really bad.

“I did some research,” Taledak says with an unpleasant light in his eyes. “I knew that Selma is from Earth. I contacted my Bululg friends. I asked if they had sold a female called Selma Hudgins. They had not. But they had someone else.”

He pushes the girl out onto the floor. “This is Cora Hudgins. Selma’s sister.”

Finally Cora raises her gaze and looks at me. Her eyes go wide, but she stays quiet.

I can only give her a little smile and shrug as my heart drops through the floor. It’s not the way I wanted to find her, but at least we’re together again. My plan worked much better than expected, although it failed badly by the end.

“Now, dear aunt,” Taledak goes on. “Selma’s sister is a slave. Selma herself comes from a slave planet. From a family of slaves. Do you now believe that your daughter-in-law is fake married to your son? Would Caladin ever have married a slave for real? Would you have allowed that, had you known it? This marriage is a sham. Caladin has defied your order to get

married. He must be recalled as manager, and I must take his position.”

The room is quiet for a few seconds. Then the chief Bululg squeaks something.

“Selma Hudgins was never sold by us. It was poached from Earth by Caladin, the manager of the Oumi Corporation. He brought it to a meeting with us, clearly in the capacity of a servant.”

The room is stunned to silence. Then Taledak laughs out loud. “Oh, this is too wonderful! She’s not even an auctioned slave! Caladin kidnapped her! He didn’t even want to *pay* for his fake bride!”

Balanoa slowly gets to her feet. She looks frail and suddenly aged. “This is... scandalous. But not completely unexpected. I did suspect that Selma...” She gives me a sharp look. “That *you*, Selma, had cheated us all. With Caladin.”

“You forced him,” I tell her. “What did you expect? *Seven days* to get married? Of course he would cheat!”

“I thought,” the old matriarch says, “that he had many females to choose from. I’ve seen how they all look at him. And I absolutely understand them. He’s the best man our clan has ever produced. The best man on Xaokui. He could pick and choose. I would have found a perfect bride for him. But he chose to fake it all. With a *slave girl*.”

I take a step towards her, but the fresk restrains me. “I’m not a *slave girl*. Nobody is a slave! We’re all *people*! Just like you!”

She gives me a tired look. “You sound like Caladin. He’s spent too much time alone in the galaxy, forgetting that the most important thing in the universe is the *clan*!”

I yank at the fresk's grip. "You can take your whole fucking clan and *ram* it—"

"Enough of this slave chatter," Taledak says, cutting me off. "Now that Selma is here, having given herself up, so to speak, we have to get rid of her, too. How about it, Chief Overseer? You'd have a matching pair of sisters. Surely that must increase their auction value."

"*It would,*" the chief Bululg says through the translating device. "*We would be willing to offer both for sale as one lot. This one is an older sibling, but still in its prime.*"

"Excellent," Taledak says, rubbing his hands. "Then it's settled. See, matriarch? *This* is how one does business. Not by flying around in space alone, forgetting where one's loyalties lie. Put her in chains."

As if he has been ready for this the whole time, the fresk behind me quickly fastens shackles to my wrists and locks them behind my back.

Fuck. I should have known it wouldn't be that easy. But I tried. I really did.

Balanoa gathers her black robes around her. "Just get rid of them all. We'll see about the manager position, Taledak. It does appear that Caladin must be brought home and reminded of who he is. But if you must trade in slaves, don't bring them here."

"Here?" Taledak scoffs. "This was an act of desperation because you didn't allow me to get off the planet. Well, then the business had to come to me. As manager of the corporation, I'm free to find the business where it is. Slave trading is profitable, Aunt Balanoa. Xaokui is not a great market, but as manager, I'll make sure it all happens well

away from here. Our clan will see wealth never before imagined. Thank you for your time, Chief Overseer. We have a deal.”

Balanoa walks out of the room with a rustle of long robes, trailed by her servant males and not giving me a second glance. The three Bululg follow, and then the fresks lead the chained girls out, me last.

Taledak catches up with me as we walk down the stairs. “I’m curious, slave. Why did you return here tonight? Did Caladin set you up to it?”

“Cala who?” I’m done with this whole family.

“Oh no, you don’t,” the thin Louluani says. “You’re going to answer my questions properly.” He grabs my upper arm and squeezes. “Where is Caladin now?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He squeezes again, making me groan in pain. “You see, when you’re being this evasive, I have to think that you’re hiding something. I can’t understand why you returned here alone.”

“I wasn’t alone,” I tell him. “I had a robot with me.”

“A combat drone?”

“A bridal stylist. She hates slavery as much as I do. We decided to free the slaves.”

We walk in silence, back down towards the dungeon level.

“A... bridal stylist?” Taledak finally says, incredulous. “You brought a *makeup robot* to free slaves from the White Palace?”

“It’s not like I had trained soldiers lining up to help me,” I fret. “Anyway, just for form’s sake: you can go and fuck yourself. You and your entire clan.”

“There’s such *fire* in you,” Taledak chuckles, letting go of my arm. “I absolutely understand why my cousin would pick you to fake marry. You know, I almost believed it. That kiss during the ceremony... it had to be real. It *had* to. And all those bouts of loud mating in your room. I thought, that seemed real. Not fake at all. But perhaps it *became* real? Gradually? Did you fall for him, maybe? Did you... oh, that’s it, isn’t it? You fell for Caladin! And you returned here to find him again after he discarded you! To plead with him to take you back! This is just too fantastic.” His cold laughter echoes from the walls.

“Fuck you,” I tell him, fighting tears and losing. “He might be a jerk, but he’s ten times the man you are.”

He grabs my arm again, a strange look in his orange eyes. “Are you sure? Perhaps we must find out before you leave.”

“No, it’s settled,” I tell him, suddenly feeling even worse. “You’re definitely less of a man than him.”

“That’s not a healthy thing for you to say just now,” he tells me as we reach the dungeon level. “Because now I insist we find out.”

The Bululg and the slave girls continue straight ahead, out to the landing pad.

But Taledak drags me to the side, into the corridor with the cell doors. “Let’s take a small detour. Be smart and maybe it won’t last too long.” He puts a hand on my butt, squeezing it hard.

“I don’t know what you think is going to happen now,” I tell him, voice trembling as I do my best to resist being dragged along the corridor. “But if you’re planning what it looks like you are, then one of us is going to die.”

It's the corridor around the corner from the one with the ledge, so I don't expect to see Drupili anywhere here.

He opens a cell and shoves me in. "Oh, you think you're that good? All right, I'll let you prove it."

The cell is bare except for a low platform against the opposite wall. It's probably some kind of bed.

Taledak closes the door and pushes me away from him. He has an unpleasant look on his face, almost feverish. "This is turning out to be a really good day! I got rid of my traitor wife. Yes, I know she warned you. She's not subtle enough for something like that. Well, she might net me a small profit too. The first Louluani ever auctioned! She could fetch a healthy price, although she's not too healthy herself. Hopefully the new owner will get *some* joy out of her before she drops dead."

He comes closer. I pull away, but the cell is small and my hands are still bound behind my back. My feet hit the edge of the platform, and I fall backwards.

"Don't be so scared," the crazy orca says and throws off his outer robe. "It could have been so much worse for you! It's a miracle you're alive. I must confess that I was going to kill you both. And Aunt Balanoa, too. I was tired of always coming up against my damned cousin and his power-crazy mother. All I ever heard was Caladin this, Caladin that. Year in and year out. And I thought, I can fix it all in one decisive move. At that time, I was almost sure that your marriage was real, you see. And so Aunt Balanoa would never see it from my perspective. Then you two abruptly left." He sits down and grabs my shoulder. "Because Aouana warned you."

"Take your fucking hands off me!" I squirm to get away, but he's strong and my hands are chained.

“But then, a miracle! The Bululg finally arrived with your sister, as requested. Living proof of a sham marriage. I wasn’t sure it was really her, you know. It seemed too good to be true. But when I saw her, I knew I had won.”

