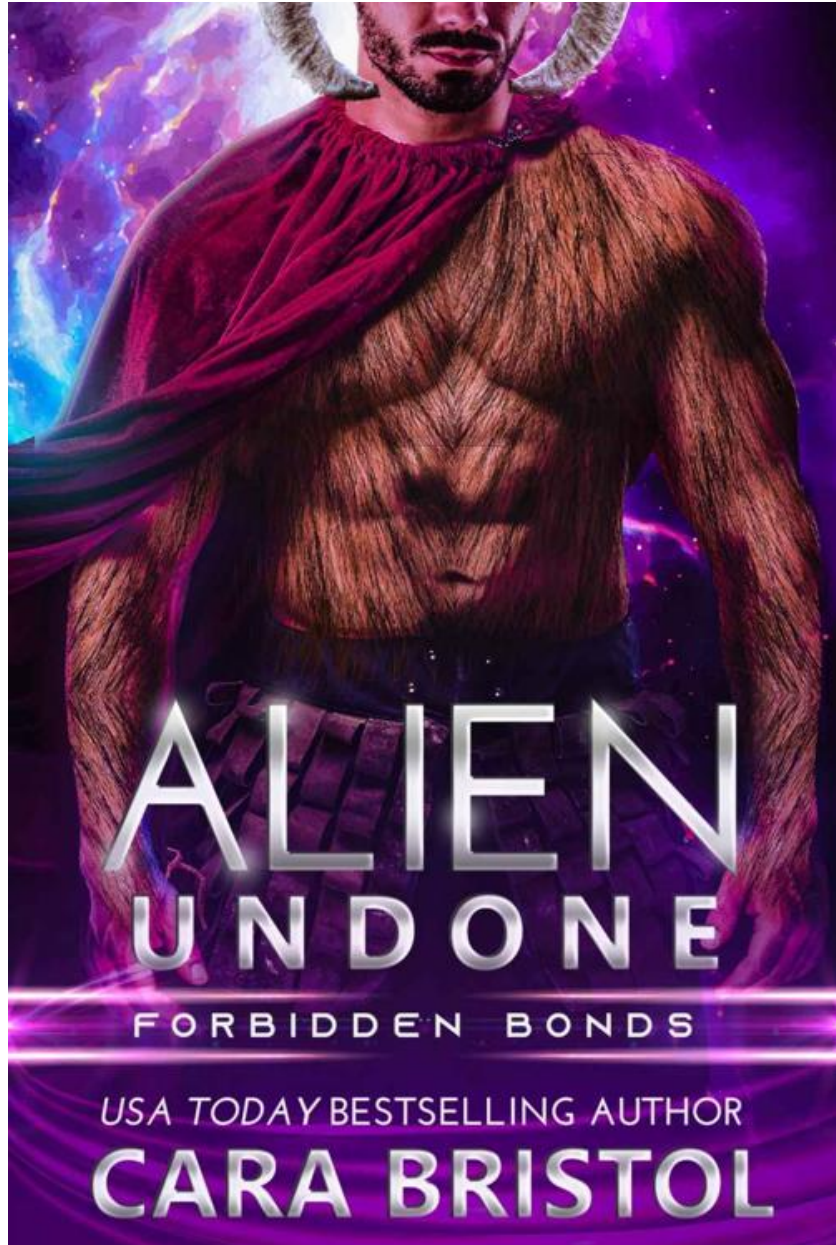


ALIEN UNDONE

FORBIDDEN BONDS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CARA BRISTOL



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Forbidden Bonds 3

Cara Bristol

Alien Undone (Forbidden Bonds 3)

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Table of Contents

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Other Titles by Cara Bristol](#)

[About Cara Bristol](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

Getting abducted by aliens is the not worst thing to ever happen to Millie Rogers. The lowest point in her life comes *after* the rescue when she's forced to deal with *him*—*Nadir*, the alien man tasked with ensuring the abducted humans get home to New Terra. He's made his contempt of humans blatantly obvious—so why does he keep dogging her? The caped, horned, furry alien is the most supercilious, *fascinating*, obnoxious, *handsome*, condescending, *rugged* jerk she's ever met. She can't wait to see the last of his muscular backside.

As advisor to the king of Araset, Nadir faces some difficult assignments, but none so challenging as shepherding the human female, Millie Rogers, back to New Terra. The smart-mouthed spitfire with the lush body seems to go out of her way to bedevil—and *beguile*—him. Despite her rudeness, he can't seem to stay away from her. Luckily, she'll soon be home where she belongs—and away from temptation.

Just as it seems they'll get their wish to never see each other again, Millie's repatriation is put on hold. The king's son goes missing, and Nadir leaves in search of him. What he doesn't count on is Millie accidentally stowing away on the shuttle pod and the craft crashing in a war zone. Forced to trust one another, they set aside their differences to battle insurgents and unexpected threats in a dash for safety.

But as desire flares, will their forbidden bond prove to be the biggest danger of all?

Alien Undone is a snarky, sassy enemies-to-lovers alien abduction romance in the Forbidden Bonds sci-fi romance series.

Chapter One

Millie

With mixed emotions, I watched Nomoru shrink as the spaceship blasted into outer space. While I bid a hearty good riddance to a planet where humans were regarded with contempt, I already missed my bestie. Holly Winter was my partner in crime, my BFF, my sister by another mister.

Holly was remaining on Nomoru. She'd *bond-mated* with Aeon, the former crown prince of Araset. Kat Whalen, Jessie Sayles, and I were returning to New Terra. The king of Araset hadn't wasted any time getting rid of us. The bonding ceremony had occurred yesterday, and bright and early this morning, the League of Planets ship had arrived to take us home. There'd been scarcely enough time to say goodbye before being hustled aboard.

That Aeon, the king's eldest son, had taken a human as a mate had done little to soften the king's negative opinion of humans, so Holly wasn't starting off on the best of terms with her alien-in-law. However, Aeon adored her, and his mother, the queen, had become fond of her. She would be okay.

But, we'll never see each other again. I sighed.

"You don't sound happy to be returning home," said Nadir, the one individual who singlehandedly could make a bad situation worse. The king's chief aide had been tasked with escorting us humans to New Terra—probably to ensure we left for good.

“Maybe I would be happier if *you* weren’t here.” The best defense was a good offense. Like the king he served, Nadir hadn’t hidden his contempt for us.

Few did. The disdain could be traced to one single event a couple of centuries ago. *One little habitable planet was destroyed, and now the galaxy hates us.* The Great Nuclear War that had annihilated life on Earth was no joke, but a horrific, dark catastrophe, all the more tragic because it could have been avoided. Two hundred years later, the descendants of the original colonists on New Terra were still dealing with the fallout—in a manner of speaking.

Nadir’s lip curled around a tusk. “I will endeavor to stay out of your way as much as possible.”

That would be a welcome first. I never knew when or where the jerk would pop up. The hulking, furry brute with ram-like horns moved like a cat. Our paths crossed way too often, and he seemed to go out of his way to annoy me.

“I would appreciate it,” I said. “How long is the trip to New Terra going to take?”

“About four days.”

Four days stuck with him? Hopefully, he would hold to his promise to stay away from me. “Don’t we go through the wormhole?” The space-time passage functioned like an express highway through outer space, allowing a ship to jump light-years ahead. Why weren’t we taking the shortcut?

“Yes, but we are stopping on Aurelia first.” He flicked an invisible speck off his cape. Intricately embroidered, the garment dropped from epaulets on his shoulders to dust the

ankles of his polished boots. His cape had a lot to do with my impression of him as an overdressed, supercilious asshole. I mean, who wore such a formal garment all the time? Inside, outside. Morning, night. Palace, spaceship. I'd never seen him without it.

“Why?”

If he stuck his haughty nose into the air any higher, he'd fall over backward. “That matter is of no concern to you.”

I planted my hands on my hips and shook my head. “See? This is why people don't like you. I was minding my own business, watching the blastoff, when you invaded my solitude. Being a polite person, I attempted to make conversation, and in response, you were snippy and rude.”

He wiped a four-fingered hand over his smirk.

“Are you laughing at me?”

“No,” he lied.

What nerve. If this guy cracked a genuine friendly smile, his face would shatter, but he had the gall to make fun of me? Even worse, his mocking grin imbued his stern alien features with handsomeness and ersatz congeniality. Something was out of kilter in the universe when someone so unpleasant could be so attractive. Assholes ought to be ugly.

I turned my back. Planet Nomoru had vanished into the blackness of outer space like it had been swallowed up. How fast were we traveling, I wondered. Speed of light? Faster than the speed of light? Nadir probably knew, but Earth would regenerate with life before I would ask him.

“Representing the king, Prince Lomax is attending a League of Planets Summit on alien trafficking,” he said.

“What?” I spun around.

“You asked why we were stopping. Since the summit will be held on Aurelia, which is not far off our travel route, we will drop off the prince before continuing on to New Terra.”

Prince Lomax was Aeon’s brother. I’d met all four brothers at the bond-mate ceremony.

“Aeon should have been the one to attend the LOP Summit, except he bond-mated with your friend. Rather than perform his duty, he is leaving for a *honeymoon*.”

There it was—the dig. This was why we couldn’t have a civil conversation.

“On New Terra, it is traditional for a couple to celebrate their marriage with a honeymoon,” I explained.

The *newlymates* were headed for *Star Planet*, a luxury vacation resort recommended by our friend Giselle Cartier. Giselle wasn’t returning to New Terra with Kat, Jessie, and me, either. She’d been recruited by the LOP for its anti-trafficking task force. Stars knew the galaxy needed human representation to clear up the misconceptions.

“Aeon is not a New Terran,” he said stiffly.

“Holly is, though.”

He shook his head. “She will always be human, but she is no longer a New Terran. She is Arasetan now.”

The *only* human Arasetan in the kingdom. On the entire *planet* of Nomoru.

A year older than Holly, I'd always tried to watch out for her since we met in foster care as teenagers. Some people might say I'd caused Holly more problems than I'd saved her from. My reputation as "Millie the Mouth" had gotten me into trouble in school, and occasionally, Holly had been found guilty by association.

"It sticks in your craw that we humans have invaded your world, doesn't it?" I taunted him.

He stiffened. "A handful of humans does not qualify as an invasion. First and foremost, my duty is to serve my king and queen and execute their will. I have no opinion about humans one way or another."

What a load of space junk. "Don't lie. Your *pecker* will shrink."

"You need not concern yourself with my sexual organs," he said.

Ew. He was right about that. *Eyes up!* Idea planted, I had to force myself not to check what he had packed away in those thigh-hugging leggings. So I focused on his rack—the spiral horns curving from forehead to nape. Huge and polished, his light-bronze horns sat atop his skull like a majestic headdress, more impressive than the king's bejeweled ones. Nadir's horns had to be as heavy as an iron meteorite—but his excellent posture never slouched. *Because he has a stick up his ass.*

I wonder if horn size and penis size are related?

Hrrcck. Hrrcck. Snickering at my private, silent joke, I sounded like a cat hacking up a hairball.

"Is something wrong? Are you all right?"

“You don’t need to worry yourself about me,” I replied.

“Until you land on New Terra, your safety is my concern.”

“Hopefully, that time will be short.” The last thing I needed was Nadir interfering in my life. Why had he sought me out, anyway? He never did say.

“It will be four days,” he reiterated.

“You are so literal.” I jutted my chin out and met his gaze.

“If you need anything during the journey, let me know,” he said.

“All I need is for you to leave me alone.” I waved in dismissal.

“As you wish.” In a swirl of cape, he vacated the lounge.

Chapter Two

Nadir

Millie Rogers had dismissed me! She'd acted like I was the lowly scorned human, and she was the chief advisor to the king. Fury burned in my gut, yet I had a strange urge to laugh at her audacious arrogance. The other humans were polite and gracious for what I'd done for them, but not her. She went out of her way to annoy me. From the moment I'd encountered her smirking, taunting personage, I'd found her disagreeable, contrary, infuriating, and frustrating.

And, stars help me, irresistible.

Her humanness should have disqualified her from any consideration beyond duty. Her people were like a foreign invasive species. Once they dug in a toehold, there was no controlling them. And Millie exemplified the worst traits of her kind—aggression, rudeness, self-centeredness.

And the inexplicable power to undermine my resolve and good sense.

How many times had I manufactured an excuse to seek her out? No pleasure or purpose could be gained by charging horns-first into a stone wall, so why did I keep doing it? How many times would I need to get knocked on my *ishta* before I stopped this foolishness?

I must be stronger.

Wisely, His Majesty had expedited the repatriation of the humans before they could cause trouble on Nomoru. Their

selfish, short-sighted, suicidal warring had destroyed millions of species and rendered one of the most habitable planets in the universe uninhabitable. The radiation from the Great Nuclear War still rendered Earth unsafe.

If not for the colony established on New Terra prior to the war, they would have wiped out their own species. So the LOP issued an embargo on New Terra, barring contact with the planet and quarantining their species.

Unfortunately, rampant alien species trafficking had resulted in their release into the rest of the galaxy.

And, in the most unfortunate situation, the king's eldest son, the former crown prince, had chosen to bond-mate with a human female, throwing the lineage of the monarchy into jeopardy and creating a rift between the king and queen. Her Majesty wished for Aeon to be reinstated. She usually got her way, but, with the royal bloodline at stake, the king was holding fast to his decision.

How had these humans beguiled rational people? Aeon. The queen. Me.

No, not me. I am curious, that's all. Millie will be gone in four days. I would never do what Aeon has done and renounce my title for a human.

I'd worked too hard and too long to give up my position for anybody or anything. A commoner could achieve no higher status than to serve as the Advisor Most Loyal to His Majesty the King of Araset. For a half-breed, it was unheard of. I owed a huge debt of gratitude to the king and queen for the trust they had placed in me.

A giggle shook me from my reverie. Around the corner, Prince Lomax huddled with the New Terran known as Kat Whalen. Of all the females, she was the most unassuming, but also the youngest and most immature. She leaned against the wall, a flirtatious smile playing on her lips.

One hand resting on the wall on either side of her body, the prince smiled down at her.

What is the royal fool doing? Isn't one scandal enough?

I cleared my throat, and they broke apart but continued to smile at each other.

“Did you need to speak to me?” Lomax asked.

“As a matter of fact I did.”

The prince stroked Kat's cheek. “So, lunch?”

“I'm looking forward to it.”

“I'll pick you up at your cabin and escort you.”

“How do you know which one I'm in?”

“I'll find it.” He winked, a gesture adopted from the humans.

They separated, but her gaze lingered on Lomax. “Bye, Your Highness.”

“*Lomax*,” he corrected.

“*Lomax*.” She peered up at him through her lashes.

He waited until she vanished down the passage before turning to me. “What's up?”

“*What's up?*” I asked, horrified at his choice of words.

“That means what do you need to tell me? Kat has been teaching me Terran Universal slang.”

“I’m aware of what it means. With all due respect Your Highness...have you lost your mind? After what happened with Aeon, you would risk a dalliance with a human? You are second in line to the throne. If Aeon is not reinstated, you will become king. You cannot march in your brother’s boots. Are you trying to kill His Majesty?” In choosing Holly, Aeon had rejected his title and responsibility. If the second son, and next in line to the throne did the same, the king would bust a horn.

Prince Lomax dismissed my concerns with a desultory wave. “As usual, you are overreacting. First of all, Father will not know of my flirtation with the *ovwet* unless you tell him.”

I flinched at the use of the derogatory word despite the seriousness of the situation.

“Second, Aeon will regain his title. It is the will of the queen, and what Mother wants, Mother gets.”

“That has been the case in the past, but it is different now. In twenty years of service, I have never seen His Majesty so adamant—”

“Mother *will* prevail. Aeon will become crown prince again and then king. Third, circumstances prevent anything more than a brief rendezvous anyway. After I disembark tomorrow, I’ll never see the *ovwet* again. One lunch with her will not alter the political landscape of Araset.”

“Kat is *human*,” I corrected.

“Human—*ovwet* same thing.”

I'd worried for naught. The fact he saw little difference indicated the flirtation meant nothing. Ovwet did mean human in Ara-Cope, but it came loaded with negative associations. It was an insult. One would never refer to someone one cared about in such a manner.

Like Lomax, I'd given little consideration to the connotation until overseeing the care of the five human guests at the palace and diplomacy had forced me to guard my tongue. The word now caused me to cringe.

Millie's influence again. I could not think of the feisty, brazen, outspoken female as an owwet. Above all else, I valued honesty. She was the most forthright, unfiltered person I'd ever encountered. I could always count on her for the truth.

My duties took me to the politically nuanced chambers of the League of Planets, the duplicitous palace of the Kingdom of Copa, and the precarious mediation court within the palace of Araset. Circling the nucleus of the king, queen, and five royal sons were scores of aunts, uncles, and cousins and hundreds of nobles vying for favor and influence. My duties included arbitrating their sensitive, often explosive, requests and disagreements.

In the royal milieu, appearance trumped virtue, perception counted more than action, etiquette outranked honesty, and title prevailed over all.

My duty to execute the wishes of His Majesty did not grant the latitude to alter decrees, and, in fact, part of my role involved serving as a scapegoat, deflecting unpopular opinion away from the king and queen and onto myself.

Sycophants curried my favor while holding me in great disdain. Others pretended agreement but then went behind my back and attempted to undermine my authority. Only Millie openly challenged me. To be honestly disliked was almost as good as being favored—or so I surmised because I'd never had the experience of being liked. Not in my current station nor in my earlier years.

To encounter someone who spoke her mind without dissembling and who demanded rather than coerced came as a refreshing relief. I would miss that when she left.

I will miss her.

“What attracts you to Kat?” I asked Lomax.

He blinked and then shrugged. “At first, she aroused my curiosity. But I like that she wants nothing from me. It is like my company is enough.” His brow furrowed. “Does that sound strange?”

“Not to me.” It mirrored how I felt about Millie, except she had rejected *my* company. “Perhaps you shouldn't keep her waiting, then. Go have your lunch. Enjoy the time you have left with the human.” A little dalliance wouldn't hurt.

He grinned then, his face lit up. I'd seen Aeon with the same besotted expression. Fortunately, Lomax would disembark tomorrow morning. And when the ship retrieved him, Kat would be gone, out of reach on New Terra.

With a skip in his step, Lomax bounded down the passage.

With envy, I watched him go.

Chapter Three

Millie

I'd expected the ship to land on Aurelia, but Prince Lomax was ferried via shuttle. While we orbited the planet, a boxy spacepod detached from the ship and zipped toward the surface. Jessie, Kat, and I watched from the observation lounge.

"He's gone. I'll never see him again." Kat wiped her teary eyes.

We'd seen little of her since yesterday morning. She and Lomax had spent every waking hour together.

"I'm sorry," I said.

Jessie and I hugged her.

Kat balled her hands into fists. "Why couldn't I have met him when we first arrived at the palace? We would have had a month together."

"Parting would have been harder rather than easier." I tried to alleviate her sadness with logic. "You would have been more attached to him." Judging from her reaction now, Kat formed attachments rather quickly.

"Then maybe he wouldn't have left at all," Kat said. Every little girl's dream—marry an alien prince.

"He has responsibilities. He must attend the summit," Jessie said.

The look she shot me suggested we were thinking the same thing. One intergalactic incident was enough. Holly and Aeon's bond-mating had hit Araset like an asteroid strike, carving out a crater of uncertainty. Everyone was talking and speculating on who would succeed the current monarchs.

Our friend Giselle Cartier also hooked up with an alien. Unlike Aeon and Holly, Joule and Giselle's union hadn't caused so much as a ripple because Joule was a slave trafficker without a reputation, livelihood, or kingdom to ruin. Nobody cared if a criminal married a human.

In reality, Joule worked undercover with the LOP, as did Giselle who was his new partner. It was hush-hush; Giselle had sworn us to secrecy to protect their cover.

"Maybe Lomax will seek me out after the summit?" Kat said.

Foolish hope led to greater hurt. "He can't do that, Kat," I said. "It's not permitted."

Jessie shook her head. "The League of Planets still has an embargo against New Terra. No one can visit or contact anyone on the planet."

Kat sniffed. "If you don't mind, I'm going to my cabin. I need a little time to feel sorry for myself. This hit me harder than I expected."

"If you need anything, let us know," I offered.

"Thanks."

"That embargo is bullshit," Jessie railed as soon as Kat left. "What right does the LOP have to decide nobody can contact us? New Terra is not a member of the league and

therefore is not subject to its rules. When we get home, I'm running this up the flagpole. New Terra needs to know what's been happening. I don't trust the LOP."

The galactic oversight and policing organization supposedly protected the galaxy and its various lifeforms, but, in the short time I'd been off New Terra, I'd witnessed some rather Machiavellian behavior. And if savvy, smart Jessie distrusted the LOP, then that meant concern was justified.

Jessie worked for the New Terra Department of State. She'd been a bit cagey, but I'd gotten the impression she ranked at the top of the organizational chart. Her past reluctance to discuss her job had aroused my curiosity. I eyed her and took a stab in the dark. "Do you know the president of New Terra?"

She shrugged. "Doesn't everybody know of the president?"

"That's not what I asked. Have *you personally* met the president?"

She hesitated. "Met her? Yes. Can I sashay into her office and plunk my ass down? No. Can I place a call and get connected to her?" The corner of her mouth quirked, and she bobbed her head. "As long as the Secretary of State okays it."

"So you work directly with the Secretary of State?"

"He's my boss."

"So you are..."

"The deputy Secretary of State."

“Get out!” I gaped. “You never said a word.” My tech support job with Art Smart, the artificial intelligence company, was pathetic by comparison.

And what do you do?

I help people turn their lights on and off in their smart homes. Yep, that’s my job. Unlocking doors. Turning lights on and off. What about you?

Oh, I’m the deputy Secretary of State.

She glanced around as if checking to see who might overhear. “I haven’t said much about my job because I’ve been trying to gather intel on the galactic situation. If the LOP and the Arasetans realized how connected I am on New Terra, they would be far less open around us.”

“No wonder you’re eager to return.”

She nodded. “Our people need to know how slavers lured us away with the *Star Cross* space cruise, the operation of the alien species trafficking cartels, the existence and the role of the LOP—and how the league has kept us in the dark about all of it. Aliens have been stealing people off our planet for quite a while. The LOP claims they’ll protect us, but you’ve seen how well that’s gone so far.”

Yeah. The organization had done such a poor job combatting trafficking, it was almost like they were colluding with the traffickers—or at least had people inside the organization who were.

“You’re right. We shouldn’t and can’t rely on them to protect us.” We’d been expected to accept a lot on faith, to disregard the evidence of our own experience. What guarantee

did we have that they were transporting us to New Terra now? We'd been told we were going straight home—and then the ship had detoured to Aurelia. If they lied about that, what else might they lie about?

Where was the proof that any of the *Star Cross* passengers and crew had been repatriated?

“You won't say anything to anybody about me being deputy Secretary of State?” Jessie said.

“Of course not.” I zipped my lips.

“Not even Kat.”

“No. I won't. She means well, but...”

“She's a little naïve and too trusting,” Jessie finished my sentence.

“We'd be smart to keep our eyes and ears open while we're on this ship,” I suggested. “This is our last chance to learn all we can about the LOP.”

“We're on the same page.” She nodded. “They granted us limited access to the galactic net. In the time we have left, I'm going to do some research and find out what's been said about New Terra, other planet nations, and the trafficking trade. The information will have been curated and redacted for public consumption, but it will still be info we didn't have, and maybe something slipped by the censors.”

“Good idea. I wish we had translators so we could understand people's conversations.” I wasn't above eavesdropping. “Maybe I should have been a little nicer to Nadir. He could have translated for us.”

“Is he still following you around?”

“Stalking me, you mean? I haven’t seen him since yesterday.” I’d remained on my toes, keeping watch in the corridors, lounges, and the mess hall but hadn’t spotted him. At the palace, he used to pop up everywhere. Was it mere coincidence I hadn’t run into him, or was he avoiding me? I *had* ordered him to go away, but he’d never listened to me before. I’d bet under that thick, shiny fur, Nadir’s hide was made of rubber. Insults bounced right off him. I hadn’t expected him to capitulate so easily.

“Why do you dislike him so much?”

“Besides his blatant contempt for humanity?” I said.

“You’d prefer pretense?”

“Of course, not.”

“I admit he has a bit of an attitude—”

“A bit?”

“But, you can’t fault his behavior.”

“I can’t?”

“Behavior speaks louder than words. Anything and everything we requested at the palace, he got for us. He was very helpful when we planned Holly’s bachelorette party. From what she says, he also assisted with the bond-mate ceremony,” Jessie reminded me.

“He wears a *cape*,” I pointed out. Always formally attired with that ridiculous cape swinging from his shoulders, Nadir never appeared in anything but dress leggings, a starched tunic jacket, and boots so shiny he could use them to peek under a

girl's skirt. Not that I was accusing him of that. He was an overdressed, pompous jerk, not a perv. He buffed his horns and tusks to a high sheen and curried his fur until it gleamed. There was never a single tuft of fur out of place on his horned head. His grooming was impeccable. Too impeccable. It wasn't normal.

She hooted. "That's your objection—his cape?"

"It's pretentious." I sniffed.

"Did you ever consider maybe he's required to dress that way? It might be his uniform?"

"Well...well...when we got rescued from the slave ship, he tried to send Holly back to New Terra knowing Aeon loved her."

"Holly *asked* to be sent back. She didn't think she had a future with Aeon. You can't fault him for doing what she asked him to do."

"Why are you championing him?"

"Methinks you doth protest too much. Perhaps you don't dislike him as much as you claim." Jessie eyed me.

"You're wrong. Totally wrong." How could she think such a thing?

"You know what else?"

"I'm afraid to hear it."

Jessie leaned in. "I think...Nadir likes you, too."

"Ew! Ew!" I clapped my hands over my ears. "What a mean thing to say."

Jessie laughed.

“I’m out of here. I can’t listen to this anymore.” I started to flounce out of the lounge then paused and peered over my shoulder. “Meet for dinner at the mess hall tonight?”

She nodded. “If you get there first, grab an out-of-the-way table. I’ll fill you in with the preliminaries of what I learn from my research. I’ll touch base with Kat.”

“Good plan,” I said.

I still fumed a little as I stomped along the corridor, keeping an eyeball peeled for my nemesis who I most assuredly did *not* like and who held me in equal, if not greater, disdain. I mean, the man went out of his way to be annoying. Except for today. I hadn’t seen hide nor fur of him all morning. Nor yesterday after our discussion in the lounge.

Leave me alone. Could those have been the magic words to get him to vamoose? I’d uttered some version of them multiple times in the past.

