



BRIDES  
OF  
THODOS

DARED BY THE  
ALIEN  
DEVIL

BRIDES OF THE VINDUTHI BOOK 6

AVA YORK

DARED BY THE ALIEN  
DEVIL

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BRIDES OF THE VINDUTHI: BOOK SIX

AVA YORK

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## EMMA

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The chef loaded the dinner plates one by one onto my trays. There were five plates and a drink for each. Each plate was loaded with a spicy Valtor stew and a doughy substance I didn't know the name of. Not the most disgusting thing that the Nazoks ate, but the acidic smell and red-brown color were pretty far from appetizing as a human.

*What would Sherlock Holmes make of this meal, I wondered.*

“You got everything?” the chef asked sharply. “I didn't make extra, so you better not drop it.”

I picked up the two trays and nodded. “I won't.”

“Wait, put 'em back down. I forgot the garnish.”

Sherlock Holmes was a man who had lived on Earth before the Catastrophes and the Ardrik Federation offered us a way out. He worked as something called a detective. To me, he was a little bit of a hero.

I only knew about him because of an old battered book a scavenger found in the remnants of one of the above-ground cities. I don't think the scavenger could read, but he brought it back because it had a hard, green cover and was pretty enough that he thought he could sell it. I was just a little kid, and my mother left me to wander the market while she haggled for algae to eat. When she found me, I was so caught up in reading it, I didn't even see her coming to get me.

Two months later, on my birthday, she bought it for me, and I've carried it with me ever since. I held it in my lap for

comfort when I negotiated one of the standard deals with the Ardrik Corporation: passage off the dying Earth in exchange for forty-five years of indentured labor to anyone who bought my contract.

*Think logically.*

I told myself that repeatedly as the ship lifted off into space. *Watch for little details. Figure out things no one expects you to, and you'll be all right.* If Sherlock Holmes could do it, so could I.

The chef put on the last garnish, then stepped back to get a good look. He smiled, obviously satisfied. The grin made me shudder with relief. He was quick to lose his temper, so any expression of pleasure meant safety for the moment.

Meanwhile, I thought about the dishes. Four entrees with doughy bread to share meant four guests. Not exactly the kind of deduction one bragged about, but it was something. The garnish meant that the chef was trying to impress, which meant the guests were wealthy. On the other hand, there was no appetizer course, which meant they weren't so wealthy or powerful that Conii needed something from them. She was out to show off, but the way you do for friends, not a boss.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” the chef snapped. “Get going before it's cold!”

That was one thing Sherlock Holmes had that I didn't. No one yelled at him if he stood thinking for twenty seconds.

I picked up the two platters and hurried towards the dining room. I heard the laughter of several voices through the door. Just like I thought, a friendly social occasion.

Valtor stew was a Nazok dish, but it wasn't fancy. It was a comfort food, the kind of thing one ate when sick. Add in the spicy kick it had to it, and there was no way the guests weren't Nazoks themselves.

They must have been the three Nazoks who Conii was on friendly terms with and wanted to impress, but wasn't particularly intimidated by. Valtor stew was the least

intimidating dish I could think of. Put all that together, and I had a pretty good idea of exactly who tonight's guests were.

I backed into the door to push it open, and sure enough, I was exactly right. Atlon, Drytor, and Tarrack all sat around the dining room table. Conii, my owner, sat at the head of the table, waving a half-empty glass as she talked.

Nazoks looked a little bit like humans, except they had gray skin and large, sharp teeth. They were usually a little taller than humans but not much more muscular. In the places humans have hair, they had something much thicker, which they often grow longer. They also had brightly colored eyes that I'm told can see quite well in the dark.

Atlon, Drytor and Tarrack all worked for Conii. Atlon handled finances, Drytor dealt with the press and other organizations, and I wasn't totally sure what Tarrack did. Whatever they needed him to, probably, but they didn't talk about his work very often.

The three of them came over regularly, supposedly to discuss business but usually to get drunk and tell stories. If I was Sherlock Holmes, I would have remembered that Valtor stew is a hearty dish, and it's supposed to go well with being drunk. Another clue I should have caught.

Sure enough, as I laid the plates down on the side table, Conii was just finishing one of her favorite stories. I heard this one a few times, including in front of these three guests, but everyone was in a good enough mood that it didn't matter.

“And that's when we realized the dart never actually got through his scales! He was completely awake the whole time and too shy to say anything!”

The table roared with laughter. I grabbed Conii's plate and drink and laid them in front of her as quickly as I could. The less she noticed me, the better.

See, while there were many things Sherlock Holmes had that I didn't, there was one advantage I had that he never managed. I didn't just work for Moriarty. I lived in her house.