“Fuck you,” I spit.

His hands start to wander over my chest. “Ah. The softness! Caladin did enjoy showing you off, didn’t he? Almost as if he was proud of being with you. Especially your behind! Don’t worry, we’ll get to that. Now let’s see if we can’t find some passion, too...”

He puts one hand behind my neck and pulls me up to him. His breath smells of rotten fish as he brings his mouth closer to mine.

I scream and kick, writhing to get away from his grip. But even a thin Louluani like Taledak is stronger than me.

As he tries to kiss me, I get his thin lip between my teeth and bite down.

He screams and slaps my face, hard. “Insolent bitch!”

The light in the cell suddenly changes. The door is open. And someone is standing there.

“Let go of my wife, Taledak.” The deep voice echoes from the walls like thunder.

Taledak whirls around and gets to his feet. “No, Caladin. Not this time. This time, you lose.”

He produces an ugly-looking gun from somewhere in his robes and aims it at Caladin.

Suddenly free of Taledak’s grip, I bounce to my feet on the platform and kick him as hard as I can right when he shoots

his ray gun. The impact barely makes him budge, but the shot goes wide and gives Caladin time to pounce.

I see the look in his eyes. I see the glitter of his teeth. And then I hear the war cry, so loud it's like ground chili peppers on fire being poured into my ears. I curl up in a corner, my head away from the room. I really don't want to see this.

My ears are ringing after the terrible yell, but the noises I hear are nightmarish.

Thankfully they don't go on for too long before there's a soft touch on my shoulders. "Selma. Let's go."

I whimper, not really capable of doing much. Strong arms lift me up, and I recognize the scent.

"Keep your eyes closed," Caladin rumbles into my ear. "I'm afraid I lost control of myself."

All I get is a glimpse, but I don't want more. It's as if the room has been painted in dark red, the 'paint' still dripping from the walls and ceiling, thick with slivers of flesh and other fluids that I don't want to think about. In one corner a black and white shape is slumped, like an empty suit.

Caladin carries me out of the cell and towards the landing platform.

"Wait," I manage, my voice hoarse. "We must get Drupili. Around the corner."

Caladin turns around and walks calmly along the corridor. "What is Drupili?"

I nod weakly towards the shiny cylinder on the ground. "That. Bring her, please."

He picks her up and gives her to me. The thermos-shaped robot is surprisingly heavy.

“And the gun?” Caladin asks, looking down.

“Leave it,” I decide. “It wasn’t much use.”

We walk out to the landing platform. The Bululg ship is gone, but the girls are still here. Including Aouana and Cora.

“Put me down, please.”

Caladin sets me down, making sure my legs will carry me before he lets go of me.

I walk over and finally embrace my sister. “Hi.”

“Selma! I don’t know what the hell is going on, but are we okay?” Cora squeezes me.

I sniffle against her neck. “I think so.”

She’s still tense. “That killer whale guy — I mean, the big one — he beat up the fresks and then chased the Bululg into their ship. Are we... are we free?”

I gently disengage. I’m emotionally drained, and I can’t fully enjoy the reunion with my sister. “I think we are. Sorry, I’m a little groggy right now.”

I turn to Caladin. “She asks if we’re free.”

- CALADIN -

I look out over the ocean. A black, egg-shaped object with golden decorations is rising fast into the sky. And another one is approaching, glowing in purple. “We’re free. All of us.”

We use the tube to enter my ship, and I send us all to my office. Selma still walks carefully on the small carpet. I suppose it doesn’t help her fear of heights that the tank beneath the floor is now filled with water. Very well, I will put a large carpet all over the floor.

Sitting down in the couches I put here for this purpose, the girls relax and look at each other, plainly not sure what to think.

Standing on the floor, I draw breath to speak, then realize that I also don’t know what to think.

“Skix,” I say into the comms. “Some help?”

He comes *shvupping* a few breaths later. “Ah. A successful mission. In every respect, Caladin?”

I glance over at Selma. “That’s still to be determined, Skix. I think we can safely assume that I’m out of the company. My mother will not like any of this. She certainly knows now that

the marriage was fake. And she will soon learn that I um... *canceled* her deal with the Bululg.”

“The deal where Taledak gave his slaves back to them, in addition to his own wife and Selma? For a profit?”

I frown. “How do you know all this?”

“You were wearing your communication device. I listened in the whole time, putting two and two together. Unethical, perhaps, but I thought it just as well. Anyway, I know all that happened. Including your cousin’s demise. Or will he recover?”

I look down at my hands and my clothes. “I should wash him off me before it all goes crunchy. Oh, could you try to wake up that makeup robot? The one on the couch? Excuse me.”

I go over to Selma, who also got splattered with Taledak’s blood. “You and I need a bath. And I have a good place for it.” I reach down to pick her up, and to my relief she doesn’t protest.

Walking over to the hole in the floor, I set her down on the edge. “Jump in when you’re ready. I’ll catch you.”

I dive into the water, which is only about my own length lower than the floor. Then I stay on the surface, reaching my arms up. “Jump.”

Selma jumps, feet first, and I easily catch her before her head gets wet.

“We can talk privately here,” I tell her, pointing up. “They can see us, but they can’t hear. Let’s wash Taledak off us.”

I start scrubbing. Selma doesn’t have a lot of blood on her, but it takes a while to remove it all from me.

“You were right,” I tell her as I scrub. “That boy does deserve better than just luxury and loneliness.”

She looks at me with her clear eyes, rimmed with red. “You came back to rescue the slaves?”

“That was the plan. I waited until the Bululg came out, because I wanted to avoid having to break those locks. My break-in tool didn’t work on those doors. And then, when I had chased the Bululg away, Aouana told me that you were here, too. Blasted shallows, I was afraid I’d come too late!”

“You cut it pretty close,” she says and strokes my forehead with two fingers. “There’s a little more right *there*.”

Her gentle move warms me and creates a spark of hope. “I will be cleaning Taledak off me for days. I lost control in there, when I saw him forcing himself on you. And I heard a slap.”

She touches her cheek. “He was a brute. I’m glad you... did what you did. What will your mother say to this?”

I grin. “Very bad things, I’m sure. But I won’t hear them. She was happy to go along with this slave trade. And, if Aouana is right, about Taledak setting up a regular slave trading business. I will find it impossible to accept such a person as a matriarch to command me.”

“You’ll demand a new one?”

I stroke some invisible spots off her arm, just to touch. “That’s not the way it works. Matriarchs are not elected. It’s a complicated political process that I honestly have no interest in. I suspect many in my clan will find Taledak’s actions fully acceptable if it would mean more money for them.”

“So you’re leaving the clan?”

“I doubt she will cast me out. But it doesn’t matter. I’m out of the company.”

Selma grabs my hand and squeezes it. “I’m sorry, Caladin. That was important to you.”

“It was. *Far* too important. Now, it’s more important for me to be free. Even if it means less luxury and more real work. Maybe I can do something to stop the slave trade in the galaxy. It’s a repulsive practice.”

Selma smiles. “That sounds like that boy you used to be. I think you found him in here somewhere.” She puts her hand on my chest, right above the heart.

“He was there all along,” I tell her. “I just forgot. I’m glad you saw him in me.”

She puts both arms around my neck. “I saw him right away, Caladin. And I thought, I’d like to marry that man.”

“And you did.”

“We’re still married, right?”

“Unless you’ve secretly divorced me.”

She shakes her head. “No chance. Caladin, I wonder... I left you pretty abruptly. And I said some mean things. But do you think... that maybe...” She chokes up.

I put one hand at the side of her head. “You said some true things, things I needed to hear. So yes, I think that maybe...”

“That maybe...”

“Yes?”

She takes a deep breath. “That maybe we can be real married? Again? I have no right to ask. Those things I said... it was because it was about slaves. And my sister had been taken just

weeks before. My mind went crazy. It was unfair to you. I'm sorry. It's just, I really love you." She wipes a crystal tear off her cheek.