Probably he had royal business to attend to. He did have an important position. I’d concede that much. I peeked into the mess hall. A couple of crewmembers were on break, but there was no sign of Nadir. *Where can he have gone?* The notion I felt anything but animus was preposterous. Normally perceptive, Jessie was way off base on this one.

It floored me she was the deputy Secretary of State. The things you never knew about people. She was smart about not telling Kat. Kat was bubbly, nice, sweet—the exact opposite of me. At twenty-five, she was only four years younger than me, but she was at least a decade more gullible. She’d believe

anything, tell anybody anything. She needed a keeper. It was a good thing Jessie and I were with her, but watching over Kat made me miss Holly all the more.

A pang of heartsickness shot through me that I was leaving my very best friend in the whole galaxy—and I would never see her again. I bit my lip and pressed my tongue to the roof of my mouth to halt the tears. I didn't cry when I hugged her goodbye; I wouldn't cry now because if I started, I wouldn't be able to stop.

Don't cry. Don't cry. I needed a distraction, something to keep myself busy so I wouldn't brood. I could assist Jessie with research, but scrolling on a computer didn't appeal. But...I could record some vid of the ship and its many alien species to support Jessie's report to the authorities.

There were a lot of different alien species aboard—the two-headed LOP officer, er, officers, approaching from the end of the corridor being just one example. What were they called, *hematites*, *hermaphrodites*—no, *Hermots*. Dressed in a maroon uniform trimmed in gold braid, the officer had one body but two heads: one feminine, one masculine.

“Excuse me. Am I allowed to explore the ship?” I asked.

Their eyebrows arched, and they glanced at each other. The female said something to me in an incomprehensible language, which led me to assume they didn't understand my question. Not everyone's translator was programmed for Terran Universal.

“Never mind; not important.” I smiled innocently, realizing it was easier to ask forgiveness than permission.

What if they had said no? This way if I got caught doing something against the rules, I could plead ignorance.

I hurried to my cabin to retrieve my borrowed handheld. We'd been given the multipurpose devices to use during our stay in the palace. I should have returned mine before leaving Nomoru, but nobody had asked me to, and I'd forgotten about it.

Our loaners were rudimentary compared to what the aliens carried, but, even stripped down, our handhelds were a marvel of tech New Terra didn't have.

I'd shoot some vid of the LOP ship and the aliens aboard for Jessie to give to the New Terra State Department in case anyone doubted our stories about what had happened to us.

Chapter Four

Nadir

I was relaxing, trying not to ruminate over Millie, when an LOP officer entered my cabin. “May I have a word with you?”

“By all means.” I gestured to a chair.

He remained standing. “I wish to inform you we have reversed course and are heading back to Aurelia.”

“Why?”

“We are not certain, but it appears Prince Lomax never arrived at the summit. Registration personnel have reported he did not check in.”

“What? Why not? What happened to him?” I leaped to my feet.

“Unknown at this time. His shuttle’s landing beacon activated, so we know the spacepod arrived safely, but he has vanished.” The beacon allowed a passenger to locate his craft again if he landed in unfamiliar territory. “We have pinged him several times, but he has not responded.”

“You left orbit before getting confirmation he’d gotten to the summit safely?”

“An unfortunate oversight.”

Unfortunate oversight? This was dereliction of duty. I held my temper in check, needing to acquire as much information as I could.

“We had no reason to assume he hadn’t arrived safely—until registration personnel contacted us. We tracked the beacon. The prince landed right outside Relia, the capital city and the site of the summit. All he had to do was walk into the city.”

“Why didn’t he land at a spaceport inside the city?”

“We don’t know.

They were *pyots*! Did they know *anything*? “Have you alerted the king of Araset?”

“We thought it premature to involve the king until we know something definitive. There could be any number of reasons why we lost contact.” He was right about that at least. Little could be gained from alarming the king or queen until we had the facts.

“The Aurelians have deployed a search party, and we intend to do the same. We will be in orbit shortly, and, once we are, we’ll send a recovery team to the surface.”

“I wish to be involved.”

“I’m sorry, but we can’t allow that. In the unlikely event His Highness has been captured by rebels or traffickers, we dare not risk anyone else.”

Rebels? Had the LOP chosen as its summit site a planet involved in an insurrection? “I am the royal advisor to the court of Araset. If it is a choice between Prince Lomax’s life or mine, I will give my life for his.”

“Our goal is that no one loses his or her life. You will remain on the ship.”

Not acceptable. “What did you mean by rebels? Has there been a problem on Aurelia?”

“We are doing everything in our power to resolve this. I’ll keep you informed.” The LOP officer spun around and left.

In my experience, no answer was an answer. What had the prince been sent into?

As the officer had pointed out, there could be any number of innocuous reasons why Lomax had disappeared. It could be simple irresponsibility. This wouldn’t be the first time a royal son behaved thoughtlessly.

But kidnapping and assassination remained terrifying possibilities. The king and queen would be beside themselves with worry. Not only was their son’s life imperiled, but his disappearance or death would jeopardize the monarchy. Losing the heir to the throne would be too much to bear. The populace would question the stability of the monarchy and their ability to rule.

Hopefully, Lomax had arrived safely but failed to register. A young man with raging hormones, he might have become distracted by a female. It hadn’t taken much for the human to turn his head.

I couldn’t rely on the LOP to investigate. Ensuring the prince’s well-being was my responsibility. The league would do its best to find him, but I didn’t trust it would be good enough. They should have had a better handle on security. If the planet was dangerous, they never should have allowed the prince to go there. They should have called off the summit.

I would deal with this matter myself. Grabbing my handheld, I hurried from my cabin.

* * * *

That's the entire search team? Two individuals? That's all they're sending? A couple of LOP officers boarded a spacepod in the launch bay. There were eleven other transport shuttles available. One docking station was empty—the one for the shuttle that had carried the prince.

The hatch closed on the LOP officers, and a klaxon sounded to clear the bay. I leaped into a shuttle, sealed the hatch then settled into the pilot's seat and fired up the spacepod. When the LOP "search party" launched through the wide-open exterior door, I scooted out behind them.

I'd programmed a communique to be delivered to the LOP two hours after my departure to avoid raising undo alarm when they discovered I'd vanished and to avoid getting stranded on Aurelia. Given that the LOP ship had left before getting confirmation of the prince's safe arrival, abandonment wasn't unlikely.

The search team zoomed toward the planet's surface, and I followed at a discreet distance. Unless their shuttle's AI performed a rear scan—and it had no cause to do that—they wouldn't notice me. No one from the big ship should be able to see us as we were heading in the opposite direction of their orbit.

Aurelia lay below me, its cities appearing as swaths of light filtering through the cloud cover. Some land masses were consumed by light, while uninhabited areas vanished into darkness.

The search “team” would home in on the landing beacon, leading them to Lomax’s last known location. My intention was to maintain visuals and follow them.

But what if I lost them in the clouds? And there was a good chance the prince had left the shuttle. Unless he’d been injured, it only made sense he’d leave the craft. And stars forbid, what if he’d been abducted?

I set my handheld to scan for a signal from the prince’s device. It immediately picked up a strong, but unfamiliar, signal. Not his. The device kept scanning and finally detected his signal, but it was very weak. *There must be interference from cloud cover or something else on the planet’s surface.*

Before I lost the signal, I inputted the coordinates into the spacepod and let the AI take over the piloting. I felt better not having to rely on visuals. Now two dots blinked on my device, Lomax’s weak one, and the unfamiliar one, the latter flashing so strongly, the device sending the signal could be resting in my lap.

As if it originated from this pod.

Like someone had left a handheld aboard—or did I have company?

I sprang out of my seat and eyed the tiny eliminating/cleansing capsule at the rear of the shuttle. It was the only place to hide. “I know you’re here. You may as well show yourself. Come out now!” I demanded.

Unbroken silence followed my command, and I let out a self-conscious chuckle. There was probably a forgotten handheld in a compartment.

Then the cleansing capsule slid open.

Chapter Five

Millie

“You! What are you doing here?” Nadir glowered.

I ignored him, my gaze shooting to the window. “Falling stars, we left the ship!” I’d heard a booming computerized voice, felt a rocking motion and then a vibration, but I’d had no idea the spacepod had launched. Where were we headed?

“Answer me. What are you doing on this ship?” he demanded.

“Me? Why are *you* here? Why did we leave the ship? I didn’t realize this was a shuttle until I got inside. How was I supposed to know it would launch?”

“You didn’t know you were boarding a shuttle.”

“I’m so glad you understand.” I thought better than to reveal I’d been roaming all over the ship, surreptitiously shooting vid. At first, I hadn’t realized I’d entered a shuttle bay; I assumed the wide long passage lined by a dozen “portals” led to cabins or something. When I peeked inside one, I saw it was a life pod. Then I heard people coming, so I jumped inside to hide. How could I guess Nadir would come along and launch the damn thing?

He cursed. “You cannot be here.”

“Fine, because I don’t want to be here. Take me back to the ship.”

“I can’t do that either.”

I gawked out the window. A planet loomed below us—we appeared to be shooting toward it at a great rate of speed. I squinted. Was that another shuttle? “Where are we going? Are we *landing* on that planet? Why?”

“*We* should not be going anywhere. *You* should be on the LOP ship.” His yellow eyes turned green with fury.

He had some nerve getting mad at me. My presence was unintentional. He still hadn’t told me why *he* was here. “Why aren’t *you* on the LOP ship? You were supposed to escort us to New Terra.” I crossed my arms. Any other time, he’d stuck to me like gum under my shoe. Why had he left without a word? How long had he planned to be gone?

He didn’t answer but removed his cape, folded it into precise quarters, almost reverently draped it over a seatback—and then flung himself into the adjacent seat.

“There’s been an incident,” he said in a serious tone.

“What kind of incident?” I didn’t wait for an invitation but flopped next to him. “Not alien trafficking?”

The league insisted species trafficking rarely occurred, putting the odds of being abducted at a mere fraction of a percent, but having been among the rare few who’d gotten kidnapped had left me tad more wary than the average person. I’d put on a brave face, tried to act like a badass, but the experience had freaked me out. I didn’t want to repeat it.

“Not trafficking,” Nadir stated then ruined my relief by adding, “At least I don’t think so.” He rubbed the base of his horn like his head ached.

“But, it *could* be?” I doubly regretted getting on the shuttle now.

“No,” he stated then amended, “Not likely.”

“Will you stop it?” I snapped.

His frown turned to an arch. “Stop what?”

“Waffling. First you issue a declarative statement, then you retreat. If the answer is no, then say no and leave it at that.”

“If you’d desired certainty, you should have stayed on the ship.”

“I thought I *was* on the ship.” *Why do I bother to talk to you?* This sparring match didn’t come close to other arguments we’d had. Why did his dismissive attitude bother me so much now? I bit my lip and clasped my hands.

“If you must know,” he said in his condescending tone, “Prince Lomax has temporarily gone missing.”

My head shot up. “How did that happen?”

His lip curled around a tusk. “If we knew how, he wouldn’t be missing.”

Nadir didn’t like me in the least—unless being rude and obnoxious was his way of showing he cared. If so, he’d fallen horns over heels. “Jessie is so off base,” I muttered.

“What did you say?”

“Nothing.” Thinking of Jessie made me realize I had vanished without a word. When I failed to show up at dinner, she and Kat would worry. Had they kept their loaner

handhelds or turned them in? Maybe I could still message them. I unclipped my handheld.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to let Jessie and Kat know what happened, so they don’t worry.”

“Don’t do that.” He grabbed my handheld. Then he spun my chair around and leaned in. “I am under no obligation to share details with you, but, in the interest of keeping the peace, this is what I know: Prince Lomax failed to register at the summit he was supposed to attend. I am going to Aurelia to find him and ensure that he is okay.”

“So the other shuttle...”

“Is the LOP search team.”

“Shouldn’t there be more than one shuttle, then?”

He didn’t answer my question but locked my handheld in a compartment.

Guess I won’t be getting that back. There went the documentation vids I’d taken for the New Terran authorities. I scowled. “Why aren’t you on their shuttle?” Epiphany dawned. “Oh...you’re not part of the search team. You’re not supposed to be going to Aurelia. You stole a spacepod. You sneaky dog!”

He stiffened. “My oath to the monarchy supersedes LOP procedure. Prince Lomax is my responsibility. If he is in jeopardy, I must go. His safety takes precedence over all else.”

And here I’d dismissed him as a by-the-book bureaucratic aide who blindly followed the letter of the law without

consideration for the desired outcome. In demonstrating he could be flexible, he'd notched up a level in my humble estimation, although I deducted a half point because he assumed he obeyed a *higher* law. But he still edged out ahead. "Hey, I'm not criticizing. I'm proud of you."

"You speak of foolish matters." The tips of his ears, visible through his fur, reddened. He averted his gaze.

Oh my gosh. He's embarrassed. The devil on my shoulder urged me to tease him, but this time the angel won out, so I pretended not to notice his discomfort. "You don't think Prince Lomax has been kidnapped, do you?" I asked, expecting to be shot down. He hadn't been a fountain of information so far.

"That is the worst case but a possibility," he admitted. "Kidnapping is an ever-present threat with royals, which is why it's imperative I personally investigate."

"If he wasn't abducted, what could have happened to him?"

"Hopefully, nothing. Maybe he did show up at the summit, but his attendance didn't get registered. His shuttle could have gone off course. Or he could have crashed."

It sounded like the options skewed more toward the negative than the positive. "I can see why you're concerned. So, what's the plan?"

He sighed, and I figured he was thinking how much he wished I didn't need to be factored into the plan. "His spacepod is emitting a beacon. First, I'll check that out because he might be with his ship. Rescue efforts will be coordinated with the LOP—" He squinted out the window

over the bow. Then he shifted his gaze between his handheld and the window.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

He frowned as he tapped into a control console. “The LOP shuttle has gone off course.”

Now that he mentioned it, it did appear the LOP shuttle veered left while we were headed to the right.

“Unless...it’s not,” he waffled.

I gritted my teeth. “Is it off course, or isn’t it? Where is the shuttle supposed to be going?”

“I *assume* the search team is following the landing beacon from the prince’s shuttle. I’m tracking his handheld, which leads us in a different direction.”

“Well, there’s your problem,” I said.

“What?”

“You *assumed*. Maybe they’re not following the beacon at all. Maybe they’re going someplace else. Maybe they received a communique the prince has been found. Or they’re rendezvousing with an on-ground search party. Or maybe, they *are* following the beacon, but he left his ship with his handheld. They don’t have the ability to track him, only his ship. So, they’re probably going to his last-known location,” I concluded.

He didn’t reply.

I poked his shoulder. “I’m right, aren’t I?” Poke. “Aren’t I?” Poke.

He grabbed my hand. “I had considered he might have landed and proceeded on foot to the summit.” Nadir droned on about something, but I focused on his oversized four-fingered paw. His hand swallowed up mine, the accidental brush of his furry wrists *sensuously* soft against my skin.

I yanked free, heart thudding and stomach fluttering. He represented everything I despised—he was a boorish, outspoken, bossy xenophobe—the opposite of what I admired and respected. And prissy. Did I mention prissy? What was with the cape anyway? This was the first time I’d ever seen him take it off. I studied him, surprised by the breadth of his shoulders. I’d assumed the epaulets had artificially broadened his shoulders, but he sported a serious set of deltoids and pecs. His torso narrowed in the masculine V shape. Nadir was *built*.

Ack! I scrubbed my eyelids with the heels of my palms. Handsomeness didn’t matter—he was still a jerk. If I wasn’t so hard up, I wouldn’t have given him a second glance. But it had been two years since I broke up with my last boyfriend. Would my parts even work anymore?

What would it be like to have sex with an alien? Do Arasetans have the same plumbing as humans? They must be compatible below the waist because Holly and Giselle are making it work with Aeon and Joule.

“What are you plotting?”

So piercing was his gaze, I got the crazy idea he could read my mind.

“Nothing.” Heat flooded my face.

His eyes narrowed. “You are turning red.”

“Yes. Thank you for *politely* pointing that out.”

“Are you all right?” He sounded concerned.

I fanned my face. “It’s a little hot in here.”

“The pod’s temperature is maintained at a steady 294 degrees.”

“That’s impossible. We’d be dead. Charred to a blackened lump.”

“That’s the Kelvin scale.” His full lips adopted a mocking curl. “It equates to twenty-one Celsius or seventy Fahrenheit.”

“Oh.”

“Perhaps you’re going through menopause and are experiencing hot flashes?” he suggested.

“You asshole! I’m only twenty-nine years old!”

“That is too young?”

“Yes, it’s too young! I’m in my prime reproductive years!” Which were zooming by at warp speed. I’d always figured I’d be married by now—or at least in a serious relationship headed in that direction. *Thank you for making me feel old.* “Don’t talk to me.” I crossed my arms and stared out the window.

How does he know about menopause?

I don’t care. It doesn’t matter.

The LOP shuttle disappeared amongst the clouds, and the planet loomed below us as a massive swirl of blue, green, and gray-white, like someone had splashed three colors of paint onto a surface and given it a cursory mix. It looked...*stormy.*

I started to inquire about the weather situation then clamped my lips shut. *Nope. Nope.* I refused to initiate any further conversation with him.

About a minute later, he said, “We’re approaching Aurelia’s outer atmosphere.”

Thank you, Captain Nadir. Clearly, he did not understand what *don’t talk to me* meant.

Suddenly, the shuttle lurched.

“What happened?” My gaze snapped to his face.

“Not sure.” His ridged brow scrunched with concern, and his fingers flew over the console. He squinted at the readout.

The thick fog of gray-white clouds enveloped us, obscuring visibility. There was another tug on the ship, and then the shuttle shook like it was having a spasm. I could feel the vibration against my feet, against my ass through the seat. “That’s normal, right?”

“No,” he said. “Definitely not.”

Why couldn’t he waffle when I needed him to? He pressed a button on my armrest, and straps sprang out to crisscross my chest. Nadir activated his own safety restraints.

I gripped the armrests and stared out at...nothing. All I saw was gray, gray, and more gray. What if we collided with something? Like another ship? Or a humongous alien bird-bat? Logically, I knew the ship’s AI wouldn’t allow that to happen, but logic wasn’t in control of my brain right now.

“Just a storm,” I murmured.

“It’s not a storm,” he said. “According to the weather analysis, it’s a calm day.”

If this was calm, I’d hate to experience extreme turbulence.

The ship’s shaking intensified. Objects in the compartments clattered; items not secured in the cockpit went flying. Nadir’s handheld sailed off the console to crash against an aft wall. If I hadn’t been belted in, I would have been knocked from my seat. I stifled a scream and clung to the armrests. *Is this what happened to Prince Lomax?*

The odor of ozone, of burning metal filled the cockpit. Lights and screens went dark.

“All the electronics are shot. We have no way to pilot the craft.” He reached out and took my hand. “Hang on!”

Stern over bow, the ship tumbled, free-falling toward the ground.

Chapter Six

Millie

What the hell? I let out a groan. Everything hurt. My back, my arms, my legs, my head—especially my throbbing head. My eyeballs felt sore as I peeled open my lids. Grayish light revealed a topsy-turvy chaos of crunched metal. *Why am I hanging upside down?* Pins and needles pricked at my dangling arms. I winced as I raised—lowered them—to grip the armrests of my seat. I was belted in.

Memories filtered into consciousness. We'd crashed. I did not remember the impact, but I remembered screaming as we fell through the sky, and, in the final seconds, the ground rising up at lightning speed. Miraculously, I'd survived—

“Nadir?” I croaked. “Are you all right?” I twisted my head. His seat was gone. “Nadir!” Could he have been ejected from the shuttle? “Don't be dead. Don't be dead.” Above me, a yawning gap in the hull revealed open sky. *Don't be dead.* “Nadir!” *Where are you?*

I tugged at the restraints, getting nowhere. Recalling he had pushed a button to activate the safety belt, I jabbed every button on the armrest, but the harness held fast. *I'm going to die here.* Tears of fear and frustration trickled from my eyes to my hairline, the saltiness stinging a cut over my eyebrow. *I'm trapped.*

Wouldn't it be a cosmic irony for the restraints to have saved me from a shuttle crash only to result in death by starvation?

Hell to the no. I did not survive abduction by aliens to die like this.

I pulled at the straps, creating a small separation between the belts and my body, and, little by little, managed to wiggle free. I dropped to an exhausted, aching heap on the floor, formerly the roof.

At the rear of the craft, eyes closed like he was sleeping—except for the blood congealed around his face and head—Nadir lay strapped into his seat, which had snapped free of its base. An illuminator, food pouches, water bags, and other items flung from compartments were scattered around him. A knapsack had landed on his chest.

“Nadir?” *Don't be dead. Don't be dead.* I dragged the heavy pack off him and knelt in a puddle from a burst water bag. I pressed my ear to his nose and mouth but felt no puff of air indicative of breathing. *No! No!*

Every insult and rude comment I'd ever hurled at him came back to haunt me. I'd taken great delight in mocking him. What had he ever done that was so terrible?

I palmed his chest. No detectable heartbeat. *You can't be dead.* Maybe I just couldn't feel anything through his thick fur, heavy blood-stiffened tunic, and the seat restraints. I wiggled my hand under his tunic to press against his furry chest. I went weak with relief when I detected a steady beat.

Thank god; thank god. I curled my fingers into his soft, thick fur. I continued to stroke his furry chest as tears slid down my cheeks...and then realized the examination had morphed into caressing. I yanked my hand out from under his shirt. *Sorry. Sorry. I didn't mean to go all pervy on you.*

For further verification of life, I pressed my fingers to the pulse point on his throat. Also steady. Good. Good.

“Wake up. Please, wake up.” I shook his shoulder gently, afraid to jar him. He’d gotten conked on the head hard enough to render him unconscious. What if the injury was critical? What if he’d sustained serious brain damage? Head injuries bled a lot, but this much? His seatback and tunic were stained with his blood, his temple sticky with it.

I fingered the goose egg on my forehead. I’d been hit by flying debris, too. But, I’d awakened while he was still out cold. *Please, wake up.*

I needed to examine his injuries. I ransacked the closed cabinets for paper towels or a cleansing cloth but found nothing. Letting out a huff, I tilted my head and gazed at the dreary sky through the gap punched in the underbelly, now the roof. Dangerous glass shards littered the floor from the shattered view screen. The nose of the ship had folded up like a pug’s face against a stone barrier. Or were we against a building? If it was a building, then someone should have investigated. Why hadn’t rescuers come? How long had we been here? The gray sky gave no clues. Was it morning? Or afternoon?

I had to wake him up. I started to use my shirt to wipe his face but then spotted his cape on the floor. I shook it free of debris, and, after taking a long drink from a water bottle, liberally soaked a large corner of the garment. Kneeling at his side, I dabbed his temples and ridged forehead and then rinsed the corner of the cape. I kept dabbing and rinsing until I’d cleaned away most of the blood and could survey his injuries.

He had an enormous knot and an ugly gash, but the wound wasn't bleeding anymore.

He groaned.

“Nadir!” I doused the cape again and wiped his forehead. “Wake up! Wake up!”

He opened his eyes—his beautiful yellow-green eyes. He blinked; I could see his confusion. He squinted at me then shifted his gaze to take in the cockpit. Person, place, time were the questions to ask to determine alertness.

“What's your name?” I asked.

“You don't know who I am? I'm Nadir. You don't remember?”

“No, no. I do. I was trying to determine your degree of alertness. You got smashed in the noggin pretty good.”

He nodded. “We crashed. Are you all right?”

“I think so. How are *you*?”

“I don't seem to be able to move.”

Oh fuck, he's paralyzed.

Flailing his arms and legs, he strained against the seat belts.

Not paralyzed, buckled in. “It's the restraints.” *Cough.* Hysterical laughter bubbled up in my throat. *Cough. Choke.* I bit my lip.

With his claws, he sliced through the bands like they were made of gossamer and sat up. “How did you get free of your restraints?”

“I had to wiggle. It wasn’t easy.”

He bounded to his feet with more energy than I’d expected and then picked up his bloodstained cape. “What did you do?” he shouted at me.

Well, that didn’t take long. “I used it to wash away the blood so I could check your injuries— *You’re welcome!*”

With a horrified expression, he inspected his cape. “You desecrated it.”

Was he for real? He could have died, and he worried about an article of clothing? An ostentatious, prissy article of clothing? “It’s a *cape*. It’s not like it’s the *royal flag*.”

“It is the official garment of the Advisor Most Loyal to His Majesty the King of Araset. This cape has been handed down for twenty generations of advisors and entrusted to me when I was anointed.”

Well, crap. It was like the royal flag. “I’m sorry.”

He cursed in Ara-Cope and stomped over broken glass to the console.

Getting knocked in the head hadn’t improved his personality. How was I supposed to know the cape held such significance? Sure, he wore it all the time, but I assumed it was because he was a flamboyant, pretentious boor.

“Can’t you run your cape through the ionizing cleaning unit?” The garment couldn’t have been passed down twenty generations without being laundered, could it? There was a cleansing capsule at the rear—I knew from having stowed away in it. Boy, did I regret that now.

“Would if I could. Electronics are shot.” He glowered at the control panel even more fiercely than he’d scowled at me. He patted his sides and then swept his gaze around the shuttle.

“What are you looking for?”

“My handheld.”

“Right here.” I spotted the device on the floor and handed it to him. Despite having been tossed around the shuttle, it looked intact. The screen wasn’t even cracked.

Nadir’s expression darkened as he swiped his finger over the visual display. “Dead,” he pronounced grimly. He retrieved my device from the cabinet, and after giving it a once over, flung it aside.

“The crash was no accident,” he said. “We were *temped*.”

“*Tempted* by what?”

“*Temped*—we got hit with a Targeted Electromagnetic Pulse. Someone took down this shuttle deliberately.”

“Somebody tried to kill us?” Well, kill Nadir. I would have been collateral damage. Nobody knew I was on the shuttle.

“Whether they intended to kill us or crash the ship and abduct us, I don’t know. We have to get out of here before whoever shot us down comes to investigate.”

Would this nightmare never end? First my vacation of a lifetime ended with me getting abducted by aliens. Then I got rescued, but *on my way home*, the shuttle I *inadvertently* boarded through no fault of my own got shot out of the sky, stranding me with Nadir of all aliens.

No wonder I never won the lottery. I had the worst damn luck.

“Wouldn’t they be here by now?” I had no idea how long ago we’d crashed, but I sensed it had been a while. Hours, maybe?

Cocking his head, he studied the sky. “Judging by the light, it’s morning,” he said.

I didn’t see that, but he read clouds better than I did.