"And I love you too," I tell her, my voice gravelly. "My love, we were real married the whole time. I'm sure you know that. It started with that kiss. After that, it was all real."

"I know. I should have given you a chance before I just left you. I'm so sorry."

I kiss my wife, tasting only the salt of the water we're in and from her tears, which are now flowing freely. "Let's continue this somewhere else."

I grab hold of Selma, dive deep in the tank, and then accelerate hard straight up, jumping out of the water and through the hole with her in my arms. As we land on the diamond floor, the rescued girls look at us with astonishment.

"Skix, make sure everyone gets something to eat and a safe place to rest. Clothes too, if you can find any. And put some carpets on this floor."

"I see," Skix mutters. "Didn't you hire a secretary to handle crucial tasks like these?"

"That was a long time ago, Skix. I know these things are beneath you. Please help me one last time."

The makeup robot comes flying and hovers in front of Selma. "My hot circuits. What the hell happened?"

"You got shot," Selma says, wiping her nose. "But we're safe now. Recognize my husband?"

"Yes, of course. Greetings, Caladin of the clan Beom. I wonder—"

“Greetings,” I reply quickly. “Excuse us. We must get cleaner than this.” I lead Selma over to the tube, sending us both to my cabin. We need alone time.

“This is nice,” Selma says when she sees it. “Comfortable, but not full of junk like that palace.”

“The White Palace didn’t use to be like that,” I tell her as I go into the bathroom. “That was all Taledak’s work. Come here.”

I turn on the shower, and Selma takes off her clothes without hesitation. I do as well, and then we find a temperature we both like.

The wall dispenses soap and other things we need, and I spend a long, glorious time cleaning Selma’s body with my hands, lathering her up all over.

“What do we do with everyone?” Selma asks, yawning as she can finally relax. “I think Aouana is really sick. Do you still have some money we can give to the girls so they can make their own choices?”

“I still have money,” I tell her as I gently rinse off her voluminous behind. “As long as you don’t expect me to pay them as much as I paid you.”

“The more, the better,” She smiles. “Maybe we’ll just stick together, all of us. In the beginning, anyway.”

I pull my wife close and just hold her there while the water cascades off us. “You’ve had a tough time recently, I think.”

She puts her head on my chest. “It’s been... interesting. How about you? Still happy about gaining your freedom? It cost you a lot.”

I turn off the water and drag us both into the air dryer. “There’s nothing more valuable than freedom. The price *should* be high.

The only thing I regret is that I'll lose this ship. It belongs to the company."

"Oh, does it? That's okay. I have a ship." Selma stretches her arms up so that the warm air reaches all of her.

"You do? Yes, of course. You had to get to the White Palace." I lead her out of the dryer and over to the bed.

She sits down. "Are we still there? At the palace, I mean?"

I sit down next to her. "There's no urgency about leaving. Taledak can't hurt us now. The Bululg left. Your ship must be in orbit, then? There was nothing on the scanners."

"It's a stealthy ship," she says and smiles. "It's circling us right now. You don't have some clothes I could borrow, do you? I want to introduce you to someone."

I find some old formal robes that she drapes off herself, and then we go to the kitchen. The girls are busy operating the food maker, and it has already produced a good amount of bland dishes.

"Selma!" the strange robot exclaims. "This girl is your *sister!* Did you *know?!?*"

Selma laughs and runs over to hug one of the girls, who does indeed look a lot like her. "Of course I know she's my sister!"

"Yes, but I mean, did you know she was there? That she was one of Taledak's victims?"

The two girls hold each other close. "No. I had no idea about that. I just wanted to free the slaves. Cora, I'm sorry I didn't react more when I saw you. It's just, I was so happy to see you but so sad to see you in chains. I thought everything was lost. You know?"

“I know!” the other girl says with a smile that is a lot like Selma’s. “I thought so too. For weeks in that creepy Bululg station.” She squeezes my wife hard.

“And you have to meet your brother-in-law,” Selma says. “Caladin, this is Cora. My sister.”

“My sister too, now,” I observe and embrace her. She’s thinner than my wife, less luxurious. But still attractive, I suppose.

“I not Interspeech so well,” Cora says. “You brother?”

Selma speaks fast in their alien language.

Her sister stares at me, mouth open. “*Yur marid ta him?!?*”

“She’s surprised,” Selma explains unnecessarily. “We have a lot of catching up to do.”

“Then do that,” I suggest. “I have some other things to attend to.”

Unable to resist, I give my wife a long kiss on her soft lips. Then I saunter out of the kitchen and take the tube to the control room.

Looking around, there’s not much here that’s mine. I’ll have to leave this ship on Xaokui. For a moment I toy with the idea of stealing it. But that would impede on my feeling of freedom. I don’t want to owe the clan anything.

Outside the viewscreen, the highest tower of the White Palace is glowing red in the light from the rising sun. Not so long ago, the sight of it would have given me goosebumps. Now, it leaves me cold. It’s someone else’s castle, no longer anything to do with me. It’s become an evil place.

Skix comes out of the tube, followed by the small makeup robot. “Ah, there you are, boss. Anything on the scanners?”

I glance at the screen. “You mean Selma’s ship? No, nothing. It must have a first-rate camouflage system.”

“Mind if I call it here?” the makeup cylinder asks in a feminine voice. “I heard we’re moving out of this ship, nice as it is.”

“That’s right,” I tell her. “The clan will want it back. But we’ll stay here until midday so the guests have a chance to rest. Have they been assigned cabins?”

“They have,” Skix says. “And they’ve mostly retired there now. They’re desperate for rest. Only Selma and her sister are still up.”

“Call your ship here if you want,” I tell the makeup robot. “It can land in the main hangar, if it’s not too large.”

She inclines her body as if bowing. “Thanks. It’s not a big ship, but it should have room for everyone. For a short trip, anyway.” She zooms to the tube and is gone.

“Well, Skix. You’re hired by the Oumi Corporation, not me personally. So I suppose this is where we part ways.”

The little lawyer walks straight up the wall with his suction cup feet, then hangs upside-down from the projector screen in the ceiling. “Oh, I’m unemployed. I terminated my position at the corporation when I realized there were slaves in the picture. Right after we saw your mother at her house. I can’t deal with those things. Even I have *some* ethical concerns.”

I’m astonished. “You quit? But then...”

“Why am I still here? Perhaps I happen to like traveling the galaxy with no particular goal in mind. Perhaps I enjoy the occasional adventure. Perhaps I’ve completely lost my mind. Personally, I think the latter is more probable.”

I nod. “I think I agree. But I don’t mind that. You know I can’t pay you, right? At least not the salary you’re used to.”

“I know,” he says, strolling slowly across the ceiling with his hands behind his back. “By now, I’m probably richer than you are. I think I’ll hang around for a while. Not as your secretary, I hasten to add. But you and Selma are an interesting couple, and I want to see what kind of trouble you’ll get me into.”

“Are you sure? We can get into really bad trouble, looks like.”

“Best kind.”

“I really appreciate this, Skix.” I reach up towards him with one flat hand. “Thank you.”

He slaps his little hand on mine. “We’ll see how long we both can take it.”

I take a small object from my pocket and clutch it in my hand. “Want to see me get into probably the worst trouble ever? Right now?”

He drops straight down from the ceiling, rotates in the air, and lands on his feet. “Try to stop me. Oh. *Damn* it. This is why I never walk on the ceiling. A little help?”

His suction cups have sucked themselves hard onto the smooth surface, and he pulls at his legs to no avail.

Shhhhvupp. I grab one thin leg and pull it loose, then the other. “Never thought of getting shoes or something?”

“Shoes look terrible on me. Let’s go. I can’t wait to see this.”

Selma and Cora are still sitting on the couch, looking relaxed as I approach.

“Selma. My beloved. We have unfinished business.”