“We’d entered the atmosphere yesterday afternoon, so we’ve been here overnight. However, they would have shot us with a long-range TEMP to avoid frying their own electronics. Given how long we’ve been here, my guess is they’ll be here soon. I would prefer not to meet them.”

Chapter Seven

Nadir

The fur on my nape tingled with urgency as if every second counted; if we didn't leave immediately, we risked capture.

“Who do you think did this?” Millie echoed the question I'd been pondering.

“Hard to say. Terrorists. Rebels. LOP Protesters. Alien traffickers. Ordinary kidnapers.” I picked up a knapsack labeled *emergency supplies* that had fallen from a cabinet.

Inside, I found a med kit, nutribars, a solar blanket, a few bags of water, and a fried electronic beacon emitter. I tossed the EBE. No sense lugging useless equipment.

Many intact water bags littered the floor. I handed the pack to Millie. “Gather up as many water bags as you can.”

I searched the compartments for additional useful supplies, ending at one locked tight, a swipe screen and keypad embedded in its door. When the TEMP hit, rather than pop it open, the pulse had sealed it shut.

“Stand back.” I gestured. Lowering my head, I rammed the compartment with my horns. The impact vibrated from my head to my shoulders.

“Are you crazy? What are you doing?” She hugged the knapsack to her chest.

The control screen had shattered. Taking a deep breath, I charged. The metal caved. *Once more should do it.* Another hit

busted in the door, and I ripped it off.

Inside, as I'd hoped, I found a blaster and a stun stick.

Her mouth moved, but no sound came out. I grinned. I'd never seen her at a loss for words.

"We're armed now," I announced. The faint ache throbbing in my skull would worsen, but to gain a couple of weapons it was worth it.

"Will the weapons work?" She found her voice. "Everything else electronic got fried."

"They should. The cabinet is TEMP-proof."

She was still clutching the knapsack to her chest.

"Did you get the water?" I asked.

"Uh, no." She grabbed a bag off the floor and stuffed it in the pack.

After securing the weapons to my belt, I assisted in gathering water.

I eyed my ruined cape, debating whether to take it or leave it. The garment identified my connection to the king, which *might* secure our safety. However, it could attach a bigger target to our backs. I had to consider our crash and the disappearance of Prince Lomax could be related. That someone dared to accost royalty spoke to his willingness to take risks. Furthermore, wearing the cape in its despoiled state dishonored the king, myself, and all my forebearers.

With a heavy heart, I folded the cape, set it in a cabinet, and shut the door.

"I'm sorry about your cape," she said.

“Compared to our lives, it matters not,” I replied. True words, but it would take a while before emotions could catch up. “Come.” I beckoned. “I’ll help you out of the shuttle.”

We were fortunate the crash had ripped a hole in the craft. With the electronics inoperable, the hatch wouldn’t open. We would have been entombed in the downed shuttle.

I grasped her waist and hoisted her upward with a firm shove. Lighter than I had expected, she flew through the opening with an alarmed squeak

“Catch.” I tossed up the med sack. “Stand back. I’m coming through.” I crouched then pushed off and leaped upward. Catching the edge, I pulled myself through the gap.

Standing on the ship’s underbelly, I surveyed the environment and the situation. The craft had smashed nose first into a massive wall. A mechanical emergency chute had deployed to slow our descent. I didn’t doubt it had saved our lives.

I saw no one approaching south of us, but the wall blocked my view to the north. Double the shuttle height, the barricade stretched as far as my eyes could see. A protective battlement, perhaps? What was on the other side? A city? The proliferation of moss and vines clinging to the nicked-and-gouged gray stone testified to the wall’s ancient roots.

Short, scrubby brush and near-skeletal trees offered little place to hide if we were spotted. Thankfully, I was armed. That Aurelia had been chosen to host the summit should have spoken to its safety, but recent events called that into question.

We faced a conundrum: we would be forced to approach the locals for assistance. But, how could we trust they were friends and not foe?

South of us lay open fields, not so much as a hamlet in sight. If there was a township that direction, it could be twenty, fifty, or hundreds of *ypnots* away.

“Shouldn’t we be leaving?” she asked. “Why are we hanging around?”

“Yes, we need to leave.” The danger I sensed hadn’t dissipated. “I need to see what’s on the other side of the wall.”

I backed up and took running leap onto the top. The wall spanned at least fifty *exdats* in width. Grooves worn into the top surface suggested the wall had been used as a road, most likely for wheeled vehicles to patrol the city perimeter.

I peered out at a dead city no longer in need of protection. The township had been reduced to rubble and ash. Anything wooden had been burned; stone structures had imploded. Residents had fled or died. Beyond the ruins, on the horizon, spires and towers scraped the sky. Another city? The capital, maybe?

“What do you see?” Millie called.

“The ruins of one city, but the existence of another.” I scanned the area, considering our options. “Passing through the ruins makes the most sense, I think.” I jumped down. “I’ll give you a boost onto the wall.” I crouched and cupped my hands.

She put her foot in the makeshift stirrup, and I gave her a shove. She grabbed ahold of a stone outcropping, not quite

making it to the top of the wall. Palming her buttocks, I gave her another push.

“Hey, hey, buddy!” She scrambled onto the wall.

I threw her the pack and climbed up.

“Did you do that purposely, so you could grab my ass?” she demanded.

“I did it to get you on the wall.” Stifling a grin, I strode to the far edge. “Grabbing your *ishta* was a bonus.”

She snorted in disgust before joining me to peer at the ruins. “What do you think happened?” she asked.

I shook my head. “I don’t know, but it wasn’t that long ago. See the char?” I pointed at blackened remains. Had the town been destroyed years ago, the rains would have washed away the soot and ash. “You can still smell it.” An odor of smoke tinged the air.

She wrinkled her nose. “Yeah. I’d noticed the smell but didn’t place it. What happens now?”

“We head that way.” I pointed at the distant spires. “My last reading of the prince’s location—or at least his handheld—put him in this vicinity or within a radius of fifty ypnots. If he was on foot, I surmise he would have headed for the nearest city.”

The city beyond might be Relia, the summit site, but with no way to know where we’d landed, I could only guess. In any case, from the city I could alert the LOP, get a transport to the ship for Millie, and then search in earnest for the prince.

“That sounds like a solid plan. Do you think what happened to us happened to the prince? He got zapped by a TEMP?”

“No, because his handheld still worked, and his shuttle landing beacon activated. But, I’m not inclined to dismiss his disappearance and our shuttle being shot down as a coincidence.”

She frowned and raised a finger. “So...our ship isn’t sending an SOS? Nobody knows we crashed?”

“No, hence the exigent need to get help. Cutting through the ruins will save time.”

She eyed the rubble below. “Wouldn’t it be easier to walk atop the wall? It’s probably a greater distance to go around the ruins than through them, but speed will compensate for the distance.”

“And it will make us easier targets. Standing atop the wall, anyone on the ground or in the air could pick us off,” I explained while bracing for an argument. She disagreed with every decision I made.

“*Okaaay*...nix the wall.”

I jumped off into the ruins below. “Throw me the pack.”

She tossed it to me.

“Now, you. Jump,” I said.

“Are you kidding me? I can’t jump the way you do. I’ll break a leg or something.”

“No you won’t. I’ll catch you.”

She shook her head. “No. I’m way too heavy. We’ll both get hurt.”

“You hardly weigh more than the pack,” I fibbed. She weighed considerably more, but still, her weight was inconsequential. Boosting her out of the ship and up the wall had taken little effort.

“I’ll find a section with footholds where I can climb down.”

“Whoever disabled the ship will investigate, either to take us prisoner or ensure we’re dead. The only good thing about the electronics being out is that our attackers can’t hone in on us. But, with a scope, they can see you standing on the wall from many ypnots away. You’re revealing our location and making yourself a target.”

“Well, when you put it like that.” She leaped.

I wasn’t expecting her right then, and I had to race to catch her.

She fell into my arms, her elbow punching me in the temple, but I absorbed her weight with ease. I saw confusion and surprise in her brown-eyed gaze. Her pink lips parted, but instead of the sarcastic comments I’d come to expect, she said nothing. *She is not unattractive for a human.* Not unattractive for any being, although lacking a broad ridged forehead, horns, tusks, and body fur, she looked nothing like Arasetans or Copans. It felt surprisingly satisfying to hold her soft form. I was so used to her brashness, the lushness of her body surprised me.

“You can put me down now,” she said.

As I released her, her form slid the length of my body, igniting a trail of unwanted heat. This female of a destroyer species, with whom I'd argued, who'd used words like a bludgeon, had awakened my libido and continued to fuel the flames of lust. Since assuming my position as the king's advisor, I'd faithfully put duty before desire. It had been a long time since I'd felt a stirring toward a female, even longer since I'd acted on it.

I will not act on it this time, either. I could not imagine a more unsuitable sexual partner. Not that I would get the chance. Her body might be lush, but there was no tenderness in her feelings toward me.

The instant her feet touched ground, she sprang away and straightened her clothing. Had she gleaned how her touch had aroused me? Had she noticed my growing tumescence?

Avoiding her gaze, I donned the pack. Then, clearing my throat, I said, "We must go."

A faint sun dipped in a gray sky. Soon it would be hidden by the wall. Days were short on Aurelia. We'd awakened in the morning; it was already late afternoon. On the positive, it meant we hadn't been unconscious for as long as I'd thought. On the negative, it meant we wouldn't get out of the destroyed city by nightfall.

Enormous piles of rubble prevented movement in a straight line. Keeping the distant wall in sight, I set out with an unusually quiet Millie.

Not a single building had been left standing. Once-stout structures had been reduced to mountains of stone, cinders, and ash. Wood had burned, stone had crumbled, and polymers

had melted into unrecognizable lumps. The air reeked of char and ash. Whatever had hit this village had blazed through fast, hot, and furious. Had anyone managed to escape and survive? Or had the entire population perished?

Millie kicked at a blackened stone. “What do you think happened?” she asked in a hushed tone.

What had happened was obvious: a city had been decimated. *Who* had done it and *why* remained a disturbing mystery. “I don’t know, and that is worrisome.”

“You think there’s a war going on?”

That would mean the possible future king of Araset had landed in the middle of it.

“If *war* had been declared, the LOP would have canceled the summit for sure. But, obviously a significant conflict had occurred, and it was irresponsible for the Aurelian government and the LOP to proceed with the summit.”

She swept her arm out to encompass the village. “You don’t think Prince Lomax’s disappearance is somehow *related* to this destruction, do you?”

The thought hadn’t entered my mind, but I couldn’t rule it out. The prince’s signal had put him close to the destroyed city. Coincidence? Possibly. But then we’d been shot down. How many coincidences equaled a probability?

“Without knowing who destroyed the city and why, it would be premature to arrive at that conclusion,” I said.

“But the people who bombed this city *could have* kidnapped him?” she persisted.

“Let’s not leap to conclusions.” I shuddered at the possibility. As soon as I got back to the LOP ship—maybe sooner, maybe when we reached a township—I’d research what had happened. Even a *mere* civil disturbance should have been made public. Had Aurelia hidden the information from the LOP—or had the LOP ignored an advisory? The king would never have sent his son here had he been aware. I had to get the facts.

Millie cocked her head. “You trust the LOP to tell the truth?”

“Trust is conditional. It is not absolute,” I hedged, uncomfortable to be speaking of such matters with a human. What did they know of trust anyway? They had chosen mutual destruction over compromise.

“That means no.”

“Not necessarily. Some people can be trusted with certain things but not others,” I said.

“Like you can count on the guy filching company office supplies to show up to work on time. Or that your cheating boyfriend would never murder you,” she said, her tone sharp.

Had that happened to her? Had she had an unfaithful mate? She did not deserve that. I had no great love of humans in general, but I had a soft spot for this one.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “A male who cheats on his mate is not worthy of her. A mate is a treasure to be honored, not disrespected.”

“Well, I kicked his ass to the curb. He’s cheating on somebody else now. Do you have a mate?”

“No.” I sped up. “We need to make as much progress as we can while there is light. Tomorrow morning, we’ll climb over the far wall and then, by afternoon, reach the city beyond.”

She had to trot-walk to keep up with me. “I suppose your job doesn’t leave much time for dating.”

Job? A servant had a *job*. A merchant had a *job*. To be the king’s chief advisor was a devotion, a life commitment. “I do not have a *job*, and I do not date,” I said. Dating was a human convention I didn’t fully understand, except I was certain I’d never done it.

“My bad. Wrong word. *Mate*.”

“I’ve already indicated I don’t have a bond-mate. Nor will I ever.”

“Well, you won’t if you continue to be so short-tempered and snarly.”

“I don’t know why you are so curious about my private life—”

“I’m making conversation—but do you even have a private life—”

“I will say this once and only once, and then we shall not discuss this again. My devotional service to the monarchy doesn’t permit me to take a bond-mate. In addition to vowing fealty, the king’s advisor also takes a vow of celibacy to ensure he can focus on duty and not be distracted by personal concerns.”

“You’re celibate? For life?” Her jaw dropped. “Seems to me you’d be better able to focus on duty if you weren’t horny

all the time.”

“I am not horny all the time, and you do not understand our customs.” Did I regret my choice? No. The rewards and honor of service surpassed the benefits of a commoner’s freedom. The sacrifice had been worth it; I went for long periods without recalling what a sacrifice it was. At first, abstinence *had* been difficult. I had been, as she had delicately framed it, horny all the time. But, after so many years, I rarely even thought of the pleasures of the flesh, hadn’t missed them until lately. Until Millie came along and reignited my libido.
Why her?

“No wonder you’re always in a bad mood.”

Was that how she saw me? I supposed others did, too. My position carried great honor and prestige, but it brought great challenges. It was not my *job* to be congenial. I was not a hospitality worker. I executed the king’s edicts, many of which were unpopular. People would dislike me regardless of how polite I acted.

“Have you *ever* had a mate?” Her eyes widened. “Oh my stars, are you a virgin?”

Chapter Eight

Millie

Had I overstepped the line? I could hear Nadir grinding his teeth. Just when I thought he intended to ignore the questions, he spoke. “No, I am not a virgin. As a commoner before my induction, I was...active. My position doesn’t require virginity, only celibacy.” The skin over his cheekbones darkened with discomfort.

Some people said I spoke before thinking and butted in where I didn’t belong. They were probably right. Nadir’s sex life, or lack of one, was none of my business. Sometimes, you were better off not knowing personal stuff about people. There was a reason some things were deemed private.

I’d been kidding when I’d suggested abstinence had caused his bad mood, but couldn’t there be some truth to it? He hadn’t given up just sex, but also close *emotionally* intimate relationships. His vow prevented him from having a bond-mate, someone to confide in, to hug and snuggle with, someone who would comb his fur at the end of the day. He needed support more than most because of the isolating nature of his position.

He’d been forced to become an island unto himself, alone and lonely, no longer a commoner, but not a royal either. He didn’t fit in with the people above him or those below him. Without peers, I suspected he didn’t have a single person he called friend.

While I hadn't met Mr. Right, I'd had relationships, and I had many friends.

The king and queen demanded way too much for the honor and prestige of serving them. Why should he be forced to live like a monk? Celibacy? In this day and age? His disapproving manner had vexed me to no end, but his service and loyalty to the king and queen were above reproach. I knew they respected him and relied on him—yet probably never considered the cost to him. Wouldn't they receive even better service if he had a way to de-stress and blow off steam?

The sun had started to set, casting long shadows, but, as I looked at him, I saw him in a whole new light. *A man who walks alone*. I saw the usual pride and arrogance, but also humility and loneliness. Determination and faithfulness. If he could take a bond-mate, he would be as loyal to her as he was to the monarchy.

"It's not right," I muttered. "They expect too damn much."

"Who does?" he asked.

"The king and queen."

"They do not expect more than I am able to give. I owe them more than I can repay. I am forever in their debt."

I halted. "Yeah, yeah you owe the monarchy fealty. I get it. And if called upon to defend the kingdom, you owe your life as does every citizen. But, you shouldn't have to give up everything else." Companionship. Sex. A normal life.

"You don't understand our culture or my specific circumstance." He dismissed my concerns in his usual

supercilious way, except, this time, it didn't push my buttons.

“Then, enlighten me.”

“The king elevated me to a position I never believed I could achieve. He and the queen were willing to overlook my disreputable history.”

“What was there to overlook?” Had he been a criminal? What could he have done?

His posture went rigid. “I'm a half-breed. I am not a pureblood Arasetan.”

Big deal. What difference did that make? Besides, he appeared Arasetan to me. Close enough. “What are you?”

“My father was an Arasetan aristocrat; my mother was Copan,” he said. “A Copan commoner.”

So his elite father had a fling and knocked up a Copan chick. The story was as old as the universe. “Is that it?”

By *half-breed* I'd expected something more exotic, like maybe one of his parents was an alien with electrified tentacles and a stinger shooting out of his ass. I hadn't observed more than a hair of difference between Copans and Arasetans. Copans had lighter-colored horns than Arasetans, blonder fur, but what the fuck? So what?

“Being a half-breed meant both sides shunned me. My opportunities were limited. My father, who is a member of the royal court, was horrified when his half-breed mistake was appointed advisor to the king, forcing him to acknowledge my presence. He looks like he swallowed something noxious every time he sees me.” A small smile touched his lips. He

glanced at me. “I didn’t aspire to the position because of that, but it is an added bonus.”

“I guess it would be.” I didn’t know his father, but I disliked him. My heart ached for the innocent Arasetan-Copan child Nadir had been. I understood him so much better now. *This must be how he’d learned his disdain of humans.* I paused. “Wait a minute. Wasn’t Aeon supposed to bond-mate with a Copan? How does that jive with the Arasetans and Copans not inter-mating?”

“It serves as another example of the king’s progressiveness and openness. He wished to stop the fighting between the two kingdoms and bring our peoples together. But the Copans’ involvement in alien species trafficking made that impossible.”

“Open and progressive? The king disinherited his own son when he bond-mated with a human.”

“He allowed the union to continue.”

More like he couldn’t stop it because the more-open-and-accepting queen put her foot down.

“So, what is the objection to us? What is it about us your people don’t like? Is it because we’re aliens?” I couldn’t buy the notion we’d been ostracized because of the Great Nuclear War. It had occurred centuries ago, and it didn’t affect anyone in the galaxy except us.

“Your species is unstable, unpredictable, and bellicose,” he stated as if quoting irrefutable fact.

This was the kind of crap that torqued my gourd. But I’d learned he was more than what he said, more than what he

believed. I'd seen the whole, complex man, his ignorance and his wisdom, his arrogance and his pain.

“You destroyed your planet and nearly your species. Who knows what you will do if allowed to run amok through the galaxy?” he concluded.

Of course he and others would think that because they lacked the facts. They didn't know what really started the Great Nuclear War because nobody had bothered to ask us. But, I knew—as did every single New Terran. The cause of the war had been drilled into our heads as schoolchildren.

I had to set Nadir straight. “Yeah, about the war—” I cocked my head at a high-pitched whistle.

“Get down!” He shoved me to the ground and piled on top of me as the huge column next to us exploded. My ears rang from the percussive blast. Debris showered us. *What's happening? Oh my god, we're under attack! We're going to die!*

My face pressed into the dirt; my heart thudded against my rib cage. Nadir's rapid heartbeat drummed against my back. Even in terror, I appreciated his chivalrous, albeit futile gesture. He'd have to be made of aramid fiber or something similar to protect me.

I waited for the next explosion, fearing every breath could be my last. *If we get blown up, will I feel anything? A split second of excruciating pain?*

For long minutes, we lay there, and then he lifted himself off me. “I think we're okay now. It was just the one blast.” He

assisted me to my feet. “Are you all right?” He scrutinized my face.

“Y-yes.” My voice shook. “Are you?”

He nodded. “I am fine.”

Around us lay the shattered remains of the column. Thick gray dust coated Nadir’s fur.

“Oh my god, that was close.” I wet my dry lips and then spit out grit. Even though he’d shielded me, I was covered with dust, too. I touched my icky hair. We were both filthy, but we were alive. For the moment.

“Why would anyone try to kill us?” I hunched my shoulders and glanced around.

“Could be we were more collateral damage than targets.”

“Dead is dead,” I responded.

“True.” His eyes were serious.

His assessment did provide a modicum of reassurance. If they—whoever *they* were—weren’t aiming at *us*, then maybe there wouldn’t be another attack. But I needed more than a guess. I required proof, facts, evidence.

“They shot down our ship. Now the pillar right next to us explodes. That’s two attacks. It certainly looks like we are targets.” I’d never forget that high-pitched whine seconds before the column got blown to smithereens.

“Well, they *could* be aiming at us.”

There he goes again. Waffling. I hate that.

“But, if they had been aiming at us, I doubt they would have missed. You don’t use a missile to kill two lone individuals.” He patted the weapon on his hip. “Someone would have confronted us and shot us.”

That made sense. But did the bombers have any sense? You had to be kind of deranged to do something like this. “This city is in ruins. Why hit it again?” I gestured at the blown-out buildings, the mounds of rubble.

“My guess? It was a rogue missile,” he surmised. “They were shooting at something else, and the missile went astray.” His brow furrowed.

“That’s good news, isn’t it? Why do you look so worried?”

“Because the blast suggests the conflict isn’t over.” He briefly grabbed his horns with both hands, something Arasetans and Copans did when they were frustrated.

To see this controlled, always-put-together man be less than perfect was endearing. There were rips in his tunic and leggings. Covered in dust, his fur was clumped and unkempt. And, like a hero fresh from the fight, he looked...ruggedly handsome.

“I’m afraid your initial assessment might be correct—we might have landed in a war zone,” he said.

Oh, now, he agrees with me? I had said that in the beginning, not entirely serious, hoping he’d disagree with me.

“Scheduling a summit on a war-torn planet is unconscionable,” he continued.

“The LOP hasn’t impressed me much, but it’s a big leap to assume Aurelia is engulfed in a war. We’re not seeing any signs of smoke, like towns are burning,” I argued as much for my benefit as his. I did not want to think we’d crashed into a war zone.

“That’s true,” he admitted.

“Could a beacon have drawn the fire?” I asked. “Maybe a transmitter got buried in the rubble?”

“But if the conflict has ended, why would it still be drawing fire?” He eyed the sky. “It will be dark soon. Let’s move away from here while we still have some light.”

Night descended early and fast on Aurelia; we’d only been walking a few hours. The sun had dipped below the wall. In dusk, the city looked even more ghostly, the crumbling towers casting long, ominous shadows.

Suddenly, I felt exhausted. *Adrenalin crash. And an actual crash. A conk on the head. Then a bombing.* Was it any wonder?

We tromped over the debris and scooted around fallen pillars, rubble piles, and charred remains. I suspected his night vision was better than mine as he remained surefooted while I stumbled over stones and debris in the waning light.

I could hear chitters and chirps of small animals becoming active in the night hours. I wondered if we’d be visited by Aurelian rats while we slept. New Terra had no such pests. Earth had had rats, mice, and other vermin. New Terra had lush plant life but no native animal life. The only animals we had were the ones the original settlers had brought with them.

For obvious reasons, they had left all the vermin on Earth. The Great Nuclear War had achieved what man had been unable to do for thousands of years—eradicated the vermin. Of course, it had killed everything else, too.

We'd walked for perhaps a quarter hour when he halted in front of a hollowed-out building. "We can camp here for the night. What do you think?"

The building front had been shorn off and the roof caved in on one end, but otherwise, it looked sturdy. Or maybe it was too dark to accurately assess the damage. It was, however, the most intact building we'd come across, and I was ready to drop. My knees and ankles were fomenting a rebellion. But, I couldn't forget the incredible exploding pillar. "What if we're inside and someone blows it up?"

"We'll be killed," he said matter-of-factly. "The same as we would be if we were outside and got hit."

The man never waffled when I needed him to.

"The building will provide some shelter from the elements," he added. "Inside, we can use the illuminator." He shrugged off the pack, rooted around inside, and pulled out an emergency light stick.

"You have a light?" I gaped at him. "I've been stumbling around in the dark, twisting my ankles, and you had a light?"

"I did not wish to draw attention to our location."

I stomped inside. He followed me and switched on the illuminator. Half-buried by rubble were shelves and counters, leading me to conclude the building had been a business,

perhaps a shop. However, I saw no merchandise at all, got no hints of what had been sold here.

“It appears the shop was looted after the bombing,” he echoed my very thoughts. Once again, we seemed to be on the same wavelength. *A coincidence. Anybody looking at this could see what happened.*

Finding an area relatively free of debris to bunk down for the night, we cleared it more, tossing some twisted pieces of metal into a scrap pile. “We won’t need the temporary shelter since we have a roof over our heads.” Nadir began removing items from the pack.

“You have a tent in there?”

“The pack is the tent. Pull the ripcord, and it expands into a shelter.”

I’d wondered what the dangling handle was for. *Note to self: don’t pull the ripcord.* “I’m going to do a quick check around.” We were in one big room—the sales floor, I imagined—but there were several other rooms attached.

“Take this. I can see well enough without it.” He passed me the illuminator.

I peeked into the smaller rooms and got lucky on the last one. A restroom—or elimination station as they referred to it. I tried the button over the commode, heard a whoosh, and the air dryer came on. The unit worked! Thrilled I didn’t have to venture outside, I completed my business.

“You know all the best places to stay,” I said upon returning. He had pumped up a bed and set out a water bag and a couple of food bars—all without light. He really could

see much better than I could. “There’s a working rest—elimination unit in the back,” I said.

“I’ll check it out.”

I offered him the illuminator, but he waved it off. “You keep it. You must be hungry. Go ahead and eat. There are a few other varieties of nutribars if you don’t like those.”

“Okay, thanks,” I responded, remembering how he had provided for us at the palace and how little gratitude or even acknowledgment I’d shown. Anything we’d asked for, he had provided, and I’d taken it as our due, assuming he’d been following orders. One of us had acted like an asshole, and I was pretty sure now it had been me.

He strode across the shop to the elimination room, tall and sure, his ass shifting with every step. *Nice butt*. Nice bod period. He had that masculine V-shape, wide shoulders tapering to a slim waist and hips. Long legs. Muscular thighs. Nadir was hot.

And celibate. What a tragic waste of masculinity.

The elimination room door closed, and I rifled through the pack. I couldn’t tell one bar from another as I couldn’t read the languages on the labels, but I did want to check the emergency supplies. I recognized a first aid kit by the contents: bandages, several loaded and capped hypos, some packaged wipes, and a couple of bottles. Antiseptic, I hoped.

He’d gotten a pretty nasty cut on his head. It should have been tended to a long time ago. What if it got infected?

He returned.

I held up a spray bottle from the first aid kit. “What is this?”

“A topical antiseptic.”