- SELMA -

Caladin's tone is so serious I start to worry. "What is it, my love?"

He comes over and to my surprise gets down on one knee. "Selma Hudgins of the clan Beom. I love you. Will you stay married to me?"

"Yes, Caladin. I will." I'm close to choking up.

It's the easiest choice I ever made. He *is* the good-hearted man I thought he was. A thousand times over.

He holds out his hand. "Finger, please."

I reach out my hand with the ring on it, unsure about what he's going to do.

He takes my hand, slips the ring off, and turns his back to me for a moment. Then he gently slides it back onto my finger. Now it has a diamond on it the size of an M&M, glittering in hundreds of fine facets.

"That should complete it," Caladin rumbles. "It was unfinished before. No doubt that's why our marriage had a degree of trouble."

"No doubt," I agree, stunned.

“That diamond has some extra functions that I will show you later,” he says. “A diamond by itself is not very useful. Cora, I’m going to borrow your sister for a while. You look like you need some rest.”

“Yes,” Cora says and gets up. “I was just think that same. I have nice cabin to rest in.” She walks to the tube and is gone.

I get up and embrace my husband, hard. “Thank you. You gave me another chance.”

“It’s only fair,” he says. “You reminded me who I am. Now, then. We have two more things to do. Come with me.” He takes my hand and leads me to the tubes, and then we find ourselves in the hangar with all the spaceships.

“Oh, there’s my ship.” I point. “Think it’s big enough?”

“I thought it was smaller than that. It’s quite new, I think. A warship?”

“Used to be. I don’t think it has any weapons on it now. But it’s good at staying hidden.”

We walk over to a dark corner of the hangar, filled with scrap and old parts.

“I promised you I’d show you my racing ship,” he says as he clears away some heaps of rusting metal and cracked composites. “And here it is.”

He takes hold of an arrowhead-shaped object and pulls it out from the trash. Its underside scrapes noisily against the floor.

It’s about as long as a sedan, but about half the width. It looks like it’s made from fiberglass, with a boxy engine section at the back. It’s something you could knock up in any garage on Earth.

“That’s a spaceship?” I ask to be sure. “Is it safe?”

Caladin chuckles. “No, no. It’s not safe at all. There are many deaths during races with these things. But I can only assume that dying in a craft you made yourself may involve some degree of satisfaction.”

The little spaceship has a small, transparent dome at the middle of its hull, but it looks incredibly flimsy. I would not be surprised if it was made partly from cardboard and wood.

“Uh-huh. I have no idea what you mean.”

He just smiles. “Space racers think strange things, my love. Anyway, I said I would show it to you. Here it is.”

“You made it yourself, from scratch? Pretty impressive that you didn’t die.”

“I even won a race occasionally. It was a happy time. Or so I thought. Now I suspect I’ve been desperately lonely for many years. To the point where I would find even Skix to be acceptable company.”

I lightly put my hand on the little arrow, and it sinks into the soft, flimsy hull, leaving a hand-shaped dent. “Sorry! We’ll take it with us in my ship. There has to be room for this little thing.”

He puts a hand on my shoulder and squeezes. “No, this stays here. I’m done with all of this. A new life begins. I’m not going to bring my past life with me. And most of the fun was in building it.”

I turn and embrace him. “It’s okay to have lived a life that wasn’t perfect, my love. It made you who you are, and I wouldn’t want you any other way.”

He buries his nose in my hair. “That makes me happy.”

We stand like that for a while, just needing to be alone.

“The ocean is right there,” Caladin says and nods towards the hangar opening. “And there’s still one thing left to do.”

We walk over there, and I look out at the sun glittering on the waves below us. “Does it involve diving deep?”

He frowns. “How did you know?”

I laugh. “That’s usually what you like to do, my love. I don’t have a mask, though.”

“But I do. Here. Make sure it connects properly all around.” He hands me a space-age diving mask like that other one I had.

“Will there be other people”? I ask.

“Just the two of us. Ah, you’d prefer your clothes to stay dry? Me too.”

He helps me take off my top, and we strip off the rest of our clothing.

Caladin takes me into his arms, lifts me, and dives out the opening. A couple of seconds later we hit the water, but he protects me perfectly against the impact and checks my mask. Then he beats his legs like a whale tail and takes us deep down.

The water is clear, and the bottom of the ocean is beautifully filled with corals and rocks and all kinds of creatures that look a lot like fish. Caladin takes us to water so deep that I can’t see the bottom, only the surface hundreds of feet over my head. But with the mask I breathe as easily as on dry land.

“This is a good place,” Caladin says, somehow able to speak without releasing a lot of bubbles from his mouth. “Float here for a while.”

He gently pushes me away from him, and I stay at the same depth, floating weightlessly.

Caladin circles me quickly, completely in his element. His moves are graceful and look effortless. He's clearly closely related to actual orcas. I lazily wonder how that works.

Click-aaaauuuuaaaaaooooeEEEE eeeeeeoOOOommm, the whole ocean suddenly sings.

The sound comes from every direction at once. It's a multilayered sound so complex that I can't separate the various tones, each playing its own melody that somehow fit together as one. But I sense the emotions in it — pride, strength, sadness, bravery, love. It's the most beautiful sound I've heard, and it brings me to tears.

Now I completely understand why he doesn't like his 'air name' much if this is what his water name sounds like. It's a name worthy of him, and that's saying something.

I should probably not be crying inside my mask at a depth of several hundred feet, but I can only hope I won't drown in my own tears.

Hiss-eeeeuuuuuaaaaa ooooooEEEEEE eeeeeeoOOOommm, the ocean sings, ending on a bass note so deep my whole body vibrates with it. It goes on for a long time, imperceptibly fading and going lower. My brain immediately hears what it's based on: Selma Hudgins Beom. But it's every bit as complex as his own name. The emotions here are even stronger, more immediate — it's a raw love, unpolished, new, uncritical, awestruck, lusty. And invincible.

Okay, now I will definitely drown in my mask. Or I would, if it didn't clean itself so effectively.

He comes swimming, spinning playfully around his own axis because he can, because he's the absolute master of the seas.

"Sounds good, doesn't it?" He grins happily.

"Wonderful," I sniffle. "Those are our water names."

"Water names sound better."

"Because you can feel them through all of you."

He comes in close and puts his face close to my mask, stroking my head with his massive hand. "And so you know the person better."

"Do it again?" I plead. "We might not see an ocean for a while after this."

He grins and withdraws.

This time I close my eyes and let the sound envelope me fully. It's the most amazing experience I've ever had, and I lose myself in it. Only one thing could make it better.

Caladin comes in close, alien cock hard and insisting as he pulls me close. Because of the mask we can't kiss, but that's fine. Having him speak my water name under the ocean is every bit as intimate as a passionate kiss. I wish I could do the same for him, but I think saying a water name takes years of practice. And probably some organs I don't have.

Feeling weightless, I pull myself higher on his body and then lower myself until his rod is splitting my nether lips. I can only hope I've enough juice down there for this to work — seawater isn't nearly as slippery as it should be.

I cling to Caladin as he gently kicks off and sets us rising towards the flickering sunlight. At the same time, I slide an inch onto his cock, finding it easy and slick. Seawater may not be slippery, but his alien cock definitely is.

As he keeps kicking his legs like the tail of an orca from Earth, I slide deeper onto him until I'm bottoming out. I stay there as his hard presence inside me churns up more and more heat, the root of his cock massaging my clit just right. When I come, I cling to him and shake uncontrollably, hearing him chuckle knowingly.

The sound of my water name fills the ocean all the way up, slowly dropping in volume but never fading completely. I get the feeling that our names will always echo through the seas of Xaokui. I can think of nothing more romantic.

I'm grateful that Caladin lets us go slowly up to the sunlight — I want to savor this as much as possible. It's the most otherworldly thing I've ever done, and yet so natural.

I come once more on his cock before we breach the surface.