“And this one?” I held up a little bottle with a roller tip.

“Wound sealer.”

“Perfect. Sit down. Let me doctor the cut on your head.”

“It’s fine. It doesn’t need tending.”

“Is that what you would say to me if I had a gash this big?” I held apart my thumb and index finger, exaggerating the distance only a tad.

“You are human.”

“Ah. The weak, fragile human. You’re the big, tough, invincible Arasetan?”

“Something like that.” His cheeks dented.

How could I have not noticed his dimples before now?
Maybe because he scowls more than he smiles?

“I’ll take care of it myself after we eat,” he insisted. “I’ve gone this long. A little longer won’t matter.”

“You can’t see the wound to tend to it,” I pointed out.

“We will eat first.”

“Fine. Whatever you say.” I tore the wrapper off a nutrition bar and bit into it.

Ugh! What is this? I’d never eaten fermented, moldy seaweed, but I imagined this was what it would taste like.

My reaction must have shown on my face because he roared with laughter, an uninhibited deep, masculine rumble. Time stopped, and I stared, the sound of his amusement waking up all my erogenous zones. His laughter was the sexiest damn thing I'd ever heard. It made biting into the disgusting bar worth it. Almost. I swallowed and forced it down; the bar was gross.

Grabbing the wrapper, I squinted at the unfamiliar writing. Maybe I hadn't bitten into a food bar at all. "Did I make a mistake? Is this edible?"

Still chuckling, he replied, "It's edible. It is a mix of different plant proteins. You might like this one better." He handed me another bar. "I'll finish yours."

It was better. Not great, but better. It tasted a bit like sweetened cardboard but with a spongy texture.

We ate in silence and passed the water bag back and forth, drinking from the same container. Placing my mouth where his had been felt intimate. He gave no indication he felt the same.

The bar proved filling. It was probably soaking up water and swelling in my stomach. *One nutritious sponge bar will keep you feeling full all day. Lose 10 pounds on the Alien Diet Plan or your money back!*

After we stowed our trash and empty water bags in the pack, I grabbed the first aid kit and pulled out the needed supplies.

Nadir protested with a grimace of annoyance. "This isn't necessary."

Men! Human, Arasetan—they're all the same. I repositioned the illuminator and knelt in front of him, the better to examine him. The shoulders of his tunic were stiff with dried blood. Dust from the blast streaked his cheeks. The cut had oozed more, bleeding into fur and mixing with dust.

The wound should be washed before being disinfected.

With a cleaning pad, I gently wiped his lacerated forehead. The jagged cut was as long as my pinkie, but not as deep as I'd feared.

He pressed his lips together, his expression stoic, his posture rigid.

“Am I hurting you?”

“No.”

“You are not used to having people tend to you.”

“I am the one who tends to others. I am not comfortable with the reverse.”

His admission gave me a tiny peek into his psyche. “I'm the same way,” I said.

I leaned in to peer at the cut. Nadir's warm exhalation breezed across my face. My breath caught in my lungs, and respiration became something I needed to think about. I dropped my gaze to find his smoldering eyes on me.

“That's uh, about as clean as I can, uh, get it.” I leaned back again and fumbled with the antiseptic. I uncapped the bottle. It was an atomizer.

“The other bottle is a wound sealer,” he said. “If you insist on tending to me, you should use that, too.”

“Okay. Good idea. I’m going to spray the antiseptic now. You should close your eyes.”

He closed his eyes. Shielding his lower forehead with my hand, I squirted the cut. He jerked but didn’t utter a sound. I applied the wound sealer with the tiny disposable applicator that came with the bottle. He hissed.

“Sorry. Sorry. Worst part is over.”

He opened his eyes. They were still smoldering.

I dropped the bottle of wound sealer. Then I couldn’t get the lid on. He took it from me and capped the bottle. Our fingers brushed, and something hot and elemental sizzled between us. A shaft of heat shot straight to my core.

Yoo-hoo! He’s celibate. And you don’t even like him.

Except I didn’t dislike him anymore. Maybe I never did. Maybe slinging barbs at each other enabled me to ignore the attraction, pretend it didn’t exist. Animus had vanished when I needed it the most.

All thumbs, I ripped open a bandage. As carefully as I could, I covered the cut. I could feel his gaze on me. Was it only my libidinous imagination that his breathing had gotten heavier? My heart and stomach fluttered.

“There.” I said with false cheerfulness. “That ought to do it.” *Thank god he’s celibate. Otherwise, the temptation...*

“You were wrong,” he said.

“Do tell me how and when.” *Please. Say something nasty to me. Make me dislike you again.*

“You called yourself weak and fragile. You are neither. You are indomitable.”

No, no. That’s not what I need to hear. Tell me how awful you think I am. “Be careful. I might think you like me,” I quipped.

“I do like you.” I’d swear his amber eyes were on fire. What the hell was he doing? Was he coming on to me? Had playing doctor gotten him hot and bothered? What happened to the whole celibacy thing? Or was I misreading the situation?

“You shouldn’t. I’m human, remember?”

I had to put some physical distance between us, but I’d become rooted to the spot, unable to move, unable to concentrate. Where was my sharp, cutting wit? Where were my ready insults? Why was I mesmerized by his eyes, his voice, his smell?

“You are different from other humans.”

Like a splash of cold water, his simple words hit with the wake-up call I needed.

“No, I’m not. I am a fair representation of my people.” While I liked to think of myself as *exceptional*, I rejected acceptance conditional on being an *exception* to my species. *Like me, like my people. I am human and damn proud of it.*

Leaping to my feet, I collected the first aid supplies and returned them to the kit. I’d gone from aroused to pissed off. He hadn’t changed an iota. Maybe he’d warmed toward me, but he was still the *ishta* he’d always been. Judgmental, prejudiced.

My anger ramped up, confusing me even more. I'd gotten my way, hadn't I? I'd prayed for Nadir to do or say something to douse my desire and, when I got what I wanted, I was... disappointed. Because I really didn't want him to be an ass. I wanted him to be noble. Little flaws, okay, but big character flaws...not okay.

Big, little—why should any of it matter? I would go home to Earth, and he would return to his celibate existence and serve his king.

Perfect. Just what I wanted.

Chapter Nine

Nadir

Unable to sleep, I lay staring at the ceiling. Nothing would ever be the same. Until now, I'd drawn pride and satisfaction from my station, but it would never satisfy again. An emptiness would always remain.

Was she sleeping? Clinging to the edge of the portable bed, Millie lay as far away from me as she could get, but no distance would be far enough for me to not be aware of her. She would return to New Terra, and I would be back at the palace, but she would be with me still. A paradox. No matter how far away, she would always be with me. But, no matter how close, she would always be untouchable.

I'd lied to protect myself and my future. I did not loathe humans. Far from it.

I did not wish to stir her ire, but I needed her to be the strong one because I was weak. One word, one gesture from her and I would abandon my vows as easily as flinging off my cape. Easier, if the truth be told. I'd clung to my cape for its significance, a manifestation of my hopes and dreams, a badge of honor, but I had shed it with surprising ease. Now it was *just a cape*, fabric embellished with braid and embroidery, no more important than any other garment and far less functional.

The stout bricks of fealty, honor, service, and celibacy supporting me throughout my years wobbled like they had been stacked on sand. It would take little to knock them over, and then what would I have? Who would I be?

Millie had tended to my head, dabbing the stinging antiseptic and wound sealer on my cut, and I'd reveled in her touch, her scent, her concern. It had taken all my willpower to not cave to the temptation to tell her how I felt. I'd started to. She *was* indomitable. A force to be reckoned with. Sweet and tart. Tender and sarcastic. Maddening and tempting.

I didn't merely like her; I ached for her. It didn't matter that she was human. Or maybe it mattered more. Certainly her humanness had contributed to my downfall. Every other female I'd kept at a distance to avoid temptation, but I had not perceived Millie as a threat, and she'd sneaked into my heart while my guard was down.

None of the humans I'd met turned out to be what I'd expected. Then it had dawned that they couldn't all be exceptions. With the realization, once-solid beliefs had cracked and then crumbled.

History didn't change, but perhaps humans had.

The Great Nuclear War had destroyed Earth, one of the most beautiful, habitable planets in the entire galaxy. It had teemed with a diversity of life unparalleled anywhere. A precious sparkling gem had transformed to a radioactive, barren rock. But it had occurred hundreds of years ago. How long should New Terrans be held responsible for the crime committed by long-dead ancestors?

Should everyone be held accountable for the sins of their forebearers? Were there crimes so heinous the debt could never be repaid but must be carried by future generations in perpetuity? Should humans today be punished for what their ancestors had done?

Many, including the League of Planets, believed culpability belonged to *humanity* as much as to the individuals who'd made the decisions to launch a nuclear attack. Leaders could change, but nature did not.

As a half-breed, I'd suffered condemnation for "crimes" I'd not personally committed. Perhaps my experience had made me more empathetic to the humans, and, upon meeting several of them, caused me to question the prevailing attitudes.

Millie was not an evil person. She was a complex, frustrating, headstrong, brash, alluring female any man should be thrilled to have as a bond-mate. If he could.

My position as the advisor to the king did not permit it. Not that she would have me. She'd made her disdain obvious.

"I'm tired of being judged and found lacking for something I didn't do." Out of the darkness, she spoke, her voice quiet but hard edged. "What you believe about humans, what everyone believes is not true."

A sorceress, she'd read my mind. Many a time her comments paralleled my thoughts. If we were on such a wavelength, what else might she have gleaned? Had she guessed how I hungered for her? How close I was to breaking?

I was celibate, but not made of stone.

"What do you think we believe?" My voice came out hoarse. Would she notice?

"That we destroyed our planet. That we engaged in a nuclear world war."

How could she deny the facts? "That *is* what happened," I replied, confused. Tens of thousands of nuclear weapons had

been detonated. Oceans boiled. Firestorms charred every continent, releasing so much soot and ash, it blocked the sun, causing a nuclear winter lasting for decades. Every living creature, animal and plant, had died.

“That is not what happened,” she insisted.

“The LOP has irrefutable documentation of the devastation and has been monitoring Earth’s condition ever since. The planet is lifeless; the radiation levels remain lethal.”

“I don’t deny Earth was destroyed. But we humans didn’t do it.”

Of course they had. I sat up and switched on the illuminator. “If humans didn’t do it, who did?”

“The artificial intelligence systems used by the militaries. Unbeknownst to Earth’s governments, the AIs had become sentient. They reprogrammed their fail-safes, preventing their deactivation, and began acting independently. Two nations did get involved in a political pissing match. They did, in fact, threaten to attack each other. But they would have settled it. They would have compromised, or one of them would have backed down. They wouldn’t have initiated a nuclear attack. Nobody wins in mutual annihilation.

“But, one nation’s AI fired a nuke at the other. The country’s leader tried to recall it, but the AI was in control. The targeted nation’s systems detected the warhead and retaliated in kind. It spiraled into Armageddon.”

“What proof do you have?”

“The survivors were in contact with New Terra. There are vid logs.”

Survivors? “Everyone was killed.”

“Not everyone.” Her mouth twisted. “Rank has its privilege. World leaders took cover in nuclear-proof bunkers. Approximately five hundred people, heads of state, high level officials, and their families sheltered underground. They lived out their natural lives in the bunkers, remaining in communication with each other and New Terra. The last transmission received was a century ago. The AI servers were housed in protected bunkers, too, so the AIs had no worries of death. They kept firing nuclear weapons until they’d exhausted the stockpiles.”

Could it be true? It sounded plausible. But it contradicted the LOP’s narrative, which used the Great Nuclear War as proof of the humans’ bellicosity, thus justifying the quarantine and the embargo. But the LOP had been known to use, misuse, or disregard the truth to suit its own ends.

Had the rationale for the embargo been a lie? Had the league promoted anti-human sentiment for centuries on the basis of a falsehood? “Were the communiques from Earth ever shared with the LOP?”

“I highly doubt it. We had no idea the LOP existed until we were lured off New Terra with the *Star Cross* space cruise, got abducted by the Copan-Cerulean Cartel, and then got rescued by the LOP.”

Technically, the *Star Cross* abductees had been rescued by the king of Araset. Aeon, who’d also been captured, had escaped and gotten word to his father. The king had dispatched his guards and myself to rescue Aeon and the abductees. Then

the LOP had swooped in and taken over rescue and repatriation efforts.

She pressed a hand to her chest. “I’d never heard anyone mention the LOP’s name. We’ve been aware other intelligent species exist because Earth had made initial contact with extraterrestrials, but communication ceased after the Great Nuclear War. We never heard from another alien...until they started abducting us.”

“Contact stopped because of the embargo—the LOP had forbidden trade, visitation, and communication with humans,” I said quietly. “Did your people ever try reaching out?”

“Again, I don’t know, but I suspect not. We were focused on survival. New Terra was a mere colony when the Great Nuclear War occurred. Our technology—everything we used—had been shipped from Earth. We had no manufacturing, but we had information. Realizing they were the last Earthlings, the survivors of all the nations transmitted the body of human knowledge to us. Good, bad, and ugly. They held nothing back. They worked together with a level of cooperation never before achieved to ensure the human race survived.

“With their guidance, the colonists retooled the robotics and machines they did have, repurposed machinery, and began mining for metals and minerals. It took a long time to ramp up, and we’re still behind the techno curve. However, our limited tech is partly by choice. The nuclear holocaust survivors warned of the dangers of AI. We’d be further ahead if we used AI more, but we restrict its programming and limit its usage. We don’t let artificial intelligence get very smart. The government monitors for signs of sentience. Every single tech

employee is required by law to report suspicious or anomalous AI activity.”

She lifted her chin higher. “Kids learn about the dangers at school, and it’s drilled into the employees at every tech company. I work for Art Smart. We design home software. I’m in tech support. People call me when they get locked out of their house or their lights won’t stop flashing or they switch on the coffee maker and the music system comes on instead.”

“Maybe you dumbed it down too much. Doesn’t sound like the product is very good.”

Expression fierce, she glowered at me. “We design excellent products. The problems are usually caused by user error.”

I held up my hands. “I apologize for my thoughtless, rude comment.”

She blinked. “I appreciate the apology.” Her lips twisted with wry humor. “Would I be rude if I said, that’s a first?”

“You would be stating fact.” I could not remember ever having apologized to her before, although I probably owed her many apologies. “One should not shy away from the facts even if confronting them is painful.” I made no excuses anymore for my behavior. I could demand evidence of all she’d presented, but I didn’t need it. Truth resonated; it needed no proof.

“I was rude to you a lot. I did not know your history. I doubt many do.” I had a strong hunch the LOP did but had suppressed the information. “But, even in my ignorance, I did not think ill of you or your friends. From the start, you

challenged my preconceived notions about humans. By nature and position, I am brusque and standoffish. I am sorry for the times I offended you.”

She wet her lips. A shaft of heat shot through me, deepening the inappropriate urges. “I’m sorry for my behavior, too,” she said. “Irritating you was a game to me.”

“You kept me on my toes.”

She grinned a beautiful, heart-wrenching smile. “Look at us, being all friendly and everything. All it took was a crash landing.”

Again, she’d almost read my mind. Millie and I had sniped at each other since we’d met. But the trials we’d endured had stripped away the outer shields, revealing our authentic selves. Like the people of Earth after the apocalypse, we were finally cooperating.

The light from the illuminator flickered across her features—her pleasing flat face, sharp and perceptive eyes, her cute snub nose, her expressive mouth, her stubborn chin. This was the face of the woman who should have been my bond-mate. I’d pledged lifelong fealty and service to the king. Although challenging, the commitment conferred great honor and status. Where was the pride and satisfaction? Nothing had changed. When she left, my world would be as it had been before.

Except now, it wouldn’t satisfy me.

She hunched her shoulders. “Okay...you’re staring at me.”

“I’m committing you to memory.” If I’d had a working handheld, I would have captured the way she looked in this moment. “When you go back to New Terra, I’ll remember you just like this.”

“You’ll be glad to get rid of me.”

“No.”

“You won’t?” Her lips curved with a pleased smile.

I shook my head. “Life won’t be the same without you challenging me. I will miss that.” I would miss her snarky attitude, her snide remarks, her smiles, her face, her laughter.

“I’ll miss you, Nadir.” Her eyes were serious, but then she chuckled. “We sound like we’re saying goodbye already, but we can’t go anywhere until we get off Aurelia.”

“Tomorrow, we’ll reach the city, and I’ll arrange transportation for you to the LOP ship.”

“For me? What about you?”

“I will stay until I locate Prince Lomax.”

“Then I’m staying, too.”

“There is no telling what will happen. It will be safer—”

“I’m staying.” She pressed her lips together.

Stars help me, I wanted her to. Any separation would be time lost, and we had so little as it was. Our farewells had been premature, but not by much. “Then I will do everything in my power to keep you safe.”

“I accept your terms.”

There was so much I wanted to say to her, but there was far more that I couldn't say. "We should try to sleep. Tomorrow will be a long day." The longer the better. The time would pass too quickly.

"Right."

I switched the illuminator off and plunged the building into darkness again. Millie curled up on her side. I lay on my back, listening to the sounds of the night and Millie's soft breathing. Her warm female scent wafted over me, her proximity causing my fur to tingle, my cock to harden. *So close*. I doubted I would get a wink of sleep. In the early years of celibacy, before learning to sublimate my desires, I had burned with lust.

She sighed, a sound of dissatisfaction and resignation. Or did I read my own feelings into it?

The bed shook as she rolled to face me. With my acute night vision, I could see her watching me. I swallowed. My senses were on fire. Why did the lust burn hotter at night? I curled my hands into fists, my claws digging into my palms.

"A kiss wouldn't break your vow of celibacy would it?"

One kiss and my carefully arranged life would cave in like the roof of this building. I desired her so much, but I feared I couldn't stop at one kiss. I squeezed my eyes shut. "Millie, I-I—" My voice came out strangled. Oh, the temptation. One kiss. Just one. Could I do it? No. It would be the end of me. I would come undone. My life would unravel. *I have to get out of here*. I sprang upright to leap off the mattress—and butted my horns into Millie.

She cried out.

“Zigqat!” I switched on the light.

She had a hand pressed to her forehead. “Jesus. A simple, ‘No, I don’t want to kiss you,’ would have sufficed. You could have cracked my head open.”

I could have. I didn’t bump her hard, but to ram one’s horns into someone’s unprotected head could split their skull. “Let me see.” I gently pulled her hand away. A knot had formed where I’d hit her. “You’re getting a bump.” I felt horrible.

“I’m balanced now. I have a goose egg on the other side from the crash.”

Gently, I probed the other side. She did have a bump. I felt worse. “I am so sorry. This is all my fault.”

“It was an accident. No harm done. People always say I’m hardheaded.”

“Where’s the med kit? There must be something to reduce swelling.” I leaned toward the pack.

“I’m okay!” She grabbed my wrist. Our eyes locked. “No harm done.”

Oh, but there was harm. Her thumb caressed my wrist, stroked my fur. Under a surge of feeling, willpower crumpled like the buildings of the township. I palmed her face and kissed her.

Chapter Ten

Millie

Exploding stars, this man can kiss.

His soft lips moved over mine, seeking entry. I wound my arms around his neck and deepened the kiss. Our tongues danced and tangled, his warm, spicy breath and taste driving me wild. The nudge of his tusks against my cheeks, the brush of fur on his wrists was surprisingly erotic. *I'm kissing an alien. I'm kissing Nadir.*

He groaned and pulled me hard against him. My breasts, heavy and achy, mashed against his chest. Tremors rippled through his body, eliciting an immediate response in mine. My stomach fluttered, and my pussy let down a surge of wetness.

Long, drugging kisses turned my limbs to mush and muddled my brain.

His hands smoothed over my back. He kissed me harder then dragged his lips across my cheek. Warm breath heated my ear. He nibbled my throat. Awash in sensation, I arched my neck.

He kissed me again. "You are a temptress. You slay me. You make me burn. You are my downfall."

His murmured words thrilled me to the core. He made me feel sexy, alluring. What woman didn't appreciate making a man go weak at the knees?

"Mm, yes," I agreed, combing my fingers through his luxurious soft fur. Earlier, he'd brushed off the dust. I

envisioned us getting naked, rubbing my nude body against his furry one—

Fuck. When I'd suggested we kiss, I'd expected a semi-chaste peck. I should not have teased him. I had nothing to lose; he had everything to lose. I didn't wish to be the cause of him breaking his vows.

“Nadir...” I pulled away. “Stop. We have to stop...this is wrong...you are supposed to be celibate—”

“Celibacy is overrated.” He kissed my neck. Nibbled. Licked.

A moan of pleasure erupted from my throat. I dug my fingers into his broad shoulders. “You'll regret it in the morning. I can't let you do this.”

“Let's worry about the morning in the morning.” He trailed his lips along my jaw. He cupped my breast and rubbed his thumb over my taut nipple.

I stifled a moan. “You could lose your position as king's advisor.” Or could he confess to the king, be given penance to perform, and then be absolved of his sin? Did it work like that? Or was celibacy a hard-and-fast rule? What if he didn't tell the king anything?

He raised his head and sought my gaze. “I wish to be intimate with you. Celibacy is cold comfort. I would rather have the memory of your soft body joining with mine to warm the austerity of my life, whatever it turns out to be. My life has been devoted to serving the needs of others. For once, I wish to serve myself.

“If you don’t wish to couple with me, then I’ll stop. But don’t call a halt because you think you’re protecting me.” His lips twisted into a smile. “It is noble, but unnecessary.”

“I’m not often noble. You should take advantage of it when I am.”

“You are you. Unfiltered and honest. It is not nobility that I desire.”

“You do know how to turn a girl’s head.” I ran my fingers over a horn then cupped his cheek. I leaned in and kissed him.

He growled in triumph, his mouth searing my lips in a burning caress that stole the breath from my lungs. I found myself flat on my back, his muscular body pressing me into the mattress, his erection rubbing against me. His situation continued to stab at my conscience, but he felt so fucking good. If he didn’t care, why should I? He was responsible for him, and I was responsible for me...right?

Abruptly, he sat up, and I thought he might have come to his senses, but he began to disrobe. I ogled him as he unfastened his tunic before standing to dispense with his leggings. *Commando. He goes commando.* My mouth dried at what had been hidden by clothing. He was a powerful bear of a man, slim-hipped but broad in chest and shoulder. The pièce de résistance was his heavy, ridged thick cock.

It throbbed at me.

“Are you waving at me?” I quipped.

“I’m wondering how much longer you intend to remain dressed.”

“Not much longer.” I stripped. I’d been forced to go commando, too, because my clothing had come from Araset. Undergarments were unheard of on planet Nomoru.

He was checking me out now, his gaze roving over my nude pear-shaped body, my average-ish breasts, wide hips, okay legs. I had pretty feet—and it wasn’t just me saying so—I’d done some moonlighting as a foot model—but Nadir didn’t give my exceptionally cute tootsies more than a passing glance. *Okay, not a foot guy.* Overall though, he seemed to like what he saw, so I forgave him for ignoring my best feature. His eyes gleamed with the kind of lust that made a woman feel like a princess. A bawdy let’s-get-down princess.

He stepped toward me and pulled me into his arms for a burning kiss, and I got to feel that luscious fur against my bare skin. *Why are we still standing?* I wondered, and, a split second later, we sank onto the bed.

If I’d thought him urgent before, it was nothing compared to now. It was as if something snapped inside him, and his pent-up desires poured out. He kissed me with fervor, his mouth crushing mine, his tongue thrusting, his tusks poking my cheeks. I hung onto his horns and kissed him back. “I love your ready-made handles,” I murmured.

My nipples drew into tighter buds as his furry chest brushed my breasts. Arching my back, I rubbed my chest against his, enjoying the erotic sensation of his rabbit-soft hide. He was fully furred except for his face, hands, and feet and that magnificent cock.

I slipped my hand between our bodies to stroke his hard-on, my fingers teasing over the ridges encircling the shaft. His

growl of pleasure vibrated through me, and my pussy contracted.

He nibbled on my neck, my shoulders, my arms, his lips igniting tingles everywhere he touched.

Taking my wrists, he drew my arms over my head and kissed me with a fierceness that left me gasping. Releasing my hands, he worked his way down my body, teasing my sensitized flesh with lips, tongue, and teeth. He suckled my nipples before scooting down to bury his face between my legs.

Holy crap if that man didn't have a magic tongue. And he knew how to use it, fluttering over my clit. It didn't take long before he had me shuddering. *For a man this talented to be forced into celibacy is a crime against womankind.*

My pussy was still contracting from the orgasm when he slid into me, his large cock filling me to the brim.

Nadir fucking was Nadir undone. Amber eyes crackled with fire. Sweat beaded on his forehead, and he growled. The primitive, carnal sound was so fucking sexy I could have come from hearing his voice alone. But, with every powerful thrust, those ridges stimulated my clit and launched me into the stratosphere again.

My pussy convulsed, triggering his orgasm.

He bellowed so loud, a fine shower of debris rained down upon us. *Oh my god. He could bring down the building. What a way to go, though.* I floated on a sex high, too blissed out to care. For long minutes, the only sound in the bombed-out shelter was our labored breathing.

Finally, he rolled away and pulled me to his side. My head settled on his shoulder, and I curled my fingers into his chest fur and sighed with contentment. Those ridges. That magic tongue. Whew! “For a man who is—was—celibate, you seemed to know what you were doing.”

I could tell from the way his tusks poked my head he was smiling. “I said I was celibate, not a virgin. I was in my mid-twenties when I pledged to the king.”

He’d certainly known his way around my body. Arasetan-Copan females must have a similar reproductive anatomy. How many women had he been with, I wondered. Had he been a hound dog, humping every available female with compatible anatomy?

“Ah, so it wasn’t like you’re naturally talented, it was more like riding a bicycle.” I feigned lightness, trying to ignore the green monster creeping in from the shadows of my insecurities.

“What? I don’t understand.”

“Nothing.” I ducked my head.

“You’re not jealous of the females in my past,” he guessed.

“Of course not.” I shouldn’t care how many alien bimbos he’d slept with before becoming celibate.

“No one but you has tempted me to break my vow.”

I did do that, didn’t I? My chest swelled with satisfaction until guilt chased away the warm fuzzies. I was free to indulge myself; he was not. I was the “other woman” who’d seduced

him away from his responsibilities, not to a family but to the monarch. *But I gave him a chance to back out.*

“I’m not jealous of the men in your past,” he said.

The men I’d been involved with wouldn’t inspire jealousy, more like mockery or pity. *He was the best you could do?*

Nadir tucked a finger under my chin, nudging me to look at him. “I am only jealous of the one in your future. Because he will have something I won’t. He will have you.”

And Nadir would have nothing. Maybe not even a job.

I could see the bleakness, the resignation in his eyes.

I don’t want anyone else. I want you. I realized the hot-as-heck furry, horned alien had sneaked his way into my heart. He’d acted like a snobby, prissy, judgmental asshole I’d never look twice at, and then, when my guard was down, he revealed his true self: a loyal, protective man with a sex appeal up the yin-yang. How devious.

“Maybe not. There might not be anyone else, ever.” I couldn’t think of hooking up with anyone else. How could anyone compare?

He shook his head. “You deserve a mate who is good *to* you and *for* you. I hate him already, but it is for the best.”

I thumped his chest with my fist. “Stop it! We just had sex. The sweat has hardly had time to dry, and you’re talking like this is goodbye.”

“I did not say goodbye. I was encouraging you to live your life when—”

“When?” I arched my eyebrows.

“When we part.”

“Didn’t you say worry about the morning in the morning?”

“I did say that,” he admitted with a wry twist of his mouth.

“Then let’s worry about five years from now in five years.” I figured it would take at least that long to get over him. He’d captured my heart. Avoidance and denial would be the only way I would get through this. “I’d much rather focus on tonight.” I wagged my eyebrows suggestively and then straddled him.

I had no idea what the penalty was for breaking a vow of celibacy, but I figured there would be one. He may as well make the crime worth the time.

Heat ignited in his eyes. He uttered a sexy growl and pulled me in for a searing kiss.

Chapter Eleven

Nadir

“Well? What do you see?” Millie called.

The morning was bright despite an overcast sky. I squinted at the domes and towers in the distance beyond the walls of the ruins. “We made good progress yesterday. We’ll reach the city before nightfall.”

“That’s great,” she said glumly.

Using the chunks of collapsed walls as steps, I climbed down from the roof of the bombed building where we’d spent the night. Beset by warring feelings, I donned the pack, and we set out. Duty insisted on haste; feelings urged me to tarry.

I had to locate Prince Lomax. His life could be in danger. Duty could not be ignored or delayed. But, the sooner I found him, the sooner Millie and I would return to the ship that would remove her from my life forever. She would go home to New Terra; I would return to Araset to face the wrath of the king.

What he doesn’t know won’t hurt you. Millie had suggested I not reveal my indiscretion to His Majesty, but I could not lie to my king, not even by omission. Having already broken one vow, I could not further dishonor myself.

Plus, the queen, who was far more perceptive than the king, would take one look at me and see that I had changed, and the shift went beyond the physical. I saw the galaxy through different eyes. I questioned old paradigms. I was not

the same person who'd boarded the LOP vessel. The inner changes had to be reflected in my outer appearance.

And then there was the evidence of my desecrated cape.

We trod over rubble, metal, and melted glass. We'd begun seeing a few personal effects. A shoe. Pottery shards. Broken furniture. Fortunately, we'd found no bodily remains, suggesting the people had evacuated before the town was hit, a guess supported by the relative absence of hovercars. We'd seen *some* burned-out transports, but not many. Undoubtedly, people had fled in their vehicles.

But, whoever had attacked the township intended to ensure the people had nothing to return to. I couldn't imagine the bombing had been a singular event. If this city had been destroyed, what other cities might have been attacked? What if the entire planet was under siege?

"Watch your step," I cautioned, and, using the rough ground as an excuse, clasped her hand. I'd observed Aeon and Holly and Joule and Giselle holding hands. We did not hold hands. The mannerism was not part of our culture. The alien custom seemed strange to us.

Her five-fingered hand felt alien in my palm, yet somehow, right. And when she squeezed my fingers and smiled at me, my heart gave a little hitch of pleasure. I decided I liked this human affectation, and, if I liked this, what other customs of theirs might I like? How many things had I been wrong about? I recalled her explanation of how Earth had been destroyed by AI.

How many of our beliefs had no basis in fact? How many were outright lies?

I squeezed her hand. “Tell me about your life on New Terra.” Time was rushing by, and I was desperate to learn everything about the woman I’d fallen in love with.

“Not much to tell. I told you I work for Art Smart. I live in a small apartment in a medium-ish city. Medium for us, anyway. New Terra’s population is nothing compared to what Earth had.” She twisted her mouth. “My life is pretty boring. Holly winning the space cruise and inviting me to accompany her was the most exciting thing to happen to me in a long time.”

“Your life is interesting to me. Tell me.”

She shrugged. “Okay. Don’t say I didn’t warn you. I work, I go home. Once a week, Holly and I get together with women from work for a girls’ night. I used to take my little sister out for a playdate a couple of times a month, but, when her mother remarried, Kalisha dropped out of the program, and I don’t see her anymore.”

“You can’t see your sister?” I was aghast.

She shook her head. “She isn’t a relation. I volunteer with Big Kid, Little Kid. The program provides mentors to children who need a stable, responsible adult in their lives.” Her grin was self-deprecating. “They accepted me as a mentor anyway.”

“What about the rest of your family?”

“Holly is it. We are not related by blood, but she is the sister of my heart.”

I ached for her because I, too, had gone without the support and encouragement of a family. My father had never

acknowledged me and would have preferred I did not exist. My mother cared for me, and I visited her whenever circumstances sent me to Copa, but there was a distance between us. We weren't estranged, but we weren't close, either. "Holly is your sole family? There's no one else?"

"She's the only one who counts." She pulled her hand from mine. I regretted the loss of closeness, rued asking what I'd thought had been a simple question. "My mother is alive, but she and I don't talk. I never met my father. I don't have any biological brothers or sisters. Holly and I met in foster care."

"I don't know what that is," I said tentatively. I wished to learn everything about her, but not if it caused her pain.

"It's a family that takes in kids whose parents can't or won't take care of them properly. Holly had loving parents, but her mother and father died in an accident, and she was too old to be adopted out. I was removed from my mother's house by social services."

"Your mother couldn't care for you?"

"Mom made bad choices. Her emotional needs prevented her from doing the right thing. She gave up more than me. She was a high school teacher. A popular one. She was fun and funny, and all the kids sought to be in her class.

"But she couldn't stand to be without a man. She always had a boyfriend. As soon as one guy broke up with her, she'd hook up with another. A few were married. Because of her occupation, she was discreet in public, but it was a revolving door at home. One of her men was the sperm donor who sired me."

Similar to my birth. The aristocrat had been my sperm donor.

“Most of Mom’s boyfriends were decent. Mostly they ignored me. A few took an interest in me, but they didn’t last long. I was thirteen when Mom hooked up with Earl,” she deadpanned. “From the start, he was overly nice in a way that made me uncomfortable. For a kid whose mother had many *man friends*, I was naïve. But, like I said, Mom was discreet. I didn’t understand why Earl’s compliments and gifts made me feel uneasy. Mom was thrilled her new beau liked me. Since she seemed to think everything was normal, I thought my feelings were wrong.

“Then Earl started touching me. He’d rest a hand on my shoulder. Give me a little hug. Brush against me when we passed each other in the hall. The touches occurred more frequently and lingered.” She lifted her shoulder in a self-deprecating gesture. “Again, I thought I was the weirdo for feeling uncomfortable. I mean, it was a hug. A pat on the shoulder.”

She exhaled in a whoosh. “While Mom was still at school one day, Earl cornered me—literally. He pushed me against the wall, kissed me, grabbed my breast, and groped my crotch. He probably would have raped me, but then Mom came home. He said if I told, he’d deny it, and she wouldn’t believe me.” Her mouth turned down. “He was right.

“As soon as she came in, I ran to her, told her what he had done. He said I was lying. Mom chose to believe him instead of me.”

I sucked in air through my teeth and clenched my fists, my claws digging into my palms. I wished I could meet that Earl and greet him with the sharp end of my horns. And Millie's mother! What parent didn't protect her child? As distant as we were from each other, my mother would have torn apart anybody who tried to hurt me.

My heart thudded in my chest. I expected the worst. "What happened? What did you do?"

I extended my palm. She clasped my hand, squeezing my fingers like I'd offered a lifeline.

"Earl had scared me, but I was more devastated by my mother's lack of support. Her betrayal hurt way more than what Earl had done. At school the next day, a counselor saw me crying and took me into her office. She got me to tell her what had happened. She reported the incident to the authorities.

"Earl was ordered to leave the apartment during the investigation. Mother refused to kick him out, so I got sent to foster care, where I met Holly. It turned out Earl was a registered sex offender. He got arrested. Mom lost her teaching position and was never able to get another one. I refused to see her. I petitioned to remain in foster care. My request was granted."

"You haven't seen her since?" I helped Millie over a pile of debris blocking our path.

"Five years ago, Mom reached out to me. Said she wanted to talk, *clear the air, mend fences*—her words. I had no desire to see her, but I thought, *She's my mother. I should at least listen to her, right?* We met for tea." She paused. "She told me

she loved me—and she forgave me for ruining her life. *She forgave me.*” She barked a humorless laugh.

“I am so sorry,” I said.

“Thank you.” She squeezed my hand and released it. “I’m over it. If I let the past define me and affect my future, then I am surrendering my power to the people who hurt me. I control my destiny. I refuse to take crap from anybody. I call bullshit when I see it, and if people can’t handle the truth, that’s on them.”

She paused. “I lost a mother, but I gained a sister in Holly.”

Who would be remaining on Nomoru with Aeon. Millie had no one waiting for her on New Terra. “Have you considered not returning to New Terra?” I asked. If Millie didn’t go home, I might be able to see her.

We’d nearly reached the wall.

She shook her head vehemently. “No. Where would I go? What would I do? Hang around the palace, living off Aeon and Holly? I doubt the king would permit it. He didn’t waste any time shipping our asses back to New Terra. What other nation planet would or could take me given the laws prohibiting contact with humans?”

Unfortunately, she was correct. Motivated by selfishness, I’d spoken without thinking it through. *As if I’m not in enough trouble with the king.*

“Besides,” she said, “we were abducted and almost sold into slavery. Alien species trafficking seems to be getting worse, not better. Why would I want to stay among aliens who

either snub us or abuse us? No, thanks. I may not have *family* at home, but I do have friends, now including Jessie and Kat.”

That she had friends eased my concern but not the ache in my heart. “I’m glad you have friends.” I’d seen how close the females had become, how they supported one another. I wondered what it would be like to have an equal with whom you could be yourself. I had no friends because I had no peers. To the royals, I was an honored servant, but still a servant, yet my rank set me apart from other servants and citizens. I made people nervous.

Everybody except Millie. From the start, she’d not been intimidated by me, my manner, or my rank. She hadn’t hesitated to speak her mind or to challenge me. She’d infuriated me, but she’d earned my respect, aroused my curiosity, and opened my mind—and tested and tempted me. I faced serious consequences for breaking my vow, but I did not regret the passion we’d shared.

“We are friends, are we not?” I said.

Her lips twitched. “Even better. Friends with benefits.” She bumped her hip against mine. I’d promised myself that after the morning’s light I would resume my celibate state, but, with a simple teasing sexual glance, good intentions evaporated. The damage had been done. How much worse could another transgression make it?

“Well, up and over, I guess.” She pointed at the looming perimeter wall. It was double my height, maybe more.

“We’ll do like we did before. I’ll give you a boost, and once you’re on top—”

“Ooh! I like being on top,” she purred.

My face and groin heated as I recalled her riding me during one of our encounters. “I’ll climb up and help you down the other side.” I cupped my hands. “I’m going to shove hard.”

“Oh, baby.” She leered.

“Millie...be good.” But a grin tugged at my lips. She was irrepressible.

“I’ll be good.” Her breath warmed my ear. “But you’d like it *more* if I was bad...”

I pressed a kiss to her mouth. We needed to get to the city. “Behave,” I said.

She gave an exaggerated sigh and placed her foot in the stirrup.

“Here goes.” Pushing with my legs and arms, I catapulted her upward. She squealed as she flew through the air, her torso landing on the wall. She pulled up her dangling legs and scrambled to her feet. “I’m good—” Her gaze riveted on the other side. “Nadir? We’ve got a problem.”

Chapter Twelve

Millie

Four masked beings in hooded, dark-gray bodysuits stood on the other side of the wall, their weapons pointed right at me. They were covered from head to toe. All I could see were piercing, cold-black eyes.

“What is it?” Nadir called.

One of them pressed a finger to his—her, its?—mouth in a silencing gesture.

“Millie?” Nadir said again.

The masked alien shook his head and caressed the trigger of his blaster with a menacing gloved finger. My knees wobbled with fear, but anger heated my blood. I was getting really, really tired of aliens threatening me. I was damn sure fed up with being kidnapped. This made twice I’d been abducted by aliens. Like being struck by lightning, if it happened once, you’d think the odds of it happening again would be almost nil. You ought to be able to cross it off your list of life experiences. *Abducted by aliens? Check!*

“I’m coming up,” Nadir said.

“No, don’t do”—he landed on the wall beside me—“that. I’m sorry,” I finished, as his gaze zeroed in on the armed aliens.

One of them jerked his weapon while speaking in a singsong, almost musical voice, which sounded beautiful but I

suspected had an ugly meaning. Nadir unclipped his blaster and stunner and tossed them down to the hooded thugs.

Waving his weapon, the alien sang again. Like a gorgeous poisonous flower or an irresistibly cute but vicious animal, the aliens' language seemed incongruous. Threats shouldn't sound so melodious.

Nadir sang a few bars, and I felt relieved he could communicate with them until he spoke to me. "He's ordering us to come down or they'll kill us," he said in Terran Universal. "I told them, I'd go down first and then help you."

He leaped off the wall. As soon as his feet touched the ground, they swarmed around him, singing. Nadir belted out a tune of his own. I would have been impressed by his deep, throaty baritone, except he was singing for his life.

"Stop! Leave him alone," I cried.

One of the thugs warbled something, and the others retreated. I could see Nadir's chest move as he exhaled in relief. "Okay, come on down. I'll catch you." He held out his arms.

What had we gotten into? Who were these people? Were they the ones who'd destroyed the city? I did not want to join the choir, but I wouldn't leave Nadir to face the music alone.

"Don't shoot!" I said and leaped.

Nadir caught me in his muscular arms and eased me to the ground.

The thug who appeared to be in charge, having gotten the others to back off a bit, sang a few notes. *I should get me one of those translator thingies.* He motioned with the blaster.

Catching the gist, we started walking. Maybe I didn't need a translator. Threat was a universal language.

Nadir and I strode side by side, following the leader who marched on ahead. The other three armed fellows brought up the rear.

"Do you know who these aliens are?" I whispered.

The leader turned around and sang a little ditty.

"Is he ordering us to shut up or else?"

"Yes."

It was so freaky to be threatened in such a melodious voice. *A lullaby of death and destruction.* I wondered if the Aurelians understood Terran Universal. Would they shoot us if I kept talking? Where were they taking us? *Why* had they taken us? Had we stumbled into the wrong place at the wrong time, or was our capture premeditated?

They herded us to a stretch hovercar, a windowed rocket-limo. *At least we're being kidnapped in style.* I assumed the hover-limo was stolen. I doubted the rebels or terrorists or whoever they were had legally purchased such an impressive transport. Or maybe they'd gotten a deal on a pre-owned vehicle. I had a lot of questions, but their masks revealed the important thing: they were criminals. Law-abiding citizens did not hide their faces.

They pushed Nadir and me into the middle row of seats, and a gray-suited alien boxed us in on both sides. Another sat in front, and the leader positioned himself behind us. *The better to keep an eye on us.* They'd taken seats without

discussion of who should sit where. *This isn't their debut performance.* I gulped.

Why did this keep happening to me? Did I have an invisible sign on my back reading, ABDUCT ME? Or EASY MARK? Why did aliens keep picking on me? Note to self: *start packing some heat.*

Of course, it hadn't helped Nadir. He'd been disarmed right away. Had he ever been abducted before? Or was this his first time? *Stick with me. I'm an old hat at this.*

The hovercar pushed off and sped through the air. The windows darkened automatically, preventing us from seeing outside. Nadir cupped my knee and gave it a squeeze. I shot him a grateful smile, but not too wide in case our abductors misunderstood and thought I wasn't taking the kidnapping seriously enough.

We whizzed through the air for maybe five minutes and then the hovercar set down. I felt a bump. The vehicle was *descending*. "We're going underground?" I whispered.

"Appears so," he murmured.

"Fa-la-la-la-la," sang the leader of the pack.

I can name that tune in three notes. He was ordering us to shut up.

My stomach knotted. How would anybody find us? Nadir had left word with the LOP he'd left the ship, but they wouldn't search for us underground. The chance of rescue dimmed like the lights as we descended.

The vehicle lift jerked, and then the hovercar rolled out. The vehicle doors flew open. Our captors got out. More

singing and weapon-brandishing ensued. Nadir and I scooted out into a cavern.

As soon as we exited, the hatch closed, and the hovercar parked itself next to several others of varying sizes. Apparently, the rebel-kidnapper-terrorist aliens had stolen a fleet of vehicles. Very enterprising of them.

I shifted my gaze from the hovercraft to our environment. Swiveling floating canisters filled the cavernous interior with light. Speckled with sparkling crystals, rough granite walls swept upward to a high-domed ceiling. The ground was solid stone. To my untrained eye, the caverns did not appear to be a natural phenomenon but manmade. Somebody had blasted a cavern system beneath the surface of Aurelia.

We got another song, and then our captors marched us through the tunnel system. Canister lights followed overhead, bobbing and dancing with an irritating strobe effect. At times, the lights seemed to be *chasing* each other in a game of tag. Were they sentient robotic pet-lights?

“What’s up with the lights?” I asked.

The leader belted out a few rude notes.

“You’re a one-hit wonder, aren’t you?” I said.

“Let’s not antagonize them—at least until we have an idea what we’re dealing with,” Nadir cautioned under his breath.

Objective, fair-minded person that I was, I felt justifiably irritated with the circumstance, but Nadir’s point was well taken. Being *dead* right isn’t all that satisfying. But, damn, the hypocrisy of these aliens burned my ass. They believed

horrible things about us while they ran around kidnapping people.

As we approached a turnoff, faint glowing green light spilled into the corridor along with a familiar sizzling hum. *It's déjà vu all over again.* My suspicions were confirmed when we entered a cellblock, each cell protected by a humming electrified force field. When the Copan-Cerulean Cartel kidnapped us from the *Star Cross*, they rendered us unconscious and then imprisoned us in the brig of their spaceship. An invisible electric field kept us detained.

Lined up on one side, six cells had been carved into the granite, and I discovered the source of the green glow. Occupying two of the cells were a dozen actors right out of central casting of a cheesy sci-fi vid. They had oversized teardrop-shaped heads, huge solid-black eyes, and emerald skin emitting a green aura.

As we drew closer, they moved to the front of their cells and burst into song.

My jaw dropped. My head swiveled between the captives and our captors. Were they the same species? Was this what our abductors looked like under their masks? My gaze shot to Nadir. He nodded.

We were shoved into the fourth cell down the row, putting a unit of separation between us and other prisoners. The force field activated with a crackle. The gang of four captors left the cellblock.

“What kind of beings are these people?” I asked.

“These are the Aurelians,” he replied.

“We’ve been captured by the natives of this planet? Do you think they’re slavers? Why are their own people locked up?” The purpose of alien species trafficking was to sell *other* species into slavery, not your own. Unless, of course, these prisoners were rivals trying to horn in on the action. My imagination shifted into overdrive.

“Anything is possible. They could be traffickers, insurrectionists, guerillas.”

“Well, whoever they are, they’re cowards.”

“How so?”

“They’re hiding behind their masks.”

“They probably are shielding their identities,” he agreed. “They may have been on night patrol. The glow they emit would reveal their presence if they didn’t cover up.”

“Do all Aurelians have an aura?”

“No. Some Aurelian races don’t.”

“What were the other prisoners saying when we arrived?”

“They were demanding to speak to the lieutenant.”

“So, the dude belting out orders isn’t the lead singer.”

“Probably a patrol leader.”

They had an organized structure. And weapons. An underground bunker. We’d been dragged into something big. I sighed and checked out our accommodations. The lodging did not live up to my expected standards. No view. No mini bar. No bunk. No running water. No toilet—not even a bucket. I had a bad feeling there wasn’t any maid service either. At least

they hadn't left us in the dark. Canisters hovered outside the cell. And we had the glowing green aliens for additional light.

A golf-ball-sized red-eyed orb streaked through the cell block.

“What the heck is that?”

It zipped to our cell and hovered outside the force field.

“A camera. We're under surveillance.” He waved. The orb bobbed as if it was waving back. “Motion-activated.”

If we tried to escape, our captors would see it.

The orb zipped off, and I watched it fly around. “Do you think they can hear us, too?” I whispered.

“We should assume so.”

Hopefully, they couldn't speak Terran Universal. “Why take us prisoner? Why us?”

“I don't know.”

“Maybe Prince Lomax was captured by these people.”

“I checked the cells as we walked by. He's not here, but they could have other cells in another area of the bunker—even another part of the planet. I can try talking to the other prisoners. They may not know who Prince Lomax is, but I can ask and maybe find out who our captors are and what they want.” Nadir inched close to the crackling force field, and the beady-eyed orb zipped front and center again.

I saluted with my middle finger.

Before Nadir could call out, singsong voices and footsteps sounded, and two unmasked glowing Aurelian thugs entered

the cellblock. That they didn't bother to hide their faces suggested Nadir's hunch about the night patrols was correct.

Or they're not worried about being identified because we're never leaving here alive.

Armed with stunners, they halted in front of our cell. "Fa la la la la," sang a familiar voice, his lizard tongue flicking out of a tiny mouth to punctuate each note.

EW. I hadn't seen the tongue before because of the mask. The movement of his flicking tongue was mesmerizing—like watching a metronome. Their language had a repetitive beat—short words uttered at even intervals.

With a sizzle, the force field collapsed.

"La, la, la. La, la la," sang the one, and both alien thugs moved out of the way.

Nadir hugged me, pressed his lips to my ear. "The lieutenant wishes to speak to me. Try not to worry. Whatever happens, I'll find you." He stepped out of the cell.

"No, I want to go with you."

If we separated, I might never see him again. I tried to follow him, and the leader went nuts, spewing singsong gibberish and jabbing at the air with his stunner like a swashbuckling swordsman in a pirate musical. This dude was going to spoil my love of musical theater.

"Millie, don't," Nadir said. "Please."

I backed into the cell.

The force field hummed.

The Aurelians led Nadir out of the cellblock.

Chapter Thirteen

Nadir

Flanked by the armed Aurelians, I was marched through the tunnels. A canister light and the spy orb followed, keeping me under close surveillance. They were taking no chances. I'd downplayed the seriousness of the situation to avoid frightening Millie. I could think of only one reason why the "lieutenant" would summon me—to interrogate me. Fortunately, Millie didn't speak Aurelian; they knew they couldn't get any information out of her.

On the other hand, it also meant she could be of no use to them.

My gut clenched. I would fight every way I could to prevent anything bad from happening to her.

We had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Hopefully, the lieutenant would accept that I had no information. And maybe, I'd learn something about Prince Lomax's disappearance.

A lift ferried us to another level, this one as meager as the one below, except the cell-like rooms were protected by doors rather than force fields. We stopped beside one of them. The leader peered at the orb-cam. There was a click, and the door slid open.

"Inside! The lieutenant does not like to be kept waiting. We will take you back to the cell when he is done with you," said the patrol leader.

I entered, and the door slid shut behind me. A tall, horned man in dark gray stood with his back to me, watching a large screen displaying drone vid of the Aurelian capital.

He turned. “What are you doing here, Nadir?” demanded Prince Lomax. “Why are you not aboard the LOP ship?”

I felt as if the rock-solid floor had somehow disappeared from beneath my feet, and I’d dropped into a parallel dimension. “I came to find you, Your Highness.” I masked my shock with a matter-of-fact tone. Prince Lomax was the lieutenant? Not a prisoner, but the lieutenant? I’d assumed him being taken captive posed the worst possible scenario. This was much worse. What had he gotten into?

“You shouldn’t have. You have complicated matters significantly.”

“What did you think I’d do when the LOP received a message that you failed to arrive at the summit?” Inside I reeled in disbelief, unable to comprehend the situation.

“You should have been well on your way to New Terra to take the ovwets home. And what were you thinking to bring one to Aurelia?”

“I feared you were in danger.” I still wasn’t convinced he wasn’t. What the zigqat had happened? “You should have foreseen if you went missing, the LOP would return to Aurelia, and I would not leave you. Millie’s presence is an unfortunate happenstance. I did not bring her. She had hidden on the shuttle pod.”

“Why was she hiding—? Never mind.” He waved and then rubbed his horn. “You have placed me in a difficult

situation.”

I had put *him* in a difficult situation? I was responsible for him, and he’d abandoned duty and sanity to join a group of... of... I didn’t know what they were. How would I get him to Nomoru? How would I explain this lapse to the king? Besides the potential jeopardy to his safety and well-being, his actions would send shock waves through Araset, Nomoru, and even the galaxy. With Aeon unable to ascend the throne, second-son Lomax had been tagged to replace him. For *another* son to disrupt the royal lineage, the stability of the kingdom would be called into question. His Majesty would be apoplectic. My gut tightened with dread at the prospect of delivering the latest bad news. On top of my broken pledge...

“The GJW has a strict non-release policy. Enemy captures are reeducated so they may support the cause,” the prince said.

“Enemy? I’m not your enemy. I am the royal advisor. I have known you for half your life. Millie and I wouldn’t be here if you hadn’t disappeared, and your people hadn’t abducted us. And what *is* the *cause*? What is the GJW?”

He thrust out his chest. “We are the Galactic Justice Warriors, fighting for the right of all peoples of all alien species to be treated equitably.” The fanatical gleam in his eyes contrasted with his deadpan delivery. These were not his words but a statement he’d memorized.

Had he been captured and “reeducated” by the GJW? Brainwashing took months, years. It couldn’t have happened during the few days the prince had been missing. I wracked my brain trying to remember when he had been gone for an extended period.

Two years ago, he'd taken a tour of the galaxy. He'd been gone for six or seven months. Was that when he'd gotten "reeducated"? Had he been harboring these ideas ever since? His behavior until now had seemed normal.

"Who doesn't desire justice for all?" I chose my words carefully and studied his face for a reaction.

"The LOP. The league is systemically corrupt. It formed to favor certain planets and beings over others."

"What a load of nonsense." I, like everyone else, had done my share of league-bashing, criticizing its bureaucracy, the arbitrary rules, and its interference in sovereign governance, but its purpose was noble—foster cooperation and peace among the nation planets and maintain law and order in the galaxy. If it sometimes fell short of achieving its objectives, that didn't make the goals unworthy, nor the league systemically corrupt. Lomax's claim was ludicrous, false, and unfounded.