Hanging off my orca husband, I take my mask off and then just stay there, bobbing up and down in the small waves.

"I love you," I tell him, but even those words lack the intensity and emotions of my water name when he speaks it.

"And I love you," he says, a smirk playing on his lips and his cock swelling inside me. "Did you have a good ascent?"

"The best," I tell him sincerely, still out of breath. "Just the best."

Mostly recovered and enjoying the warm sun on my naked skin, I straddle my orca's smooth back and keep one hand on his fin as he takes us back to the palace where his ship is waiting. On the way I can't help rubbing my bare sex on his hard, smooth spine, so that when we use the transport tubes and find ourselves back in his cabin, I'm dripping from both saltwater and my own juices. Not bothering to dry off, I climb onto Caladin's huge bed and beckon him to me. I'm sore and

exhausted, but I'm also insatiable right now. And I'm concerned that he hasn't come yet today. That seems unfair.

He comes in close and licks me from my stomach all the way up to my boobs, continuing to my mouth, where he Frenches me deeply.

"Salty," he grunts.

"So are you," I tell him. "But I know something that could cure it. You like my ass, right?"

"I wonder what could possibly have given away that deeply held secret," he deadpans and reaches under me to grab my butt that way. "But yes, I confess. I really like it."

"Then let's try this." I turn around on all fours and present my butt to him, head on the mattress. It's the first time anyone has seen me like that, but now I really want to show Caladin all my charms. "So you have something nice to look at."

"Sweet depths of the clearest ocean," he marvels breathlessly as he positions himself behind me. "Where have you been all my life?"

- - -

Caladin really wanted to leave the planet at midday, but we all need to rest. So it's midnight when we finally board my blue spaceship and leave Caladin's huge, purple egg on the landing pad of the White Palace.

"Sure you won't miss it?" I ask as I take the controls and gun the engines in a steep curve going up from the surface.

“The ship? Oh, I will. It was made to my specifications, and I’ve had some good times there lately. But I’m not going to look back. And I was able to bring with me most of the ancient artifacts I collected. We’ll sell them and be rich.”

“You’re leaving a lot behind,” I remind him gently. “There’s still time to change your mind about some of those things. You won’t lose me now.”

He puts his hand on mine. “I know. But I want to be free, too. I can’t be free under any matriarch.”

“You don’t think you’ve just traded one matriarch for another?”

He chuckles. “If so, my new matriarch is so cute and so charming that I haven’t even noticed that she is one. And no matriarch should have an ass like yours.”

“I’m not, though,” I assure him. “I’m your wife. Not your boss.”

“I know that. You don’t have the matriarch system on Earth. And I see no reason why it should leave Xaokui. It’s not the best way to run a society.”

On the big viewscreen in front of me, the blue and white planet is slowly receding. I still have trouble grasping how well everything worked out. Not only did I get married to the most incredible guy in the universe, I also found my sister and rescued her from slavery. I never dreamed that my plan would work so well. It’s all because of him, of course. If he hadn’t come to rescue those girls after all, we would all have been auctioned.

No, I don’t want to think about that. It ended *so* much better than that.

“So first we’ll find a doctor for Aouana,” I recap our plans. “We’ll set the girls free on a space station of their choice, giving them a decent amount of money to survive on for a while. Cora stays with us, along with Skix and Drupili. That takes care of the next few hours. What do we do then?”

“I have a place I want to go,” Caladin says. “To find out something that could be important. My love, we’ll need more speed than this to get off the planet.”

I push on the gas lever. It vibrates faintly under my hand, as if urging me on. I sense the gigantic power ready to fling us into space, a coiled-up force barely contained in the warship’s sleek hull. Being in control of all that makes me nervous about unleashing it. “All right. It’s my first time taking off from here.”

“And the last, one hopes.”

“Oh? You never want to return? What about the oceans?”

He shrugs. “There are many oceans in the world. Your planet has some really good ones, for instance. I will never be able to explore them all in one lifetime.”

“But we’ll try, right?”

“Oh, we’ll try. Together, maybe we can do it. But if so, we should get started soon.”

I give him a happy grin. “Let’s just go.”

“Exactly.” He places his big, warm hand on top of mine. Then we push the gas all the way forward.

EPILOGUE

- SELMA -

“There they are,” Caladin says and points to the viewscreen.
“They stopped working.”

I have the ship go lower until we’re maybe a thousand feet from the surface of the Moon. Ahead of us, there’s a row of yellow excavating machinery just standing there, neatly lined up.

“Maybe they hit a hard layer of rock.”

“I don’t think so. Then they would just keep trying. They’re robots, they don’t know how to quit. It looks to me as if they think they’re done. Land here, please, my love.”

I take the ship down to the gray, rocky surface. It’s hard to gauge just how close the ship is, so I rely on the instruments to make a hard touchdown which makes the whole ship judder.

“Sorry, girls,” I mutter. Our passengers in the lounge must have felt that. The three alien girls we saved got off at a big space station, overwhelmed by the amount of money we gave them and determined to make their own way through the galaxy. Cora and Melinda, the other Earth girl, stayed with us. Everyone is happy about that.

I power down the engines. “Can I come with you?”

Caladin gets out of his specially-constructed seat, bought at great expense at that same station. It is much bigger than mine and has room for his dorsal fin. “You can. Drupili wants to come too, I think. Bring a gun. There’s someone else here.”

I stiffen. “Oh? Who?”

“I don’t know. The sensors are acting weird, giving me a ghost signal as if there’s a well-camouflaged ship parked right next to us.”

I look at every screen, seeing nothing except a barren landscape. “Is that bad? It has to be, right?”

He picks a long gun for himself. “We’ll see. It’s strange, anyway— the Bululg will only allow *us* to land here, not strangers. Only I have the rights to dig here.”

We put on light, supple spacesuits and jump down to the ground in one-sixth the gravity of Earth.

“That’s one small step for me,” I recite from memory. “One giant leap for uh... you, I guess. Right? Or the other way around.”

Caladin lifts the solar visor of his helmet and looks at me funny. “Are you all right? Oxygen mix the way you need it?” The comms are as clear as if we were sitting on a couch in the lounge.

“I’m fine,” I assure him. “I’m just happy, that’s all.”

“I’ll watch her,” Drupili says, hovering alongside us. “If she shows more signs of silliness, I’ll slap her a little.”

“What?” I exclaim, outraged. “That’s not how you do it!”

“I’ll play it by ear,” the makeup robot says, waving a small gun of her own. “I’m willing to try other approaches.”

The spacesuits have an inbuilt AI that controls smart fibers in the suit, making it impossible to trip. After a few dozen steps in the powdery dust, my boots are covered in the stuff. It's as sticky as mud despite being completely dry.

Caladin swings himself up on a huge, wheeled excavator machine and helps me up on it. There's a small control panel and two big chairs. Using the controls with an expert touch, he drives the machine towards the hole the yellow giant robots have dug in the loose soil of the Moon.

Looking over my shoulder, I see Earth as almost a full disk of blue, white, and brown. Ahead is the Sun, its light being rendered less than blinding by the visor in my helmet.

We descend into the dark tunnel, going steeply down.

"Stay alert," Caladin says tightly as he turns on intense floodlights at the front of the machine. "If you see any movement, let me know."

We go further and further down, and when I turn around, the opening of the tunnel is only a small, bright pinprick.

But there's light ahead, too.

"What's that? Should there be light here? One of your machines stayed behind to work, maybe?" I suggest, hoping I'm right.

"They were all up there," he says. "And they don't need light to work."

I clutch the gun in my hand, not comfortable with this kind of uncertainty.

The light has a strange tone to it, though. It's not white, but also no other color I can think of. And it's getting stronger as we get closer.

Finally the light gets so bright that Caladin turns off the floodlights on our machine. “Drupili, please go ahead and tell us what that is.”

“Sure,” she says brightly and zooms ahead, gun held in front of her, so small she’s barely visible. “Send the expendable robot. Seriously, do it. It makes sense. I can be repaired.” She’s still grateful after Caladin both saved her and had Skix restore her to fully working order then let her come with us as a normal part of the crew. Now she worships the ground he walks on.

I don’t blame her, though — I feel the same way.

It took a while for it to fully sink in. Caladin took me from Earth, gave me a job, gave me money, married me, and then saved me and my sister from slavery. And it cost him his entire old life, a life of luxury and wealth and admiration.

On the other hand, I think I helped him find himself. He’s nowhere near as grumpy anymore, and now he’s even prone to joking and laughing.

The machine rolls to a halt on wheels that are taller than me. It has no engine noise on the airless Moon, but I think it’s fully electric so it should be pretty quiet anyway.

Drupili vanishes into the light and stays away for several minutes.

When she returns, I notice she still has the gun.

“Well?” Caladin asks.

“I’m not sure,” the little robot says. “I mean, they *seem* friendly. And I told them who we are. But they look unusual. Actually, you better take a look yourselves.”

Caladin looks at me. “You better stay here. I don’t like it.”

I take his hand. “Think I’m going to let you out of my sight, now that I finally got you? No chance.”

He sends me a quick grin, teeth glittering in the alien light from up ahead. “At least stay behind me. Shoot first and ask questions later. Actually, don’t ask any questions. Some people see it as weakness.”

We climb down from the machine and walk towards the light, Caladin’s huge shape first, then Drupili hovering at face height, then me, clutching my gun and raising my visor to see behind the light.

It’s a hall, but it’s too big to be called even that. It’s similar to a room in the same way that a hippopotamus is similar to a mouse — completely wrong in every way apart from the technical sense. It curves out of sight in every direction, as if it fills the whole Moon. It’s filled with large objects, gleaming in shiny metal, curved and alien-looking. They have a faintly dangerous air to them, and there must be thousands of them.

I spot the other people here. It’s a small group of creatures, two small and two large, three of them wearing spacesuits of different designs. There’s a fifth person, too, sitting on some kind of hover bike. As we slowly approach, guns pointing to the ground, I notice she’s an old woman, but she’s not wearing a spacesuit.

Caladin takes off his helmet with a sharp hiss. While I struggle to read alien script still, the head-up display in my helmet shows a breathable atmosphere. It shouldn’t be possible, but Caladin seems to suffer no ill effects, so I take off mine, too.

The aliens do the same. Two of them don’t look like aliens at all — they’re Earth girls, but they don’t look like delivery workers.

“Greetings,” Caladin rumbles in Interspeech. His voice carries fine in the fully breathable air. “I am Caladin of the clan Beeom. This is my wife Selma and our companion Drupili.”

“Greetingzzz,” says one of the aliens and takes off from the ground. “I am Tzor.”

I back off. It’s a hornet as large as Caladin, his wings buzzing and his long, black stinger extended.

“Thizzz izzz Mila and Grace,” the hornet buzzes in a deep tone. “And Xan’tor.” He points the stinger towards a deep blue giant with spikes on his shoulders.

“Hi, Selma,” Mila says in English and walks over to me. She has a war-like look to her, but she’s smiling and seems friendly. “I’m Mila. Don’t worry about our guys. They look dangerous, and they are. But they’re on our side. Are you from Earth, by any chance?”

“I am,” I tell her, just slightly confused. It looks like space is just teeming with Earth girls these days. “You too, I assume.”

“I’m the leader of the Space Brigade of the Earth Freedom Army,” she says. “We’re a small group, but we’re active.”

“Okay. I’ve heard of the Earth Resistance, but I wasn’t sure if it was true. Are you the guys that destroyed the Bululg home world?”

“Not us personally, but we had something to do with it.” She gives Tzor a brief glance. “Can I ask why you’re here?”

I point at Caladin. “That’s my husband. He owns all the digging machines on the surface. We came to see if they had uncovered anything. Looks like they have.” I nod towards the gleaming alien machines all around us.

“They have,” Mila says and follows my gaze. “They absolutely have.”

“What is all that stuff?”

“That stuff is the end of the Bululg occupation of Earth. And, if we do this right, the end of all slavery in the whole galaxy.”

“Right,” I tell her, not following at all.

She gives me a tight smile. “This is the legendary Elder cache of weapons. Each of those things is a starship with so much offensive capability that I don’t know what to compare it to. You know the Death Star from the old Star Wars movies?”

“The big, moon-sized ones that could explode planets with a single shot of a green beam?”

“Yeah, those. We think these will be the same kind of totally overpowered compared to every other weapon ever made. Just one of these things could defeat the whole Bululg fleet around Earth in a matter of minutes. And there are hundreds of them. Thousands.”

I get dizzy just thinking about it. “It sounds so easy.”

“Right? We actually have to think really carefully about this. Because once it’s out, this toothpaste ain’t going back into any tube. But me, I think we can use it to brush the galaxy with. Really, really well. Making it all sparkling clean. Making it *good*. For everyone, not just the most brutal and ruthless species. We’ve been looking for something like this for years.”

I look up at Caladin. “This is what you were looking for, right? What should we do?”

“I always avoided thinking about what I’d do if I actually found this,” he says thoughtfully. “Now that we’re here, I have no good answer. But this will get out, of course. The Bululg

know I'm digging here. They're bound to check on my activities and discover this at some point. Do we want the Bululg to have this kind of power? For that matter, do we know how to operate these weapons?"

Mila nods towards the old woman. "We should probably ask the real owner. Her name is Tebbas and she's a little bit strange."

We walk over, and Caladin raises his right hand. "Greetings, Tebbas. We understand you own these objects."

"She does," the hover bike says, flashing its lights. It's obviously some kind of robot. "More or less. She is one of the last of her kind still present in the galaxy. Take a step back, Caladin. She spooks easily."

I barely raise an eyebrow about a hover bike talking. I'm used to robots by now.

"Have you seen Verv?" the old woman asks. "He should know about this."

"Don't be fooled by her unusual way of speaking," the hover bike says. "She thinks faster than any of us. I can't make any decision for her. But the fact that you're here at all is a good sign. She would not have allowed you to find this cache if it didn't suit her."

"My plans," Tebbas says.

She looks like a confused old lady in a robe with a hood. Her eyes dart around as if she's not sure where she is. She reminds me of an old grandma in a retirement home. And I have one of those on Earth.

I take a slow step closer. "Hi, Tebbas. I'm Selma. This is a wonderful place you have here."

“Wonderful,” she says. “Yes. We made it. All of us. Then the others vanished. They left. I stayed behind. Because someone has to guard the machines! They’re very bad machines! But they can also be good.”

“I think so too,” I tell her. “They’re bad. We must be careful with them.”

“Careful,” she echoes. “Very careful with the machines.”

I nod. “And we will be. We will not do anything that you don’t want. Tebbas, if I may ask, what are your plans?”

- - -

We leave the Moon behind and let the ship drift towards Earth. Caladin is allowed to visit, because the Bululg seem to still honor the deal he made with them. To me, that shows how desperate they are to make any kind of money. Things must be going badly for them.

“You found them,” I tell Caladin as we relax in our seats as Earth slowly grows bigger outside the windshield. “You’re the best picker in the galaxy.”

“Perhaps. Didn’t feel as good as I thought. The power in that room, the responsibility!”

“With one of those things, you could go back to your home planet and conquer it. Call yourself king and abolish the matriarch system.”

He looks at me with horror. “*What?!?*”

I laugh, grab his hand, and kiss it. “I love it when you’re outraged, my love. I was just joking. I know most of the clans are different from yours. And say what you will about Xaokui, at least they don’t like slavery there. There are many other planets I would fix first.”

“The matriarchy can work if the matriarch is good,” my husband ponders. “But she can’t have absolute power. That’s where it all falls down. Most people can’t handle that power over their fellow beings. My own matriarch being a case in point.”