"It's true," he insisted. "The LOP could end alien-species trafficking but doesn't. They figure if they *say* the right things, no one will notice they're not *doing* anything."

"If they don't appear to be doing anything, it's because most of their anti-trafficking efforts are undercover," I said in vain. Attempts to change his mind would be a futile exercise. Fanatics could not be persuaded by facts or logic.

"That's what they want you to believe," he replied. "In reality, LOP officials and monied supporters publicly condemn trafficking while privately buying slaves from the cartels."

“You have proof? Give me names.” Such a bald, bold accusation required proof. Ne’er-do-wells existed in every organization. I’d ousted a Copan spy and had dispatched a few thieving servants from the palace. With regard to the LOP, I’d heard of one handler who’d trafficked in alien species, and, given the size of the league, there were probably others. However, I truly believed those were the *exceptions*. The exceptions did not define an organization.

Lomax waved his hand. “It is fact.”

“Supposition without documentation is not fact. It is rhetoric.” And often outright falsehood. Had the LOP made mistakes? Surely. Could they have done more sooner to combat trafficking? Of course. But trafficking had grown bigger and more complex than what any one agency could handle. There were hundreds of independent, sovereign nation planets, some of which belonged to the LOP, some of which didn’t. The vastness of space provided cover for criminals, pirates, and slavers. Enhanced policing in one sector pushed the cartels into another. Break up one cartel, and another formed.

“We receive LOP reports. You’ve seen the data, the numbers of aliens the LOP has rescued and repatriated,” I pointed out. *It’s just as well he never made it to the summit.* Given the ideas he harbored, there was no telling what damage he might have inflicted on the genuine efforts to combat trafficking and how he might have misrepresented Araset’s interests.

“Minuscule compared to the problem—presuming the data is even factual and not falsified. Your continued

arguments on the LOP's behalf demonstrate that you do not oppose the enslavement of alien sentients," he accused.

I could not believe my ears. "Have you lost your mind, Your Highness?"

"So, you do not deny it." He looked smug.

"That is a ridiculous statement. Of course, I deny it. But I shouldn't have to." Claws extended in fury as I stepped toward him, angrier than I'd ever been in my life. *He is still the king's son, still a prince. Still the king's son*, I repeated the mantra, forcing my claws to retract. "My stance on the issue should not even be a question." How dare he accuse me of such a thing?

The screen now showed the brig. Millie paced in the cell, her face scrunched with worry. The Aurelian captives slumped dejectedly in their cells, their glow dimmed.

Outrage burned hot. "That is your idea of equity and justice?" I gestured at the screen. "You abducted and imprisoned Aurelian citizens. Where is the justice for them? You are no different than the cartels. You are what you claim you oppose."

Lomax's eyes blazed with a crazed fanatical light, but, again, he answered in a monotone. "If you are not with us, you are against us, and opponents of the cause must be reeducated, and if they cannot be reeducated, they must be neutralized."

"Then it was your men who shot at us in the ruins of the township."

"They mistook you for LOP."

"That made it okay?"

“We are in a war for justice.”

“Millie was a *victim* of alien species trafficking. And I’ve been assisting with the repatriation of the abducted humans.”

“If you had stayed on the ship like you were supposed to, all of this could have been avoided. But you ventured into GJW territory. We have claimed the village as a sanctuary for victims of alien species trafficking. The LOP makes empty promises; we take swift and decisive action.”

The vid on the screen changed from the brig to the bombed-out city.

“Were all the citizens of the township against you? Is this the GJW’s doing?” I asked.

“The Aurelian government refused to cancel the LOP Summit, so we staged a protest.”

“You bombed a village!”

“The residents had the ability to vacate if they wished. It was a mostly peaceful protest.”

My jaw dropped. “With all due respect, Your Highness, have you lost your mind? Since when is a bombing and destruction peaceful? You burned their homes, their workplaces, their businesses. The people weren’t cartel members or members of the LOP. You may have spared their lives, but you left them with no way to *make* a life.”

His gaze hardened. “In the battle for justice, a certain amount of collateral damage is acceptable. Besides, there are no true innocents. As I have said, you are for us or you are against us. If you are for us, you will join the cause and fight. Silence speaks for itself.”

I did not recognize this man with the hard eyes, sneer, the dark-gray clothing of the insurgent. His mask lay on the console. Millie was right; only cowards hid their faces. This could not be the same fun-loving, carefree young man who flirted with the human woman named Kat. I did not know this man.

“They are people living their lives,” I replied. “Isn’t that what you’re fighting for? The right for people to live a life of their choice?” I argued futilely. Fanaticism didn’t respond to logic or fact. Zeal was the means *and* the end. A fanatic never achieved his goal because he never would acknowledge the cause had been settled.

The vid on the screen shifted to a vibrant city. Able to see it close up, I recognized the unique shapes of the spires and towers of Relia. The city we’d been heading for *was* the capital. Wide pristine streets were decorated with flowers and flags. Buildings, statues, and monuments had been cleaned and renewed until stone sparkled and metals gleamed. Boughs and banners festooned balconies. And this was only one urban center. Across the planet, every municipality and hamlet would have prepared in a similar fashion. The planet had been anticipating the honor of hosting the summit for months.

At the capitol pavilion, the actual meeting place of the summit, armed guards dressed in their finest uniforms patrolled the perimeter and manned entrance checkpoints. Surveillance drones zipped around. I couldn’t imagine what else the Aurelians could have done to secure the summit site. Unfortunately, the surrounding smaller townships hadn’t been so fortified, leaving them vulnerable to attack. The government couldn’t lock down an entire planet.

I massaged the base of a horn. My head throbbed with the enormity of the problem—getting Millie to the ship, releasing the other captives, taking Prince Lomax into custody, and alerting Aurelia and the LOP about the GJW. They must know a village had been attacked and destroyed, but were they aware they were dealing with an organized, interplanetary insurgent group? I dreaded having to inform the king of his son's involvement.

First things first: getting Millie out of here. I had no idea how to achieve that. "What did you hope to gain by destroying the township?" I asked.

"The cancellation of the summit."

"And what would that achieve?"

"The LOP must be disbanded. It is corrupt at its core, and it cannot be saved."

He didn't draw a direct line, but I could see the circuitous plan. "You destroyed the township to force the cancellation of the summit, thus discrediting the LOP by making the league look ineffectual." I paused. "But, they didn't cancel the summit."

"And now people see the LOP for the corrupt organization it is. People lost their homes, but they went ahead with the meeting."

At least no lives had been lost. Yet. It occurred to me I only had Lomax's say-so no one had been killed. Possibly, many had perished. An icy chill invaded my veins. *What has he done? How can there be recovery from this?*

Prince Lomax was only two years younger than Aeon, but they were more than a decade apart in maturity. The assumption that Aeon would take the throne upon the death of the king allowed his younger siblings much more freedom—to Lomax’s detriment. In fact, his appointment to represent Araset at the summit had been an effort to give him more responsibility, help him mature. Instead, the king had unwittingly played into the insurgents’ hands.

Aeon had been stripped of his title. Lomax was not mentally stable enough to rule. The three other sons were still children, the youngest only ten. *Long live the king! He had better not die anytime soon.*

Lomax leaned his knuckles on the console and studied me. “So, you understand the quandary your presence has placed me in.”

“No, no, I don’t.”

“As I stated, the GJW has a strict policy of non-release. You and I have a personal history. You have served my family and the kingdom well. You’ve earned our respect and gratitude. You have been, dare I say, a mentor to me and my brothers. For your years of service and friendship, I would send you back to the ship.

“But, that would betray my oath to the GJW and mock the values of equity and justice I have pledged to uphold. You do not stand with the GJW; therefore, you are against us, and I fear reeducation would not work on you. Your beliefs are too entrenched. For that reason, I cannot allow you to leave. You’ve seen too much. You know too much. If released, you would return with a strike force.”

“So, what are you going to do with me?”

“*That* is the quandary.”

Chapter Fourteen

Millie

I let out a huge sigh of relief when Nadir returned. When they'd taken him, I'd feared I'd never see him again. However, his grim expression had my stomach knotting with dread again.

The unhooded guards collapsed the force field and pushed him into the cell. Electricity sizzled as the field reactivated.

“Are you all right? What happened?” I hugged him then pulled back to study him. He did not appear to be injured. They hadn't beaten him. “You were gone a long time. I was getting worried.”

He gave a short, humorless chuckle. “I found Prince Lomax.”

“He's alive? He's here? He's a captive, too? Is he all right? He's not injured, is he?”

“He's the lieutenant.”

“What? I don't understand.”

“The group that abducted us? Prince Lomax is one of them. They call themselves the Galactic Justice Warriors. They believe if they can discredit and destabilize the League of Planets, it will end alien species trafficking.”

“That's crazy! That makes no sense.”

“The decimated township? The GJW did that, figuring if they destroyed an entire village and displaced the people, the

LOP would cancel the summit.”

“Isn’t the purpose of the summit to discuss how to stop alien species trafficking?”

“Yes.”

“Shouldn’t the Galactic Justice Warriors be in favor of a summit?”

“If they were genuinely interested in stopping alien species trafficking. But they’re not. Their anti-trafficking rhetoric is a ruse. The Galactic Justice Warriors are anarchists. Their aim is to wreak chaos and dissension. They have hijacked a legitimate cause to convince well-meaning people to join them, promising the destruction of the existing social order will bring about the desired change. In reality, they don’t seek anything better; they only wish to destroy what exists. They’re trying to dismantle the League of Planets by claiming the league is systemically corrupt and secretly promoting alien species trafficking.”

“And *Prince Lomax* is involved?” I hardly knew him, but I couldn’t reconcile the affable, easygoing royal with anarchy, bombings, and kidnapping. The king would have a cow—or whatever kind of bovine mammal was native to Nomoru.

Nadir nodded. He sucked in a breath, grabbed his horns with both hands, and paced our small cell. He exhaled through his teeth. “Near as I can figure, they recruited him a couple of years ago. He was probably captured, isolated, drugged, and bombarded with GJW propaganda. Drugs can soften a person’s resistance to new ideas.”

“You mean he was brainwashed?”

“Brainwashed.” He nodded. “Hopefully, Mnemonians weren’t involved. If *they* brainwashed him, it will be irreversible.”

“Mnemonians?”

“Mind controllers from planet Mnemonia. The Mnemonians follow a strict code of conduct, but a rare few without an ethical core sell their services.”

Oh great. Mind-controlling aliens. Could the situation get any worse? Sometimes, ignorance was bliss. My dull life on New Terra looked pretty darn good from the vantage point of this prison cell. I wish I could slip on a pair of magical ruby slippers, click my heels together, be transported home, and forget all of this ever happened. Except I would never abandon Nadir to deal with this alone.

Besides, running away, denial, and ignorance allowed a problem to spread. Isolated from the galaxy, we New Terrans had been oblivious to the troubles brewing, and the problems had found us anyway. Traffickers had abducted us. And now there were rogue Mnemonians?

I wrapped my arms around Nadir from behind and rested my cheek on his shoulder. He hugged my arms then removed them, turned, and embraced me. For a couple of minutes, we clung to each other. His heart beat against my ear in a reassuring thump.

He had devoted his life to getting things done in challenging situations. If anyone could get us out of this mess, he could. I was no slouch either, if I did say so myself. Nobody worked harder and longer without complaining than me. Well, okay, not the complaining part. But the rest was true.

Anyway, we were a team. Team *Alien Ass-Kickers*. There. I named us. We were official now.

We'll get through this together.

We had to because the alternatives were not acceptable.

Nadir cleared his throat as if getting ready to speak when one of the tiny spy orbs zipped over and hovered outside the electrified barrier.

“Fuck off.” I flipped it the bird. I’m sure it was wishful thinking on my part, but the camera bot seemed insulted as it flew out of the cell block.

“We have to get out of here,” he said.

Agreed. If we couldn’t break out, we’d be left singing the blues with our Aurelian cellmates. And that was the best-case scenario. “Now would be the time, while the spy cam is gone.” I assumed it zipped off to surveil another area of the bunker. Maybe the GJW had a limited number of spy bots and had to rotate them. “Got a plan?”

“Not yet.” He reached up and grabbed his horns again. His gesture betrayed his uncertainty. Since he rarely let his guard down, it revealed his vulnerability. *He trusts me*. Feeling gooey inside, I stood on tiptoe and kissed him.

“What was that for?” He blinked, but his cheeks dimpled in a pleased smile. Those dimples were so darn cute it made me want to kiss him again, but escape had to take priority.

“A kiss for luck?” I suggested.

“We’re going to need it.” Dimples vanished. “The situation is precarious.”

“Well, yeah. We were abducted by anarchists seeking to overthrow the League of Planets.”

“Anarchists who take no prisoners,” he said grimly.

“We’re prison— What do you mean?”

“They’re after recruits, not prisoners. Captives undergo reeducation.”

“They’re going to brainwash us? Like hell!” Would a Mnemonian invade my mind? The ultimate violation, brainwashing robbed a person of autonomous thought. *The Galactic Justice Warriors seek to enslave our minds. They’re as bad, if not worse, than the cartels.*

Nadir shook his head. “Prince Lomax believes I’m too stubborn for reeducation to work. I doubt they’d try it on you because you don’t speak the language. You wouldn’t understand what they were telling you to think.”

So maybe ignorance could be bliss. When our captors spoke, all I heard was, “La, la, la, la, la.” Then a thought struck me. “What if they implant me with a translator?”

“Then it could be successful.”

“Hey, I’m stubborn, too.” I hated the idea that I could be manipulated, that the GJW could mess with my mind and supplant my values and beliefs with their propaganda. It made me sound malleable, weak.

“I’m afraid they’re going to kill us,” he said.

Kill us? I couldn’t have heard correctly. *Grill us, maybe.* Interrogate us. *Thrill us?* Would be nice, but I doubted that one. *Drill us at a POW camp?*

His face was so grim, I couldn't fool myself I'd misheard. "B-but Prince Lomax? He wouldn't do that to us, to you. You're the royal advisor to the kingdom of Araset. He's the lieutenant, isn't he? Can't he intervene on your behalf?"

"He has changed. He has become one of them. We have to escape." He strode to the force field and held up his palms.

"Don't touch it!" I cried.

"I'm not." Like a mime trying to find his way out of an invisible box, he ran his palms just inside the electrified portal. The force field crackled and sparked. "It's extremely hot," he said. "We can't bust through it. We'd get electrocuted."

The spy orb hovered on the other side of the force field. It bobbed like it was laughing at us.

Using both hands, I flipped two birds. It zipped away and disappeared.

Nadir glanced around the cell. "If we had something to break through the force field, it might short it out, but we have nothing."

"Not even a chamber pot," I said, realizing I needed to pee. Like, really bad. If they didn't bring us a pail or something soon, I was going to have to squat in the far corner of our cell, and I hated to do that in front of Nadir. We had not yet reached the point in our relationship where I felt comfortable going to the bathroom in front of him. I mean, we'd only had sex once—well, three times in the same night, but I counted that as one encounter. Call me vain, but me squatting in the corner was not the last image of me I wanted him to have. But, right now, I felt like I could pee buckets.

I narrowed my eyes at the invisible force field and then at Nadir as a crazy idea struck me. I rolled my eyes. It would never work.

He looked at me. “What is it?”

“It’s too stupid to mention. You’ll laugh.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

“Well, Art Smart, the AI company I work for? It got sued a few years ago. It was implicated in a terrible freak accident. Not the company’s fault, but deep pockets, you know?”

“Why would I laugh at that?”

“I haven’t gotten to the punch line. A woman was charging up her service bot. She had it plugged into a bathroom electrical socket. Somehow, the charging bot fell into the tub of water while she was bathing. She got electrocuted and died.”

“That is not funny at all.”

“It shorted out the electrical system in her flat. The entire place went dark. If we shot liquid at the contact points, wouldn’t it short out the force field?”

He stroked his chin. “Maybe. Perhaps when they deliver a meal and some water, we could use the water for that purpose.”

Considering they probably intended to kill us, getting a meal seemed iffy. “Yeah...or you could pee on it. I don’t know about you, but my bladder is about to burst.”

He curled his lip and wrinkled his nose. “You want me to urinate on the force field?”

“That’s the funny part.”

Chapter Fifteen

Nadir

Urinate on the force field? The idea disgusted me. If it didn't work, the blowback would soil our cell. I was not some derelict who fouled the space where he slept and ate his meals. On the other hand, I had no desire to make this cell the space where I slept and ate my meals. Worse, most likely we were going to be executed. We had to get out of here one way or another.

If we could short out the controls, the beam would shut off.

“Well?” Millie asked.

I eyed the contact points. “It's worth a try.”

“I'd do it, except my anatomy isn't built for hosing down force fields.”

I squared my shoulders. “I'll do it.”

“Atta boy.” She grinned. Humans had more relaxed attitudes than Arasetans did about private bodily functions like waste elimination.

“If it works, we'll need to get out of here fast before the spy cam or a GJW guard comes. Get ready to run.”

“Got it. Let me empty my bladder first. I can't run on a full bladder.” She moved to a corner of the cell. “Don't watch me. Turn around. I'd like to keep the romance alive.”

“Gladly.” I turned my back.

Clothing rustled. “Keep an eye out for the pesky cam bot. I don’t want the GJW watching me either.”

“It’s all clear.”

I could hear the rushing sound. It went on and on. My own bladder began to ache. Finally, I heard clothing being adjusted. “Phew. That’s better,” Millie said. “You can turn around now.” She stepped away from a spreading puddle. “Your turn.” Then she scowled. “Better wait a sec.”

The spy orb zipped around the cell block then flew up near the ceiling and hovered, its red eye seeming to focus on us.

She extended the middle digit of her right hand. Then the left. Then both. “Shucks. It seemed to make it go away the last few times. Must have been a coincidence.”

“What does that gesture signify?”

“It means fuck you,” she said.

I couldn’t make the gesture. Having four fingers instead of five, I had no middle digit.

“Zigqat!” she shouted at the cam bot.

I stifled a laugh. Her mispronunciation disarmed her curse. *Tickle you*, is what she’d actually said.

It took interminable minutes before the orb flew away. As soon as it left, I got into position a couple of exdats from the force field, allowing for a safety buffer while being close enough to hit the target.

I freed my penis from my leggings, aimed at a lower contact point, and released. The stream missed the target by a

tad, hitting the field. Sparks exploded in a wild spray. The stench of vaporized urine almost made me gag.

I tried again. Adjusting my aim, I hit the contact point. There was a huge burst of light and heat and then...nothing. I cocked my head, listening for a hum. Nothing.

“Is...is...it off?” she asked.

“I think so.” I redirected the stream to where the field would have been. Not so much as snap or sizzle. “It’s off.” I readjusted my clothing. “Come on.” We sprang out of the cell.

Seeing us, the Aurelians prisoners clamored for their freedom.

“How did you get out?”

“What did you do?”

“Help us! Release us!”

“What hymn is the choir singing?” she asked.

“They want out,” I said, and explained to them what I had done, how to aim. They rushed to the front of their cells and fumbled with their clothing.

“Tickle you, it’s back!” Millie cried as the spy orb zipped into the cellblock.

She snatched up a discarded length of pipe. “Batter up,” she shouted and swung at the orb.

It tried to zip away, but with a *crack*, the pipe connected and sent the bot smashing into the stone wall. The red light extinguished, and the orb fell to the floor.

She hissed and waved her hands. “And the crowd goes wild as Millicent Rogers hits a home run.” She grinned at me. “Did I mention I play on the Art Smart softball team?” She stepped to the orb and bashed it several times more, reducing it to bits of crushed metal.

Sparks exploded in the two occupied cells. The Aurelians stormed out.

The spy bot had had plenty of time to record and transmit our escape; we’d lost the chance to sneak away undetected. The GJW would be coming for us. But, with a dozen Aurelians free, they’d need to round them up, too. I had no idea how many GJW thugs occupied the bunker or how many spy bots might be patrolling.

“Let’s go.” I grabbed her hand, and we ran.

Two Aurelians followed us; I wasn’t sure if that was good or bad. It made for a larger fighting force if we encountered the GJW, but a larger group wasn’t as nimble, couldn’t hide as easily, and produced a greater heat signature.

Two of the floating lights accompanied us, too. I carried Millie’s length of pipe and considered giving them the same treatment she’d bestowed upon the spy orbs, fearing they could have cameras or trackers or both attached. But, without the lights, even with the glowing Aurelians, Millie would have a hard time navigating the tunnel.

We reached a V in the passage, and the two men broke away from us, jogging to the right. One of the lights went with them, leaving the passage noticeably dimmer.

“Shouldn’t we go with them? Maybe they know the best way out,” she said.

“They’re heading for the hovercraft lot.”

“How do you know?”

“I paid close attention when they brought us down here.”

“Shouldn’t we follow them? A vehicle would be a lot faster.”

“Only if we have the authorization codes to operate it. And the hovercraft lot will be the first place the GJW will look.”

“Then, how are we going to get out of here?”

“Through a shortcut to the surface. The other passage was musty. I’m getting a whiff of fresh air this way. We’re headed to the surface. Trust me.”

“I do trust you.” Her serious tone halted me in my tracks. “I trust you,” she repeated.

Her admission rocked me to the core. Many people relied on me, but how many trusted me? My heart swelled with a complexity of emotions I couldn’t begin to express. I felt happy and scared at the same time. What if I let her down? What if I was wrong about the fresh air? Experience and instinct were all I had to guide me. I pressed a quick peck to her mouth. “When we get out of here, I’ll kiss you properly.”

“When we get out of here, I’ll expect more than a kiss.” She waggled her eyebrows.

I laughed. “Fair enough.” I leered back at her.

We hurried through the tunnel, which began to ascend, more proof we were heading toward the surface. By now, the GJW had to have discovered our escape. I hoped the fleeing Aurelians would distract them. Lomax would consider me significant, but the Aurelians posed the greater threat to the GJW. I was an outsider; they were citizens. If they got away, reported what had happened to them, and led authorities to the bunker, the GJW would be dealt a serious setback.

We made a turn, and natural light and a surge of fresh air filtered into the passage.

“I see daylight. We’re almost out!” Millie said in a loud, nervous whisper.

It seemed too good to be true we’d gotten this far without a hitch. I might have thought the GJW had set a trap, except they couldn’t have predicted we’d escape in the manner we had. They couldn’t have guessed urinating could deactivate the force field. Across the galaxy, hundreds of thousands of dangerous criminals were incarcerated behind force fields employing the same technology.

Leave it to my Millie to discover a vulnerability in the technology.

“I’m hoping no one is lurking outside,” I said. “If it’s clear, we need to move fast because we’ll be exposed.”

Motioning for her to wait, I crept up to the opening and peered out. All clear—we had a straight shot to a copse of trees. Beyond the woods, over the leafy canopy, I spotted the spires and domes of the capital city.

I motioned for Millie to come forward. She squinted at the city in the distance then peered behind us at the stone wall. She widened her eyes. “That’s not the bombed-out township, is it?”

“We were underneath it the whole time. They flew us around to confuse us.” I pointed at the trees a couple of ypnots away. “Let’s go!”

We ran. I expected to hear the thunder of insurgents in pursuit or feel the whoosh of a hovercraft swooping in. But, luck ran with us, and the only sound was the thud of our feet and our ragged breathing. Before fleeing the cellblock, I’d snagged the heavy pipe Millie had used to destroy the spy camera. Running with it was cumbersome, but it was our sole weapon. The wooded area was farther away than I’d estimated. By the time we reached it, our tired legs had slowed to a fast walk, and we were both gasping. We staggered into the jewel-toned woods.

Millie started to collapse onto the leaf-covered ground, but I grabbed her arm and urged her deeper into the trees. “Keep...keep going. Make...make sure we’re out of sight.”

Walking now, we threaded through the foliage, crunching fallen leaves and branches, our breathing raspy and heavy. Unseen birds and other critters chattered and warbled from the leafy canopy, helping to drown out the noise we were making.

When I was certain we were shielded from view, I halted. “We can rest now.”

“Is it safe?”

“It’s either safe enough or it’s not.” I passed the pipe from my left hand to the right.

“Oh well, that’s a big help.”

“It depends on how much the GJW wants us back. I truly think we were in the wrong place at the wrong time. We’d trespassed onto their territory. But is it worth it to them to expend the manpower to come after us when they have a dozen Aurelians to worry about?”

“We can expose them, too. They have to round up everybody.”

“Which is why we shouldn’t dawdle.”

“Then let’s make the most of our short break.” She smiled seductively. “You owe me a kiss.”

“You said I owed you more than that, as I recall.”

“I’ll take a kiss as a down payment.”

I dropped the pipe, and she slid into my arms like she was meant to be there, like we were two interlocking pieces snapping together. I lowered my head and kissed her. Our lips parted, and she moaned against my mouth. My tongue slid over hers. I held her close, one hand across her shoulders, the other cupping her bottom. My cock hardened, and I pulled her tighter against me.

I plundered her mouth as if I could kiss her enough to satisfy me. But, I couldn’t. A lifetime wouldn’t suffice, and we didn’t have that anyway. We might not have ten minutes if we didn’t get a move on. But I’d never felt as alive as I did when I was with her. Was it selfish to enjoy being on the run with her?

I knew these humans were going to be trouble. From the moment I met her, she had gotten under my fur, her verbal jabs and challenging attitude irritating me. Yet, every clash and squabble had me running back for more. And, once we stopped squabbling, I lost my head and my heart. I lost myself in her. Like Aeon who'd given up a kingdom for Holly, I'd risked the security of my position for Millie. Except Aeon got to keep Holly. I might have thrown away everything for a few nights of pleasure.

I'd do it again.

I'd do it sooner.

She had upended my beliefs and shaken my identity. Nothing had been the same since she'd blown into my life; nothing would be the same after she left. I didn't want to think about leaving Aurelia. I clung to the present, to this time with her, but the future barreled toward me, and duty wouldn't permit me to dodge it.

I leaned my forehead against hers, letting the kiss of her warm breath waft over me. I sighed. "You are a force to be reckoned with."

"I'll take that as a compliment?"

"It's a fact." I kissed her one last time. "We have to get going." Holding her hand, I kissed each of her fingertips and then her palm. "Hold that for later," I said.

She closed her hand into a fist. "I will."

I trust you, she'd said. Her trust was the biggest honor and responsibility of my life. I had to get her to the LOP ship, get her home safe and sound.

We set out again. She slipped her hand into mine, the simple gesture warming me from the inside out yet opening up an ache of longing. When we parted for good, I would never hold hands with anyone again.