“What was it with your mother, anyway? Why was she so chummy with Taledak, even after she knew he wanted to kill her?”

“I think she was tired. It’s my impression that she had been fighting plots from Taledak and his mother for years. And finally she had to agree to force me to get married. With me married, she would have no weaknesses, no points of attack for Taledak to use against her. I was the final weak point. Having secured that, I think she was too tired to fight his slave trading scheme. Or maybe she was just blinded by the money it would bring in. We will never know.”

“She hasn’t tried to contact you since?”

“She has not, and that’s for the best. She’s unfit for her position, but the next lady in line is certainly no better. I’m just happy I don’t have to deal with that.”

I squeeze his hand. “At some point, maybe you should contact her. She *is* your mother.”

“She was until she cheerfully stood by and watched as two of her clan members were sold as slaves to the Bululg,” Caladin says with barely restrained anger, his massive jaw clenching

up. “You and Aouana. What kind of matriarch would do that? No, she can live out her days without me. It would make me feel dirty to speak with her now. And a big part of my freedom is that I never again have to deal with a matriarch.”

I squeeze him again. “It’s your choice. Just know that I support any choice you make, my love.”

“I know, and I’m grateful.”

“Oh, and I had another message from Aouana. She’s recovering fine. Turns out her illness was a slow poisoning. Apparently there was something bad in the air in that gallery. I felt it, too, now I think about it. It made me dizzy. She’s sure Taledak was behind it.”

“He didn’t even trust his own wife to not give away his slave trading secret,” Caladin says with contempt. “And of course she would get in the way of him enjoying some slave girls of his own. Sweet, gentle Aouana. Well, she’s free of him now. We’re all free, like I said. How’s your sister acclimatizing to space?”

“Cora? Oh, she’s doing really well. She and Drupili are best buddies now. Notice how good she always looks. Drupili practices her makeup skills on her. And on Melinda, too. But not on me, sadly.”

Caladin adjusts our course. “I like you better without her fakery. Except that wedding dress. That was really nice. Oh, look. I see oceans.”

I look at the screen. “Let’s pick that big one right there. The Pacific. I always wanted to swim in it.”

A few minutes later we’re skimming the surface, finding a place where the waves aren’t quite as tall as houses. It turns out to be outside a small island with a beach, which Caladin

carefully avoids when he has the ship hover thirty feet over the surface a mile from the shore.

I go to the lounge. “Who wants to swim?” I ask the girls.

“Not really a big swimmer,” Melinda says, one of the other Earth girls we freed. “But I’ll watch you and cheer every time you don’t get eaten by a shark.”

“Cora?”

My sister is lying on a couch, looking radiant with brand new makeup. “I’m with Melinda. Don’t get eaten, and enjoy. Drupili would murder me if I took a bath with this brand new face on.”

“I do have a gun,” Drupili agrees, standing upright on a table. “So that’s definitely a possibility. No, I’m joking. It’s fine. The face will be fine. It’s only the hair I worry about. I haven’t got the hang of it yet.”

“All right. Then it’s only Caladin and me. Um. Don’t look out the window when we jump in. Maybe our swimsuits will fall off.”

“She means they won’t be wearing any swimsuits at all,” Cora announces like a true little sister. “It’s their thing.”

Caladin and I get to the ventral hatch. Cora is right — we’re not going to wear anything for this. Except I will be wearing that diving mask that works so well.

We open the hatch, and warm tropical air fills the little airlock.

“You first,” I tell my husband. “I like watching you dive.”

He throws himself out the hatch without hesitation, does a full spin and somersault before he breaks the surface, his streamlined body barely making a splash.

Then he treads water, waiting for me.

I don't relish jumping out of the hatch this high up. But Caladin will catch me if anything goes wrong. I take a deep breath and throw myself in, not quite as gracefully as him.

"That's brave, my love," he enthuses. "You're conquering that fear of heights. Ready?"

I adjust my mask, feeling the tingles starting down below. This is going to be good. "Let's go."

He grabs me and starts diving.

"It's deep," he says with a grin. "Deep water means good resonance."

When he feels we're deep enough, we're so far down the water is distinctly colder and only the occasional sunray reaches us.

Caladin lets me hover in place while he races away in pure joy, in his element and looking more than ever like a killer whale. He's completely out of sight when the sounds start.

First my water name, then his. Then my first name, his, my last name and our clan name. The whole ocean echoes with it from all around, and I close my eyes and enjoy the clarity and the harmonies and the emotions they evoke.

Caladin returns from an unexpected direction, having circled me without me seeing his distinctive shape.

He comes in close and embraces me. "This ocean is even better! I think it has a different salt content. Did you *hear* the upper band chromatics? Sweet depths, I thought they would never fade!"

"It was very nice." I sniffle inside the mask, unceremoniously grabbing his cock because the water names can't help but

make me both emotional and horny. And him too. “But I know something that’s even nicer.”

- - -

“This is the Pyramid,” the girl called Averie says and nods ahead. “You’ll see why we call it that.”

It’s obvious — the big room in the secret space station two days’ hyperspace travel from Earth is shaped like a pyramid. It’s full of shipping containers, crates, and all kinds of space age equipment I can’t identify. There are also other members of the Resistance, as well as their alien husbands and various others.

Cora, Melinda, Caladin, and I are introduced as new members of the Space Brigade of the Earth Freedom Army and welcomed to their secret base. It’s a huge Elder installation, extremely alien and partly unexplored. Drupili feels right at home, and Skix makes friends with a tricycle-like alien called Frox. They both have suction cups, although they’re plainly not from the same species.

“A lot of our guys aren’t here,” Averie says. “We’re actually quite a few more than this. And we’ve had so many successful actions and missions that the Bululg are really feeling the pressure.”

“They will feel the pressure even more if we use the Elder weapons,” I comment, sitting down on a shipping container. “But that might not be possible.”

“Yes, I heard,” Averie says, sitting down and dangling her legs. “Tebbas will allow us to use one of those things, but only to show it and not to actually use its full power. We think that should be a plan for later, if we need it. We will try to persuade her to allow more decisive use, but she’s hard to talk to. Anyway, we might not need those things. The Bululg have been in trouble for a while. They lost their home planet, and their slave business isn’t going so well because Earth girls are more trouble than they’re worth. We think they’re planning to leave Earth by themselves.”

“Really”? I exclaim. “That’s incredible!”

“They will sell the planet to someone else,” Caladin says calmly. “They won’t just leave. They will be replaced by others in the same trade, probably less scrupulous ones. The plunder of the planet will accelerate, and more slaves will be taken.”

Averie nods. “That’s what we think, too. But that sale could be interesting. We might consider buying Earth ourselves.”

I stiffen, surprised. “Won’t that be really expensive?”

“Very much so. But if we make a bid, we’ll add something priceless. We’ll tell the Bululg that if they sell Earth to us, we’ll stop harassing them.”

I look at Caladin. “Would that work?”

“I don’t know,” he admits. “The Bululg are mostly interested in money. But if they’re as shaken as you say, then perhaps it will convince them. Speaking for myself, I’d find it hard to accept that you’d let the Bululg off the hook with no repercussions.”

Averie shrugs. “Our mission is to free Earth. Bringing the invaders to justice is not part of that. But that’s all in the

future, and we have to think about it. Right now, we'll ask all of you to complete a medical check as new members. You all look super healthy, but it's new regulations. Frox will do that. It's a thirty-second process." She jumps off the crate and walks over to a corner of the pyramid. "Frox, you want to help out?"

The alien that looks vaguely like a tricycle rolls up. "Sure thing. Who's first?"

Caladin goes first, then Cora, Skix, and Melinda. I'm last to sit down and have a robotic arm rotate around me at immense speed.

"Looks good," Frox says, looking at three-dimensional screens. "No problems. You're eight days pregnant."

"Ha ha," I groan. "Next you'll tell me it's triplets. No, I've had that joke done to me before."