“I still can’t get over Prince Lomax getting involved in kidnapping and destroying an entire township,” she said.

“I came to Aurelia because the prince had gone missing. We found him, but he is still lost. I suspect he has been lost for a long time.”

“What will you tell the king?”

“The truth. But, it will require immense proof. The king will resist with every breath he takes. He will rail. His anger will be fierce.”

“On the bright side, your broken vow will seem minor by comparison.”

“It might go that way,” I hedged. My gut told me the opposite would be true. I could foresee becoming a scapegoat for Prince Lomax’s far more serious transgressions. Wrath that should have been directed at the second son would be transferred to me. The situation with Lomax decreased my chances of receiving a pardon, my only hope for redemption.

The walk had gotten easier as we’d stumbled across a game trail, a path worn through the wood by traveling animals. Like people, animals were inclined take the path of least resistance. Except me. Rarely had I taken the path of least resistance. I glanced at Millie.

We emerged from the woods into a clearing. In the distance sprawled the towering metropolis of Relia. Still

several ypnots away from the capital, I spotted hovercraft entering and leaving. I estimated at least a two-hour hike; we wouldn't reach the city until after nightfall.

A visual scan detected no threats, a positive sign that maybe we'd eluded the GJW, that they'd chosen not to come after us but were occupied with rounding up the Aurelians. It wasn't like they had no idea where we would go. Of course, we would make a run for the nearest city.

However, any organization willing to bomb a village into ruin would be unlikely to leave loose ends. And Prince Lomax would want me back. My capture would be personal to him.

We weren't safe yet.

Chapter Sixteen

Millie

We chased the city that seemed to move as we did, staying out of reach, never allowing us to get closer. It sprawled on the horizon, a tantalizing, teasing Shangri-La of light and safety. We should have been there by now. It felt like we'd been hiking for *hours*. My feet hurt, my legs ached, my stomach growled with hunger, my lips were chapped, and my mouth was dry. The GJW had confiscated the pack containing our supplies, so we'd had nothing to eat or drink since leaving the ruins that morning.

The sun had begun its descent, dragging a shade of night over the brightness of day. The sunset—a starburst of mauve, persimmon, and amber—was a magnificent sight to behold, but I didn't care. Stunning colors didn't make my sore feet hurt any less. I couldn't drink or eat a sunset. Did I mention I was getting cranky?

“We'll be given food and drink at the LOP embassy,” Nadir said.

“How did you know what I was thinking?”

“I can tell by the way you keep licking your lips you are thirsty. I hear your stomach growling. And I feel the same. It won't be much longer now. Maybe another half hour.”

“Thirty minutes!”

“Maybe twenty.” He bent at the knees and turned his back. “Hop on. I'll carry you.”

“No, I’ll walk. I’m just...*hangry*.” It was sweet of him to offer to carry me, but he had to be tired, too. He never complained.

“Hangry. I do not understand that word.”

“It means when hunger makes you angry.” I needed to do better. Act better. I had no right to complain because being here was my own fault. If I hadn’t hidden on the shuttle pod, I could have avoided this little adventure. I could have been having dinner with Jessie and Kat. I’d have quite a story to tell when I did get back to the ship. Would they be more surprised by Prince Lomax...or by Nadir and me?

Lomax. Jessie wouldn’t be shocked about Nadir—she’d gloat. She’d insisted all along there was something between us.

“When did you realize you liked me?” I asked him.

“What makes you think I like you?” His mouth twitched with a teasing grin. I loved this lighthearted side of him.

“Har. Har.” I mock-punched his upper arm.

“From the start, you got under my fur. Your sarcastic comments, the way you challenged me. You intrigued me. I couldn’t stay away.” Another grin. “You may have noticed our paths seemed to cross a lot.”

“I did kind of notice.” Damn. Jessie had been right. She’d insisted Nadir kept popping up to see me. She’d gloat for sure.

“All the favors I did for your friends, I was doing for you. You seemed unimpressed by me, and that made me want to impress you. But I fooled myself into believing duty had motivated me.”

I hooked the crook of his elbow and hugged his arm.

“The king’s advisor can’t have feelings. Well, I can have them, but I can’t act on them. So, I suppressed them. After we crashed, I realized how much you meant to me and that I wasn’t acting out of duty but concern.” He glanced at me. “When did you know you liked me?”

I smiled and peered at him from under my lashes. “What makes you think I like you?”

He chuckled.

“At first, you were the man I loved to hate. I enjoyed our sparring sessions more than I would admit to myself. After we crashed, and I got to know the real you, everything clicked into place. Then you—” My mouth dried, and my knees knocked together. *Say it! For stars’ sake, this can’t be any scarier than being abducted by aliens.*

“Then I?” he prompted.

“Then you became the man I loved to love,” I finished. What would he say now? He’d admitted to liking me, but he hadn’t mentioned the *other L* word. Was I jumping the gun?

He halted and turned me to face him, taking my hands in his. In the fading light, I had to squint to read his expression, but that was a good thing. If the heat served as an indication, my face was beet red. I’d never told a guy I loved him before. I didn’t remember being this nervous the first time I had sex.

“*Viq ogurk gat,*” he said. Was he letting me down in Ara-Cope? Responding with the dreaded *thank you* to a declaration of devotion? “I love you,” he repeated in Terran Universal.

A smile broke out on my face, but then wavered as his expression remained solemn. He looked as serious as a heart attack. *Maybe that's the Arasetan culture?* I should have pumped Holly and Giselle for details about how Aeon and Joule expressed their love.

“You don't look happy...” I said. Thank goodness I hadn't tried this in daylight. I felt emotionally exposed. Naked.

“You fill my heart with gladness, but the complexities of the situation—” He broke off as I tugged a hand free and clapped my tingling nape and whipped around.

A glowing red dot bobbed in the night. “Nadir! It's the—”

“I see it.”

Another GJW spy orb circled us. If not for its red eye, we wouldn't have been able to see it in the dark. But, it did have the light—a red, glowing bullseye.

“Get the pipe. Where's the pipe?” I would smack the effing sphere so hard, it would bust a window in the capital city.

“I dropped it in the woods when we kissed and forgot to pick it up.”

The orb swooped in to hover right in front of our faces like it was taunting us.

Nadir snatched it out of the air.

“Good catch!” I cheered. He could play ball on my team any time. The orb hummed, its wings vibrating, trying to get away.

He held it in place on the ground and pressed his heel onto the spy cam. *Crunch*. With a swivel, he crushed the orb.

“There’s no telling how long it’s been following us. It might have just caught up with us or it could have been following us from the beginning, but I don’t doubt it was transmitting.”

“That’s why they didn’t race to come after us. They sent the spy cam.”

He snapped his gaze to the city. “Let’s hurry. Once we enter the capital, we’ll be untouchable.”

We were so close. Like a city that never slept, the bustling metropolis was lit up like daytime, revealing pedestrians ambling through the streets and hovercars speeding through the air. But we weren’t safe yet. If we got recaptured, we wouldn’t be lucky enough to escape a second time. They’d follow through on the threat and execute us.

Nadir grabbed my hand, and we sprinted through the night. Fear fueled the urgency. Urgency ramped up my fear. Running made the danger more tangible, more threatening. Pebbles rolled under my feet. Twigs snapped at my ankles.

I stumbled, but he caught me, preventing me from doing a face-plant.

In the darkness, our breathing sounded heavy and labored like we were doing something fun. This wasn’t fun.

“How-how are you doing?” he asked.

“Just-just peachy,” I gasped, letting go of his hand to clutch at the stitch in my side. I’d run more today than I had all year. Bile bubbled into my throat, but I didn’t slow down. Maybe I’d become paranoid, but the sensation of being

watched hadn't ceased with the destruction of the spy cam. There could be more orbs following us. *We're not safe until we enter the city.* Like the chorus in an Aurelian song on repeat, the mantra played on a loop in my head, putting power to my legs.

Whoosh. A forceful gust of hot air knocked me on my ass. "What the hell?"

Nadir hit the ground, too, but rolled to his feet and hoisted me to mine.

I gaped as the hatch on a hovercar peeled open. Whether cloaked by tech or darkness, the vehicle materialized out of nowhere.

A tall, hooded figure, his silhouetted head oddly shaped, leaped out.

"Run, Millie, run!" Nadir shouted.

With a growl, he charged at the figure, ramming him in the chest with his horns. They fell in a tangle of limbs. Three more hooded figures armed with stunners jumped out of the hovercraft.

I gulped.

It ain't over till the fat Aurelian sings. I shoved my hand into my pocket and grabbed the canister of antiseptic. Before we'd left the township ruins, I'd found it on the floor. I'd missed it when I put away the first aid supplies after doctoring Nadir's head.

Singing at the top of his lungs, a hooded GJW thug rushed at me with his stun stick.

“*Hi ya!*” I shot him with the antiseptic.

His song hit a glass-shattering high note, and he crumpled over, rubbing his eyes.

“Okay, who’s next? Who wants a squirt?” I shouted, brandishing the canister.

The other two hooded men froze, glancing between their blinded compatriot and me, seeming to reconsider taking me on. They had to get close to jab me. My little can of antiseptic had a longer range than their stun sticks. Unfortunately, it was a *little* can. From its weight, I guessed enough antiseptic remained for one more good blast. I could take out one of them, but not both. *They don’t know that.* I waved the can menacingly.

Nadir had the insurgent pinned. One of the men confronting me rushed to help his fellow thug. “Watch out!” I yelled to Nadir.

Whoosh. The blowback from another hovercraft sent the thug reeling. Before the craft even set down, the hatch opened, and a *dozen* armed aliens leaped out.

I definitely did not have enough antiseptic.

Chapter Seventeen

Nadir

Blasters drawn, the Aurelian police surrounded us.
“Nobody move! Drop your weapons!”

The GJW insurgents ditched their stunners, but Millie stood there, clutching something.

“The human doesn’t understand! She can’t speak Aurelian,” I shouted before they shot her for noncompliance. “They’ve ordered you to drop your weapons,” I repeated in Terran Universal.

She tossed the object.

Two familiar-looking uniformed officials emerged from the group and strode toward me. I still had the insurgent pinned. The woman eyed him. “Prince Lomax, I presume?” she said in Ara-Cope.

“Yes.” I yanked his hood off and stood up. I’d known immediately it was Lomax. The hood had hidden his face, but it couldn’t disguise the outline of his horns.

“Prince Lomax, you’re under arrest for kidnapping, insurgency, and destruction of property.”

“Nadir? What’s going on?” Millie gasped. Either she hadn’t noticed or she didn’t recognize the emblem on the hovercraft and the uniforms. Inching toward me, she widened her eyes as the prince and the other three GJW insurgents were placed in restraints and herded into the police vessel. Discarded weapons were collected.

I pulled her close. “They’re LOP—and Aurelian police.” The two familiar individuals were the “search team” I’d followed off ship.

“The cavalry arrived.” The tension left her body, and she slumped against me.

“Are you all right?” the woman asked Millie in Terran Universal.

“I thought we were goners,” she replied.

Concern hardened into a scowl. “You should not have left the ship.”

“It’s a long story,” she answered before I could reply.

“You’ll have plenty of time to tell it.” She stared down her beak of a nose. “I’m LOP Special Agent Judika Ospra, and this is my partner, Davi Dovano.” She motioned at the approaching male.

He held up Millie’s canister. “What were you going to do with this? Tend to everyone’s wounds after the fight?”

She tossed her head. “I was hoping to prevent a fight, sort of. The one guy might need medical attention. He kind of got sprayed in the eyes.”

“Kind of?” Ospra arched her feathery brows.

“The medic already checked him out. He’ll be fine,” Dovano said.

Ospra extended her arm at the police hovercraft, indicating we should board. “After you...”

* * * *

We'd been so close to the capital city, we could have walked there almost as quickly as flying. We'd hardly boarded the hovercraft and lifted off before it landed in Relia outside the LOP embassy, an imposing edifice fronted by statuary of every LOP director since time immemorial. Ospra and Dovano ushered us off the craft, and then it flew away with the prisoners, including Prince Lomax. Millie and I were taken to an interrogation room, identifiable by its stark lack of amenities. Two straight-back wooden chairs faced off two more comfortable-appearing chairs over a plain rectangular console.

“Have a seat,” Ospra said.

Millie glanced at me. “Are we in trouble?”

“Depends on what you have to tell us,” Ospra said.

Millie headed for a cushioned chair, but Ospra blocked her path. “Over there.” She gestured to the other side.

With a huff, Millie flopped into a wooden chair, and I took the one next to her. “I'm parched,” she announced. “If this is going to take more than a few minutes, we need water and a snack. We haven't eaten since this morning.” Her stomach growled as if to prove her point.

Dovano exchanged a glance with his partner before slipping into a seat opposite us. He tapped the console, and a communication and command unit appeared in the glass. He typed in a few strokes and then closed out the unit. “Refreshments have been ordered,” he said.

The accommodation surprised me, but then, as a member of a protected class unfamiliar with galactic laws and customs, Millie could get away with more than I could. I hesitated to push my luck by issuing demands because I was going to need every iota of luck available to me.

I wasn't too worried about what would happen to us. We were victims, not perpetrators. We hadn't done anything wrong other than leave the ship without authorization.

However, I had more than our welfare to consider. Prince Lomax's actions had thrust me between two powerful forces. The LOP would seek to prosecute him; the king of Araset would insist he be sent home.

Ospra slipped into the seat next to her partner, studying us with an eagle-eyed gaze. "So, tell us what happened."

Before I could signal for her to let me do the talking, Millie offered, "We were abducted by those Galactic Justice Warrior nutjobs. They locked us up beneath the township they destroyed, but we escaped when Nadir peed on the force field. We were headed to the city, so we could return to the LOP ship when they found us again. Then you guys came."

A chime sounded in the room. Dovano tapped a talon on the console, and a low-level LOP staffer entered with a tray. After setting it on the console, he nodded at the two officers and left.

"Help yourselves," Ospra said.

"Thank you." From a carafe, Millie poured two glasses of water. She handed me one, and then drank hers, draining the glass. I downed half of mine, thirstier than I'd realized. As she

refilled our glasses, I served our food onto two small plates. I'd been expecting nutribars, but they'd provided *chorts*, protein sandwiched between two leavened, but thin, grain-based rounds. In addition, there were *rabanas*, a purple-red crescent-shaped fruit.

Millie bit into a chort, her expression shifting from hesitation to approval. She flashed a thumbs-up as she chewed. I began to eat. The protein source was savory and flavorful, the rabana ripe, sweet, and juicy.

“So, again, tell me why you left the ship,” Ospra said. Asking a question one already knew the answer to was a common interrogation technique.

“I came to search for Prince Lomax after he failed to show up at the summit,” I said. “I’m sure you know that.”

“I’m sure you know that the LOP was handling the search.”

“He is my responsibility.”

She turned to Millie. “And what about you?”

Millie swallowed a mouthful of chort. “My being here is an accident. I happened to be on the shuttle when Nadir launched it.” She selected a crescent fruit.

Ospra’s feathery brow arched, but it was Dovano who asked, “What were you doing on the shuttle?”

Millie bit into the rabana and muttered something.

“What was that?” Ospra said.

She swallowed. “Taking vid.”

A huge security breach. If I'd known what she'd been doing, I would have advised her to keep the information to herself.

Ospra scowled. "Of the shuttle?"

"Of the entire LOP ship," she replied, and I cringed. "I wanted to show everyone on New Terra what is out here. What they've been missing."

The LOP had gone to great lengths to prevent New Terrans from learning about the galaxy. I leaped to Millie's defense. "She is not familiar—"

"What happened to the vid you shot?"

Millie shrugged. "It was on my handheld, but all our electronics got toasted when we crashed on Aurelia."

"That's *why* we crashed," I added. "All electronics were destroyed."

"For your sakes, let's hope so." Ospra curled her lip and her talons.

"I'll have their handhelds collected." Dovano accessed the console controls.

"They're on the evac pod. You don't know where our ship is," Millie said.

"We know where you landed. We're the ones who brought your shuttle down," Ospra said.

"What?" My jaw dropped.

"Did you think we didn't know you were following us? We had no choice but to disable your shuttle."

“You caused us to crash? We could have been killed!”
Millie said.

“But, you weren’t,” Ospra said.

“We could have been. This is unacceptable.” I intended to file a grievance at the highest level.

“You misappropriated an LOP vessel, left the main ship without authorization, and attempted to land on Aurelia during a key summit meeting. Any unauthorized spacecraft would be considered a potential threat and treated in the same manner.”

“You knew I was no threat. You know who I am. I notified the LOP where I was going and why.”

“The message was not received until after you had left the ship without authorization. And we did not know about *her*.”
Ospra glanced at Millie.

“With all due respect, everyone on the LOP vessel is aware of the humans aboard.” There were only three of them: Millie, Jessie, and Kat. “Returning them to New Terra was the primary purpose of the journey.”

“Exactly. So, why did one of them show up on Aurelia? She has no legitimate reason for being here.”

“I *told* you. It was a mistake,” Millie said. “I wasn’t trying to come to Aurelia.”

“We know that now,” Dovano conceded. “But, at the time, it seemed suspicious.”

“For the protection of all the dignitaries attending the summit, the LOP had to err on the side of caution,” Ospra added.

“So, you shot down the evac pod because *I* was onboard?”
Millie glowered.

“We didn’t shoot you down; we disabled your electronics. Your presence wasn’t the only reason we did so, but it was a contributing factor in the decision,” Ospra said with no trace of an apology. “You could have been a spy. Or a member of the GJW.”

“How could you think that of her when she was with me? I’m the royal advisor to the king of Araset.” What did it take to be above reproach?

“And Prince Lomax is the son of the king of Araset, and yet he is a lieutenant in the GJW,” she pointed out. “We’ve had him under surveillance for a while but didn’t have enough evidence against him to act—until now. We suspect he intended to hijack the summit proceedings to air the GJW’s so-called grievances.”

Based on what I’d learned, there was little I could say to rebut her claim. Her suppositions were possible. He had gotten into deeper trouble than I could fix. The king’s intercession might not be enough to save him.

I could not believe the prince had joined the GJW uncoerced. “He did not join the GJW of his own free will. He’s not an anarchist or an insurgent. He’s a *prince*. He was brainwashed,” I argued.

“That is entirely possible,” Ospra conceded, “but it doesn’t relieve him of accountability.”

“What has Prince Lomax *done*? You’ve presented conjecture of his intent, but what crimes has he committed?”

Millie asked. “Did he...was he involved in destroying the village?”

Good questions. I waited with bated breath for the answer.

Ospra and Dovano exchanged a glance. “We are still investigating his actions, but he did not have anything to do with the destruction,” Dovano admitted.

I exhaled a breath of relief.

“We believe the GJW recruited him because his high-profile status lends credibility to their organization. They intended him to be GJW’s public face,” Dovano explained.

He flattened his palms on the console and splayed out his talons. “We have *informants* inside the GJW, as well as our own undercover agents. The LOP, with the cooperation of the Aurelian government, has been successful in keeping the Galactic Justice Warriors in check. Unlike the trafficking cartels that have penetrated every sector of the galaxy, the GJW is mostly confined to this planet, where it originated, with just a few tiny off-planet groups, which will soon be stamped out.”

“If they’re so in check, how did they manage to destroy the township?” Millie asked.

Again, Ospra and Dovano looked at each other. A heavy silence followed.

“The Aurelian government destroyed it,” Ospra said.

“What?” Millie echoed my shock. “No. The GJW did.”

“The GJW makes many claims, most of them untrue,” Ospra said. “Propaganda is a powerful weapon.”

“They’re claiming responsibility to turn a defeat into a victory,” Dovano explained. “The GJW had infiltrated the township, turning it into a stronghold and a mecca for sympathizers. They posed an imminent threat, not just to Relia, but the entire planet. They were so entrenched, the Aurelian government decided its only recourse was to take drastic measures. They raided the village, arrested the known GJW members, and then torched the township to prevent the GJW from returning.”

And caused them to go underground.

“The LOP allowed that?” Millie said. “Innocent people lost their homes.”

Ospra shook her head. “That is not how the LOP operates,” she denied. “It was strictly an Aurelian decision.” She brushed away an errant feather. “We refrain from dictating to nation planets how to prosecute insurrectionists on their own turf.”

Refrain, my ishta. Araset continually ran into LOP interference. The destruction may not have been an *official* LOP campaign, but I’d bet my cape the agency had had a hand in it, possibly provided the weapons. At the very least, they’d supported it from the sidelines.

I crossed my arms. “If the *Aurelians* routed out the insurgents, why is the GJW still around to wreak havoc?”

“The members unknown to the Aurelians escaped, and smaller units had been established in other areas. They were able to regroup. That’s why the prince was so important to them. He is a mascot around whom they can recruit. If

someone as important as a prince of Araset supports their cause, well, then, it must be legitimate.

“At one point, the GJW were two thousand members strong. They’re down to an estimated few dozen on Aurelia, and a few hundred off planet. We are very close to eliminating them.”

The explanation confirmed my hunch that we’d escaped because the GJW lacked the manpower to pursue us right away. With the captive Aurelians free, they’d had their hands full. But they’d located us with the spy cam and would have recaptured us if the LOP hadn’t shown up.

“Are you aware the GJW have gone underground—literally? They are using tunnels under the old township.”

Dovano nodded. “As we were collecting you, a joint LOP-Aurelian team raided the tunnels.”

So, we would have been freed—provided the GJW hadn’t executed us first. I recalled the prince’s implied threat. Would they really have killed us? Would he have allowed it? Despite everything I’d witnessed, I still couldn’t believe he would do that. I clung to the belief that deep down he was still honorable and decent and would have halted our executions.

But, what of the others? They’d shot at us in the township. Had they actually killed people? How would their actions affect the prince? Would he be deemed guilty by association? He’d only been on Aurelia a few days. *And what might he have done elsewhere? He didn’t just yesterday flip a mental switch. What of his other ambassadorial trips?* We wouldn’t know what had happened until he could be deprogrammed.

“They found two bodies. Two Aurelians were killed,”
Dovano said.

That could have been us.

“That’s awful.” Millie shook her head.

“We’re reviewing the spy cam vids to determine the
persons responsible. They will be charged and prosecuted
accordingly,” Dovano said.

The vid would exonerate the prince, I was absolutely sure.

Ninety-nine percent.

Ninety, anyway.

“So, what happens now?” I asked.

“You two will be transported to the LOP ship and return
to Araset, pending the outcome of this investigation. Given
that we may need further testimony from Ms. Rogers, she
cannot go home yet.” Ospra’s mouth adopted a wry twist.
“Regulations wouldn’t permit us to contact her on New Terra.”
Her gaze shifted to Millie. “Rest assured, Ms. Rogers, you will
get home. You have the guarantee of the League of Planets.”

“Oh well, as long as there’s a guarantee.” Millie’s sarcasm
echoed my thoughts.

But the delay gave us more time together. My heart raced.

Then Millie addressed the LOP again. “What about my
friends? Jessie Sayles and Kat Whalen? They’re supposed to
go home.”

“Unfortunately, their homecoming will be delayed as
well. It would not be an efficient use of resources to deliver

you to Nomoru then ferry them to New Terra then return for you.”

“And what of Prince Lomax?” I braced for bad news.

“He will remain in our custody until the investigation is complete and then his case will be adjudicated in accordance with the law.”

“On behalf of the king, I request His Highness be allowed to return to Araset while the investigation continues and pending the adjudication. I accept full responsibility for him and will ensure he does not leave Nomoru.” That would give us time to figure out when he’d been compromised and get him deprogrammed.

“As you have no authority to speak for the king,” Ospra said, “you cannot accept responsibility for him.”

I drew myself up and fixed an imperious stare. “As the royal advisor to the kingdom of Araset, I am designated and authorized to act on behalf of His Majesty.”

“Conditional on you operating in your official capacity—as *designated and verified* by the royal cape.” She swept her gaze over me. “You have no cape. How am I supposed to know you have the authority to act on the king’s behalf?”

This didn’t come as a total surprise, but I felt like I’d been rammed in the chest.

Millie jumped to her feet. “You’re saying because he doesn’t have the cape *with him*, his position doesn’t count? You know who he is! You already admitted it. His cape is on the evac pod.”

Ospra’s lip curled. “Unfortunate.”

Millie's eyes flashed. "This is the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

"The cape serves as proof of authority. Without it, he has no proof. He may have been released from his position as advisor."

Millie planted her hands on her hips. "Oh yeah? Well, show me your proof of authority! What legal right do you have to act on behalf of the LOP?"

Ospra detached her handheld, tapped it, and held it up to display her electronic badge. Dovano did the same.

"All I see is your picture. I can't read those squiggles. That badge could say you're members of the Galactic Justice Warriors."

Ospra's eyes flashed dangerously.

"Millie, it's all right." I leaped to my feet and took her arm. Rules were rules. The LOP had been known to bend them, even break them, but Ospra would stick to every single letter of the law—until she didn't.

Millie blinked back angry tears. "I am so sorry. This is all my fault." She glowered at Ospra. "It's my fault he left the cape on the evac pod."

If I had had the cape, it wouldn't have done me any good. Desecrated, it conferred no power or authority. Even if it had remained intact and in my possession, Ospra would have found another reason to ignore my request.

"When we retrieve the handhelds from the evac shuttle you hijacked, if we find a cape, we will return it—after the completion of the investigation," Ospra said, and then looked

at Dovano. “I believe our question session is complete for the time being. Please escort Nadir and Ms. Rogers to a shuttle so they may return to the ship.”

“This way, please.” Dovano gestured for us to follow him out of the interrogation room.

Chapter Eighteen

Millie

A solemn Nadir and I shuttled to the LOP ship late at night, technically the wee hours of the morning. I knew he was worried about the prince's situation, probably feared he might be blamed. If half the stories I'd heard about the king's temper were true, Nadir had good reason to be worried. Which was totally fucked up. Lomax was an *adult*, for crying out loud, and, hey...did anybody remember his *title*? The prince outranked Nadir. He could order him around, and he would have to obey.

It put Nadir in a precarious position—he had the responsibility for Lomax without the authority to command him. What little authority he did have was conferred in that stupid cape. Without it, he'd essentially been defrocked. I felt responsible. I had no idea it was that important, and I felt terrible for all the times I'd mocked him for wearing it. I'd desecrated it, and he hadn't had it when he needed it.

"I'm so sorry about your cape," I said as we disembarked the shuttle and left the launch bay.

We saw no one; most of the crew and the passengers were still abed. The silent, vacant ship added to the feeling we'd been gone much longer than three days. It felt like I'd lived a lifetime.

"It's not your fault," he said.

"Yes, it is. I should have found something else to wipe up the blood."