It looks at me with six eyes on stalks. "It's not a joke, Selma. I wouldn't joke about that. See for yourself."

Indeed, the machine is telling me that I'm pregnant.

"Oh." I don't know what to say. I was *not* prepared for this, secretly pretty sure I couldn't get pregnant by an alien as different as my husband.

Caladin bends down and checks. "Ninety-nine percent certainty. Would be nice to see a hundred, but it's close enough." He embraces me and lifts me off the chair. "My love."

His voice is hoarse. "We're going to be parents."

I cling to him and bury my face in his massive chest. "It's a dream come true."

There are many congratulations and even some cheering.

I wipe my face. “How does that work, with an Earth girl and an alien father? Is it possible?”

There’s some chuckling.

“It’s very possible,” Averie says and takes my hand. “I’ve done it myself. And the result was better than I thought. Much better. I’ll show you later. The kids aren’t here right now. But some of us have gone through it. It’s safe. Especially with the medical equipment we have. Don’t worry, Selma. You’ll be fine.”

Only then can I let the joy fill me. Being pregnant by Caladin, the best man in the galaxy, is beyond incredible. I sob and hug and sniffle and embrace everyone.

Finally I go over to Caladin and look up at him. “My love, we have twice as much work to do as most parents.”

He grins. “Oh?”

“We have to think of an air name *and* a water name.”

He picks me up, pulls me close, and then waltzes around the Pyramid with me, his happy laughter echoing from the walls. “That will be a real joy! We will try out many, many names before we find the perfect one.”

“Exactly. Maybe we should get started. Is there an ocean nearby?”

Frox scratches his wheel. “An ocean? Depends on how you like it. Icy, full of methane, full of sulfur, full of helium... there are quite a few options.”

“Water,” I tell him. “Warm, but not hot. Clean, but salty. Three thousand feet deep, at least. So big you can’t see the shores. Not too many monsters, although *some* monsters is okay so Caladin won’t get bored.”

“I don’t know any place like that,” Frox says and shudders. “Sounds dreadful.”

“No problem,” I assure the alien. “We’ll search. In a pinch, Earth is only a couple of days away. Are we done for now? It’s just, we suddenly have a lot of things to discuss.”

“We’re done,” Averie laughs and comes in to hug me again. “We’re used to newlyweds here. And the newly pregnant. See you later.”

Caladin and I walk back through the aptly named Toblerone corridor to the hangar where our ship is docked.

My husband takes some time admiring the other ships in there. “Some of these are extremely advanced,” he marvels. “They would normally only be seen flying for the Star Marshals or some other major force. No wonder this little group is being so successful against the Bululg.”

We enter the ship and sit down in the lounge, me on Caladin’s lap.

“So, my darling. This worked out incredibly well.”

“Incredibly,” Caladin agrees and sniffs my neck. “Everything went our way. And now we’ll even be parents. I can’t wait to teach him to swim!”

“Or *her*,” I tell him. “This could be a future matriarch I’m carrying.”

He scratches his chin. “I suppose it could. But I’ll try to discourage that path in our daughter. I want her to be happy.”

I stroke his head fin. It’s both supple and firm, smooth and rough, depending on which way I stroke it. Much like its owner. “Me too. That matriarch thing doesn’t really suit any of us.”

Caladin looks into space. “My love. I was thinking.”

“I’ll alert the media.”

“What?”

“Sorry.” I kiss his smooth head. “Just an old joke. I’m very happy and it makes me say weird things. What were you thinking, my heart?”

He frowns as if thinking deeply. “We were only married once. Wedded. There was one ceremony in front of mostly strangers and enemies. We both thought it was fake. And I suppose it was, in a way. Now that we have new friends, perhaps we could... well, not get married *again*. We are still married. But I want to do something that feels like a real wedding. Smaller than that first one. Simpler. But real, all the way through.”

I squeeze him tight. “I think that’s a really great idea.”

“We could even do it here. On the station. That Pyramid must have room for it, yes? Nothing big. Just something for us. Soon. And I will get you another ring. Made of gold, the way it should be.”

“We’ll get one for you, too,” I tell him. “We’ll have matching wedding rings. Plain rings with no stones in them. That’s common on Earth, you know.”

“Is it? You never told me until this moment.”

“I can’t be expected to tell you *everything*,” I tease, lowering my voice to sound like his. “No, I didn’t. I’m sorry. But yeah, let’s do that. Soon.”

“As soon as it can be arranged. I’ll ask Mila.”

I stretch on his lap, leaning into him. I can’t get enough of his smoothness, his scent and his warmth. “Good. Meanwhile, you

never told me what the diamond in this ring does.” I show him the engagement ring that he made himself.

“It does a few things,” he says. “Turn it this way and it lights up.” He demonstrates.

The diamond becomes a small, intense flashlight.

“Push it down and it sends out a distress signal. Pull it completely off and it becomes a bomb that you can throw at an enemy.”

I study the ring with renewed interest. “Not an ordinary diamond, then.”

“The diamond is ordinary. That small piece of metal holding it in place is not.”

I adjust the ring. “You made this yourself. Not bad for a picker.”

He glances over at the wall, where some of his old artifacts are displayed. “I may be out of the picking business. We found the Elder cache, and that’s the second most important find anyone could make.”

“What’s the most important find?”

He nuzzles my hair. “Just my crowning achievement. After that, there’s nowhere else to go, nothing that could top it: I picked *you*.”

I embrace him fully. “You did, didn’t you? I think you have a real talent for it.”

He puts his hand behind my neck. “Perhaps it’s time to uncover new talents. There’s one I’ve been meaning to develop.” His lips brush against mine.

“Swimming?” I suggest.

“I already know all there is about that. No, there’s something else. One that takes a partner to practice with.”

“Flying a spaceship?”

He frowns. “You think I should practice *that*?”

“No. I really don’t. You’re an expert pilot. But I can’t think of anything where you need to practice at all.”

“I mean *this*.” His lips make more contact, his lips lingering on mine.

“That’s the one thing in the world you do best,” I wheeze breathlessly, all kinds of tingles spreading through me. “But we should both practice. So we don’t forget.”

He gives me many small tickling kisses. “Together.”

I laugh, which I’ve been doing a lot recently. He keeps bringing out the best in me. “We’ll do a lot of things together.”

He grabs my butt, lifts me and positions me astride his thighs. “Almost everything. Do you know what the best part is?”

“I know,” I tell him, feeling his hard cock pushing at my butt through layers of fabric. “It’s all real.”

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Dear reader,
Thanks for reading *Alien Orca*!

Caladin was a fun hero to write. He is scary and grumpy, but he has a heart of gold that is buried so deep it takes Selma a lot of effort to uncover it for him. I think he really needed her in his life. Also I had fun with his fear of beaches. But you already know I’m easily amused.

Real orcas on Earth live in matriarchies where older females lead the clan, and I thought that was an interesting structure to explore. Though I think real killer whales are not as cruel as the ones in Caladin's clan.

I'm not sure why the Louluani species look so much like orcas. They must have a common root, or maybe it's a case of convergent evolution. We may never know.

Selma went from being yanked this way and that by various aliens to someone who decides her own path, although the one she picks is almost certain to fail. But she has a strong sense of duty, and because of that she didn't really have much of a choice. I thought her reward for going to free the girls in the dungeons should be pretty solid, and finding her sister there fit that purpose. Her plan to get abducted on purpose worked, but not the way she expected.

It looks like our Resistance is getting ready for a final battle with the Bululg. With the Elders on their side, more or less, I think I can guess who will win.

If you have comments about the book or maybe suggestions or you just want to say hi to the coolest scifi romance fans in the universe, come by my Facebook page right [here](#).

And make sure you're signed up to my newsletter, right [here](#). That way, you'll be the first to know when the next book in this series is ready, as well as my other series.

As always, reviews on Amazon, Goodreads or Bookbub are much appreciated.

Thanks again for reading *Alien Orca*! I hope you liked it.

Calista