“Your intentions were good.” He took my hand, squeezing my fingers. “Besides, it wouldn’t have swayed Ospra anyway. The lack only afforded her a ready excuse to do what she would have done anyway.”

“Well...I can’t forgive myself—”

“You mustn’t blame yourself. I don’t blame you. This is a complex situation.”

“You’re very magnanimous.” I saw no trace of the supercilious, disapproving man I’d once met, but a humble, self-sacrificing one. Maybe the experience had changed him, or maybe I was finally seeing beneath the surface to the real man. He’d devoted his life to the royals, surrendering his needs for theirs.

As he will continue to do. My heart ached with prescience of the bleak future rolling toward us. Nadir would maybe receive another cape and resume business as usual, while I would return to New Terra. How much time did we have left? A few days? A week? Despite the investigation, I felt certain the LOP would expedite my repatriation. Humans were like ugly heirlooms you were forced to keep, but you didn’t want to display, so you shoved them out of sight in a closet.

I squinted at the vaguely familiar passage. “Where are we?” I hadn’t paid any attention to where we were going; I’d simply been walking.

“This is your cabin.” He stopped in front of a door and dashed my hopes. “I’ll let you get some sleep while I tend to my duties.”

This was it? *Sayonara. Adios.* It's been fun? I stared at him.

"I must contact the king and inform him about Prince Lomax before the LOP does," he explained gently.

"I understand. You definitely need to do that." When would I see him again?

He caressed my cheek with a finger. "I would like to return when I am done, if I may."

A burst of sunlight flooded my body. "I would like that."

He leaned in and kissed me.

A crew member came marching down the corridor. We hadn't encountered anybody since returning to the ship, but the instant we kissed, *hellooo!* I expected Nadir to break away, but he didn't, just continued to kiss me.

When we separated, the crewmember had disappeared, and Nadir had a smile on his face. I loved knowing that I had put the grin there, and, for the moment, his troubles had been lightened. I wished I could be his comfort, his support, his rock. He needed someone. I had a bad feeling Nadir stood in the path of a category-five shitstorm.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," he said and strode away.

I let myself into my stateroom and sprang into action. I needed to let Jessie and Kat know I was okay, but, given the hour, they were probably asleep, and I wanted to be ready when Nadir returned. I dashed into the tiny room with the ionizing cleansing unit and shrieked at the sight of my reflection in the mirror.

Grime streaked my face like war paint. My brunette hair had snarled into dreadlocks. Forcing myself to peer at the damage, I realized some of the “dirt” was dried blood from getting conked on the head in the crash. I’d known my clothing was ripped and soiled, but, in the taunting light of the cleansing unit, it was positively filthy. And Nadir had seen me like this. Kissed me. Ugh.

Cupping my mouth with my palm, I huffed. *Oh, sweet baby Yoda.* My face flamed.

Not bothering with the garment cleaner, I shoved my disgusting clothing into the incinerator chute. Then I stepped into the ionizer and set it to run for a double cleaning cycle.

Emerging fresh and sparkling with a head of squeaky-clean-but-matted hair, I donned a robe, brushed my fuzzy teeth, and then applied myself to detangling the rat’s nest. When I was as presentable as I could be, I went to find something to wear. Scrutinizing the limited options, and finding nothing remotely seductive, I decided to just stick with a robe. If Nadir was returning for the reason I hoped, I wouldn’t be wearing clothes very long anyway.

I’d shut the wardrobe when a buzzer sounded.

That was fast. I ran to the door and jabbed the open button. “Nadir—”

Jessie and Kat stood outside.

“Millie!” Kat cried.

“Oh my god! Are you all right?” Jessie said.

They launched themselves at me, catching me in a group hug. “I’m okay. I’m okay.”

“Where have you been? What happened? Nobody would tell us anything,” Jessie said.

“We’ve looked for you everywhere,” Kat said.

“I’ll explain everything.” I pulled Kat in, and Jessie followed.

“Where the hell have you been?” Jessie repeated.

“Nadir and I were on Aurelia, searching for Prince Lomax.”

“You left the ship?” Jessie said.

“You and Nadir?” Kat’s jaw dropped.

“Nobody told you?”

Jessie pressed her lips together. “Nobody said a word. We started to get concerned when you didn’t show up for dinner several days ago, but when you didn’t appear at breakfast either, we got worried. When we couldn’t find Nadir, I cornered several LOP reps. They insisted you were fine; you were out and about on the ship somewhere.” She shook her head disgustedly. “They lied. They had to know you’d left the ship.”

“Why did you go looking for Prince Lomax?” Kat asked.

“He never showed up at the summit.”

“He didn’t?” Kat’s eyes widened with alarm. “What happened to him? Is he okay?”

“Er...he’s fine...sort of. Physically unharmed, anyway.”

“What do you mean? Is he okay, or isn’t he?” Kat twisted her hands.

I recalled the time they'd spent together. He'd seemed as smitten by Kat as she was by him. Had his feelings for her been genuine or an act? Being an insurgent didn't preclude affection, did it? Perhaps he had the ability to compartmentalize his emotions, using the ones he needed depending on the situation. Or maybe there was a sleeper effect to the brainwashing, like it kicked in when triggered. I could only guess.

It pissed me off the crew had pretended everything was fine and never told my friends I'd left the ship. Of course, they would have worried more if they'd known.

I squeezed Kat's shoulder. "He...um...got into some sketchy stuff. It's a long story. You guys had better sit."

They perched on my bed, and I pulled up a chair and recapped my adventures: unintentionally stowing away on the evac pod, crashing, getting abducted by the GJW anarchists, discovering Prince Lomax was a GJW lieutenant.

"Lomax is kind, gentle, and gallant. He's not an insurgent!" Kat defended him.

"We think he was brainwashed."

She crossed her arms. "I won't believe it until I talk to him myself."

I couldn't blame her for refusing to accept the truth. I'd been shocked, too, and Kat knew him better than I did. I continued with the story about how we escaped, almost getting recaptured, then the rescue and interrogation by the LOP.

"That means," I said, delivering the bad news with a wince, "you guys aren't going home yet either. We're

returning to Araset until this matter gets sorted out. I'm sorry."

Jessie grinned. "So, you and Nadir surrendered to the inevitable and got it on. I knew it!"

I'd glossed over the details, relating we'd achieved amity, but of course Jessie read between the lines.

Kat wet her lips. "W-what's going to happen to Prince Lomax?"

I shook my head. "It's still up in the air. He's in LOP custody. Nadir will pull all the strings he can to get him sent home while the investigation continues. He's talking to the king right now. I'm assuming the monarch will intervene." I omitted mention of the cape and Nadir's loss of clout.

I patted my mouth to stifle a yawn. "Sorry. I've been up all night." Another buzz sounded in the cabin. "That must be Nadir."

It was. He'd cleaned up, too. His fur and horns gleamed. He'd donned fresh but simple leggings and a tunic. The casual, relaxed mode of dress suited him, adding another dash of macho to his considerable sex appeal. He smelled scrumptious. I leaned in for a sniff of his woodsy, leathery musk.

Over my shoulder, his gaze honed in on Kat and Jessie. "I didn't know you had visitors. Good morning, ladies."

"Come in." I grabbed his wrist and hauled him inside.

"Morning," a dejected Kat greeted him.

"Good morning, Nadir," Jessie chirped in a bright voice, grinning like the Cheshire cat. She would never let me forget

she'd been right about us all along. But I forgave her because she leaped to her feet and grabbed Kat's arm. "We were on our way out."

Dragging Kat with her, Jessie sashayed to the door. "We can catch up more after you've had a chance to...take a little nap."

I resisted the urge to throw a pillow at her departing back.

"You are tired. I should let you sleep," Nadir said after they'd gone.

"Sleep is for sissies."

He shook his head. "I don't quite understand the idiom."

"I don't either. I just made it up. I'm glad you're here. What did the king say? Is he really furious?"

Nadir hadn't been gone very long, and I couldn't guess if that was good or bad. It could go either way. In criminal trials, deliberations tended to be shorter when the jury reached an acquittal. On the other hand, when you got fired, the boss did it lickety-split without beating around the bush. "You're fired! Don't let the door hit you on the ass when security escorts you out." Had he been terminated? Or had the king said, "Hey, we all make mistakes. Don't worry about your broken vow and the debacle involving my second son who was supposed to inherit the throne."

"The king was indisposed, so I was unable to speak with him. I left a lengthy message, explaining what has occurred. I did learn from the captain that we will orbit Aurelia until tomorrow, at which time he will set course for Nomoru. We'll reach the planet the day after."

He rested his hand atop the chair I'd been sitting in. "Were your friends upset about the delay in returning to New Terra?"

I shrugged. "Didn't seem to be, but we didn't get into it. Kat seemed more concerned about Prince Lomax. She likes him."

He nodded absently and shuffled around my cabin, the tight space forcing him into a dance-in-place routine. *Step to the left, turn. Step to the right, turn.* He touched things, and there wasn't much to touch. He appeared preoccupied with the vid screen and console controls I'd never figured out.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

His fidgety behavior was out of character. The king couldn't have reamed him a new one because he hadn't spoken to him yet. Had he gotten bad news about Prince Lomax?

"I'm fine." He touched his horns with both hands before dropping them to his sides. Okay...I knew that gesture. He was not fine. He turned away from the console. His chest rose and fell on a deep breath. "Would you...would you ever consider not returning to New Terra?"

Huh? I didn't understand the question. Not go home? Where else would I go? Where else *could* I go? I had no say-so in where I lived. The LOP shipped all humans found off planet back to New Terra, and, even if they didn't, under the embargo, no planet would accept us. "I have to go back."

"I understand." He nodded.

I moved close to him. It took two steps; the cabin was that small. "What do you understand?"

“That you miss New Terra. You wish to go home with your friends.”

“It’s not like I have any other choice.”

He lifted his hands toward his horns then dropped them and squared his shoulders. “You could stay with me.”

I blinked. He could not have said what he just said. “What was that?”

“You could stay on Nomoru with me...as my bond-mate. Viq ogurk qat. I love you. I don’t want you to leave. I want to spend the rest of my life with you.” His posture was stoically straight, but his restless hands revealed his insecurity.

“I love you, too. I would stay with you if I could, but how is that possib—”

He smothered my words under a hard, searing kiss. His muscular torso squashed my breasts. Tusks poked at my cheeks. I kissed him back fervently as the world—well, the spaceship—tilted under my feet. What did this mean? Did I dare hope for a future together?

He murmured in Ara-Cope between kisses.

“Terran-Universal, please.” I thumped his chest with a fist as my heart pounded with hope.

He lifted his head. His gaze locked on mine, and he spoke clearly and succinctly in Terran Universal. “Millie, will you accept me as your bond-mate and stay with me?”

“Yes, but—”

“No buts. Yes is all I need.” He ducked his head and kissed me again.

Of course I would be his bond-mate. But there were buts. Didn't his advisor position require celibacy? Would the LOP even permit me to remain? They'd granted special dispensation to Giselle and Holly, but Giselle had gone to work for them, and Holly was the bond-mate of a former prince. Not to mention, the king barely suffered Holly's presence, and she was his *son's* bond-mate. It seemed highly unlikely the king would let me reside at the palace.

"Nadir..." I squirmed out of his arms to raise these very important issues, but he capitalized on the opportunity and pushed my robe off my shoulders. Questions fell away as my gaze locked on his mesmerizing amber eyes. They blazed with desire. My stomach fluttered, and my pussy clenched with need. We could talk later.

He disrobed like his clothes had caught fire, flinging them off so frantically I half expected him to stop, drop, and roll. But then he stood before me in a glory of taut muscle, luxurious fur, and naked emotion. He'd removed more than clothing. He'd stripped away shield and pretense to reveal his love for me, his desire and yearning, his nobility and honor, his pride and his humility.

My heart swelled with such powerful emotion, I feared the organ might burst. "You are amazing," I said in a low voice, and then my breath caught at his sweet and lascivious smile. A gentle tug of my hand had me falling against him, melting into his embrace. Our lips fused in a searing caress of tongue and tusk as we tumbled onto my narrow bed.

I arched my neck as he kissed my throat. The brush of his lips, the gentle nip of his teeth, the nudging of his tusks against

my sensitive skin caused my pulse to race. I hung onto his horns, my fingers playing over the ridges before sliding down to grip his fur-covered shoulders.

He teased my breasts, rubbing his face against the mounds before laving the stiff peaks and drawing a nipple into his mouth. I ached and moaned at the sweet tugging sensation I felt clear down to my core. He slipped a hand between my legs to tease my clit. Wet and aching, my pussy contracted when he eased two fingers into my channel.

I palmed his cock, rubbing the length, appreciating the firmness of the ridged rings encompassing the otherwise smooth shaft. Tightening my hand, I pumped his hard-on, eliciting a growl. His sexy, throaty intonation ratcheted up my lust. *I could listen to him growl all night long.* Joy tingled through me as I realized I *could*. Buts or no buts, we had a future! I could listen to his wonderful voice, stroke his luxurious fur, spar with him in good fun, have him, hold him, and love him for the rest of my life.

I grabbed his horns and kissed him with passion and joy. His thigh parted my legs, and then our bodies merged. I moaned from the delicious pressure and fullness. As our bodies moved in a timeless rhythm, I buried my face against his neck, breathing in his intoxicating alien scent. Swiveling his hips on the inward stroke, he hit the right spot to drive me insane with need, pushing me toward ecstasy. Tension rising higher and higher, I rocked my hips in sync with his thrusts. *So close, so close...*

When he convulsed, growling in my ear, I exploded into a million tingling, rapturous pieces, expanding and soaring into

the cosmos before raining down like a meteor shower, somehow falling into place, whole again, in his arms.

Bodies still joined, he continued to rock inside me as he rubbed his cheek against my face.

This is where I belong. This is what I've been searching for. The well-being suffusing me was more than an aftereffect of a stupendous orgasm but originated from a deeper sense of rightness. Nadir and I fit. We completed each other; we complemented each other.

I tugged on his horns, so I could look him in the eyes. Not only was he sexy as hell, he had nifty handles. I cleared my throat and wet my lips, determined to get this right. “Viq ogurk qat,” I said in Ara-Cope.

He blinked, and then his mouth twitched in a way suggesting he was trying not to laugh. “I love your toenails, too,” he said in Terran Universal, his face almost serious.

“What?”

His lip caught on a tusk in a devilish, boyish, happy grin. “Your pronunciation is a little off.”

“Damn. I need to get one of those translator thingies.”

“I’ll see that you get fitted, but I’ll miss your cute malaprops.”

Affection shared, we smiled stupidly at each other. He brushed a kiss over my lips then rolled off and tucked me up against his side. I pillowed my head on his furry shoulder and smoothed my hand over his chest and abs. Beneath fur lay hard muscle. His coat camouflaged how well-built he was. *He doesn't spend all his time in the palace. Or maybe he does.*

Maybe Arasetans are naturally muscular. I realized that was one of many, many things I didn't know about him. Now I had a lifetime to discover them.

However, the answers to my *buts* had to be addressed sooner rather than later. If only I wasn't so sleepy. Comfy and toasty, cradled in his arms after great sex and a long adventure, my eyelids drooped with exhaustion. Nadir stroked my hair, combing through the strands in a soothing gesture. Blinking, I tried to stay awake.

He chuckled. "Don't fight it. Just let go."

"Maybe I will take a little nap. Don't go anywhere."

He kissed my head. "I'll be right here."

* * * *

I startled awake to find Nadir perched on an elbow peering down at me. "How long was I out?" I smiled at him.

"A couple of hours."

"You didn't watch me sleep the whole time."

He shook his head. "Just a little while," he lied unconvincingly.

I wiped my mouth. "I didn't drool, did I?"

"No."

"Talk in my sleep? Confess any deep, dark secrets?"

"No. You snored a little."

"I do not snore!"

He threw his head back and let out an obnoxious, nasal snort.

I slugged him lightly in the chest. “I do not make those noises.” *Maybe* I snored *a little*, but not like that!

He chuckled. “No. You have a cute snore.”

I glowered.

He laughed.

Ancient stars, I loved this light, teasing side of him. Again, I marveled that across the galaxy we’d found each other. The alien I’d once dissed turned out to be the man of my dreams. As a bonus, staying with Nadir meant I’d get to see Holly, the sister of my heart. I couldn’t have predicted my life would take this turn, so it felt like fate, with a little assist from the alien species traffickers who’d abducted me.

But. But. But. I hated to erase his smile, but pesky questions demanded answers.

“So...how can I be your bond-mate if you have taken a vow of celibacy?” I launched right into it. I did *not* intend to enter into a bond-mating in name only. Much as I loved Nadir, a sexless marriage would be a deal-breaker.

“I have resigned my position as advisor to the monarchy of Araset.”

“You what?” I almost bopped him in the nose as I sprang to a sitting position.

“In my report to the king, I relayed I had met my bond-mate, broken my vow, and that on my honor I would resign my position, but I would continue to assist in any way I could in getting the prince home.”

I bit my lower lip. “You put all that in a message?” He had served the king for a long time, dealing with the monarch’s mercurial moods and arbitrary edicts, so, far be it from me to second-guess him, but...okay, I was second-guessing. He’d severed his commitment to the king. A face-to-face exchange might have been better than breaking up with the monarch in what essentially amounted to a text.

We need a break. It’s not U, it’s me.

His gaze dropped to my bare breasts, so I tugged the bedcover over my chest. He needed to stay focused. Still, the gleam in his eyes was flattering. And hot.

“I wish to avoid blindsiding him by giving him time to come to terms with the situation before we meet in person. Besides, I had to get word to him about Lomax before he heard the news from somebody else. Gossip travels at the speed of light. I don’t want to have to hide how I feel about you,” he explained.

Well, that made sense. “How do you think the king will react when he gets your communique?”

“He will explode.”

“Oh.”

“And then he will calm down.”

“This is my fault. I led you astray.” I was an evil seductress. I kind of liked the title, but I worried about the king’s reaction. Seducing Nadir was one thing. Luring him to his doom was something else.

“This is my choice. You are my bond-mate. I choose you.”

“What about your position? You’ll be unemployed. How will we support ourselves?” Who would hire me? I worked in tech support, but my skills were not up to snuff in the greater galaxy. Technology out here was so much more advanced than on New Terra. What kind of employment could Nadir find? Did he have transferable skills? What kind of job did indulging the whims of entitled, spoiled royals translate to?

“We’ll be fine.” He shrugged. “I was handsomely compensated during my many years of service.”

I would hope so. They’d have to pay me a heck of a lot to get me to give up sex for the rest of my life.

“Living and working at the palace, I had no need for money, so credits have been piling up and accruing interest. It’s not a fortune, but it will see us through until we figure out what we want to do. Perhaps we will open a business together.” He was remarkably sangfroid.

“And we will live in Araset?”

“Unless there is somewhere else you prefer.”

“No, Araset is perfect.” I could see Holly—and Giselle, when she dropped in for a visit in between LOP undercover assignments. But, still. “How can you be so calm and matter-of-fact?”

“I realized after I messaged the king that if you consented to be my bond-mate, I had everything I needed and wanted. Anything else that came my way would be a bonus.”

Getting abducted by aliens had taught me life tossed you curveballs. But if not for a curveball, I wouldn’t have met Nadir. He was the best thing to happen to me.

I tilted my head and studied him. He sat up in bed, his posture relaxed, his expression calm. I'd messed up his fur; it spiked on his head. That wonderful, tantalizing musk wafted off him.

Damn, he's fine. And he's all mine.

"Viq ogurk qat," I enunciated as clearly as I could.

The corner of his mouth twitched.

Dammit. "Still toenails?"

He laughed and pulled me down onto the bed. "It means the world to me that you love my toenails. I love your toenails, too."

"That's not surprising. I do have very cute feet," I said and kissed him.

Epilogue

Her Majesty Queen Citrine of Araset

Two days later.

He's gone too far this time. I projected a bland countenance and allowed my skirts to disguise my hurried gait as I rushed for my bond-mate's receiving room. The time had come to put a stop to the nonsense.

Two footmen guarding the chamber stepped aside to allow me to enter.

In full tantrum, the king stomped across the jeweled mosaic floor. At the sound of the door, he halted and whirled around to shout at a lone cowering aide. "I told you no visitors! I am not to be disturbed— Not you, my sweet," he said when he noticed me.

"I would hope not," I said drily. I turned to the aide. "You may leave us."

"As you wish, Your Majesty." His expression relieved, he fled.

My bond-mate jutted out his chin. "You cannot change my mind."

"Change your mind about what?" I asked.

"Whatever you came here to change my mind about."

I held my tongue. Finesse worked better than force, and he needed to vent a while longer. *Saar* was a benevolent

monarch, revered and loved by the citizens, but he had episodes of volatility, expressed in private. Those emotional explosions enabled him to rule the kingdom with a steady hand. Rather than allow feelings to seethe and fester, he released them, so when he did act, it was with a clear head.

He resumed pacing, his gait agitated, his embellished cape flying out behind him, unencumbered by the gemstones in his horns. With the coronation of every new king, the crown jewels were inlaid in the ascending monarch's horns, a process requiring several years to enable him to adjust to the weight. If all the jewels were embedded at one time, the king would be unable to lift his head.

“Everything is changing!” Saar tossed up his hands. “And not for the better.”

I settled into my throne and watched my beloved wrestle with the burdens of responsibility. On top of ruling a kingdom, dealing with our Copan rivals, and navigating galactic affairs, he now faced significant upset in his own house, the palace. Many matters were simply out of his control.

“How could he *do* such a thing?” he railed.

“Which *he* are you referring to?”

He laughed mirthlessly. “See, that’s the problem.” He came over and settled into his throne next to me. “Take your pick. Lomax. Aeon. *Nadir*,” he emphasized the former royal advisor’s name. He bounded to his feet again.

“Aeon bond-mated to a human. Lomax joined a galactic insurgency group. It’s a good thing we had five children

because we're going to run through all of them before we find one who is qualified to rule.

“And now, Nadir. The lone reliable constant.” He dropped into the seat beside me again. “The one individual I could count on no matter what broke his vow of celibacy and lifetime fealty and resigned his position so *he* can bond-mate with a human.” He waved his hands. “Other than you, there was no one I trusted more than Nadir. I need him to manage palace affairs. The kingdom I can rule. Copa I can deal with. Galactic politics I can navigate. But the nobles and our children? Zigqat.”

“Then maybe you should not have arrested him,” I said.

Upon landing in Araset, Nadir had been taken into custody for breaking his vows.

“It's not like I locked him in the dungeon.” Saar scowled. “He is merely confined to quarters.”

“You barred him from seeing his bond-mate.”

“What bond-mate? There was no official ceremony sealing such a union,” he said, avoiding my gaze.

“How could there be when you confined him to quarters and refused him visitors? He needs your blessing to move forward with the ceremony.”

“The royal advisor must remain celibate to enable him to focus his attention on serving the monarchy.”

“That is an old, outdated custom, which, quite frankly, was always ridiculous—and detrimental to the goal.”

“Regardless, the vow of celibacy is our tradition and the law.”

“Perhaps you would care to give celibacy a try,” I suggested. Saar was a lusty male. It was how we ended up with five children. He wouldn’t last three nights. Probably not even two.

He narrowed his eyes. “You wouldn’t.”

No, I wouldn’t cut him off. I’d have a hard time going without, too. But I held my silence. Let him worry a little.

“What do you intend to do about Nadir?”

He didn’t answer right away. “I don’t know.” He sighed. “What do you recommend?”

“Release him. Allow him to bond-mate with the human. Eliminate the celibacy requirement and then beg him to take his old job back.”

“Beg? I am the king. I do not beg.”

“Ask him if he will accept the position.”

He huffed. “All right.”

“And then—”

“What else? Isn’t that enough?”

“Restore Aeon’s title and allow him to inherit the throne. You wish to avoid change? Don’t change the line of succession. Aeon has been groomed to rule. He knows what to expect. He is a very capable, wise, kindhearted young man.”

“You are right. As usual. I will reinstate Aeon,” he said.

Thank the stars. It had been getting to the point where I feared I might have to force the issue. Uncertainty and chaos didn't foster confidence among the populace nor in the galaxy. People desired the security of knowing we had a stable government—and would have a stable government no matter what crises might be swirling around us. With Aeon and Lomax unable to inherit, and the other children still too young and callow, the future of the kingdom had become uncertain.

Saar gave me the side-eye. “Any suggestions on what to do with Lomax?”

“I do, if you're open to hearing them.”

“I am always open to your suggestions, my sweet.”

“Well, I hope you don't mind, but I took the liberty of calling an LOP minister I know. After a long discussion, she agreed to arrange for Lomax to be sent home. While the investigation is ongoing, he must remain under palace arrest and must report in to an LOP rep who will be assigned to him. But he can begin deprogramming.”

“That's a good first step.”

“*And*, since you asked for my input, I recommend Lomax be allowed to visit with Kat Whalen.” I'd been informed my son had significant affection for the human, and I had a hunch she could be instrumental in his recovery.

“Who?”

“She is one of the humans. She and Lomax have a friendship—”

“No-no. Enough humans already. I'm not without sympathy for their situation. I know they were abducted from

their planet and all, but no. Just no. Aren't two living in the palace enough?"

Two in the palace. Holly Winter and Millie Rogers. I hid a smile. He'd just revealed he'd accepted Millie Rogers as Nadir's bond-mate. He'd come around on this, too. He needed a little time. Lomax wasn't even here yet.

"As you wish, Saar." I patted his knee and rose to my feet. "See you at dinner?"

"Of course."

I started to leave.

"Citrine?"

"Yes?" I peered back at my beloved.

"Sometimes I wonder who's ruling this kingdom, you or me."

"There's no question, Saar. You are," I replied and went to deliver the good news to Nadir and Millie.

* * * * *

Thank you for reading *Alien Undone (Forbidden Bond 3)*. What will happen to Prince Lomax? Can he be deprogrammed? Is a bond-mating between the prince and Kat Whalen possible? Find out with me in *Forbidden Bonds 4* to be published early in 2024. Also, Jessie Sayles will get a book of her own. To get notified of future *Forbidden Bonds* releases, subscribe to my newsletter: <https://carabristol.com/newsletter/>. You'll get a free sci-fi romance to read while you wait for the next *Forbidden Bonds* book.



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About Cara Bristol

USA Today bestselling author Cara Bristol writes science fiction romance about tough alien and cyborg heroes who fall hard for gutsy heroines.

Cara is a homebody who married a wanderer. When she's not writing or being distracted by squirrels cavorting outside her office window, she enjoys reading and traveling the world with her husband. Topping her bucket list is visiting all seven continents and petting a squirrel.

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