Conii bought my contract about three years earlier. I was fairly happy about it at the time. Housework definitely wasn't glamorous, but it was far from the worst kind of work people bought humans for. Between having no special skills and average looks, it was about the best I could expect.

On paper, Conii was the head of the Nazok Cultural Advancement Fund. There wasn't anything inherently suspicious about that. During the last big galactic war, the Nazoks lost a lot of their territory and influence. They mostly tried to remain neutral, but by the end of the war, that wasn't an option anymore. Most of their territory was either conquered by the Ardrik Federation or by the Vinduthi and Mondians, who were, in turn, also conquered by the Federation.

Conii lost a husband and several members of her family in that war. She brought them up a lot, and her tone always made it clear she was going to make someone pay for it.

It took me about a week to figure out that the Nazok Cultural Advancement Fund wasn't just interested in putting on concerts and festivals. There was always money and expensive things running through the house. Sometimes, even guns. The servants, including myself, all put on a show of not knowing anything, but we still did. Conii was a gang boss, and that was her headquarters.

I dropped off food and drinks for Drytor and Atlon. As usual, neither of them paid attention. As always, it felt casual from Atlon and purposeful from Drytor.

"That's the great thing about being Nazoks," Drytor said. He set his glass down as he spoke. "The Vinduthi gangs and the Enforcers never even bother with us. They're so worried about each other; they don't even see us creeping up on them."

*Much like how you don't even notice me serving you food,* I thought, scurrying back toward the serving table.

"Are we creeping up on them?" asked Atlon. "I don't wanna be grim or anything, but the average Vinduthi gang moves more creds in a day than we do in a week. Nothing

wrong with that. But we're about as close to overthrowing the Vinduthi gangs as they are to overthrowing the Federation."

"You're thinking like a Vinduthi again," said Conii, smiling proudly.

"I'm just being realistic," he replied.

"No, you're thinking like a Vinduthi," Conii repeated, gesturing with her glass. "The Vinduthi are soldiers. All strength and numbers. Who's got more men? Who's got more guns? More, more, more. We Nazoks are trickier than that."

I set the last plate and glass in front of Tarrack.

"Thank you," he whispered to me. He always said that when I served him, and it always felt good to be noticed, even if only for a moment.

I smiled and walked back around the table to the door. I would stand there for five minutes in case anyone wanted anything, and then I would have a short break until it was time to clear for dessert.

"But being tricky isn't always enough when your enemy is still stronger than you are," Atlon said.

"Hey, don't bring down the party," Drytor teased. He eyed Conii nervously. Fortunately, she was in good spirits that evening.

"That's just what people who don't know how to be tricky say," she said. "The key is to use your enemies against each other. For instance, take Havek, that inventor the Vinduthi always brag about. I didn't have the strength to take him down, but the enforcers did. So I planted a little evidence, and now he's in Deathgate prison, a barren little rock that no one escapes from."

"Let's be careful," said Tarrack, glancing quickly at me. "There are humans present."

Conii laughed then looked at me and smiled a sickly smile. "Don't worry. My property knows when to keep its mouth closed. I give them dignity and decency, unlike the rest of their

kind on this station. And in return, they keep their mouths shut, their eyes closed, and their hands to themselves.”

I didn't say anything. I just stood as still as I could, waiting for the attention of the group to pass away from me.

“Take that one over there,” Conii continued. “Her name is Emma or Emmus or one of those silly sounding human names. I bought her. She serves me quite faithfully. And in return, I give her freedom to roam about Thodos III to do my bidding. Is she dumb? Not any more so than the rest of her kind. But she's earnest and she's too stupid to take any action against me. If she ever did though, she knows that even if I didn't kill her, she'd never have a good setup as the one I provide. She'd be back with her kind outside my protection living in filth with the rest of her miserable race.”

I was lucky if she just wanted to make a mean comment about me. I'd seen her do much worse to the other beings who worked for her. Besides, she wasn't wrong. Working for Conii, I was given more freedom to come and go and have my own space than if I worked at any number of places on the station. Men weren't buying slots of my time to grope me or fuck me. I didn't have to sell my body for my supper.

There were some who would kill to have what I did.

I was perfectly aware of it.

Conii turned her attention back to her friends, and they went with her. “As I was saying. It's not about how powerful you are. It's about knowing what to do with that power.”

For the next few minutes, I did my best to ignore their conversation and focused on being still. Conii's anger would often reignite suddenly just when I thought she calmed down. When five minutes ended and I silently exited the dining room, I breathed a sigh of relief.

As I walked back to my quarters, an idea formed in my head.

I knew that Conii was a criminal for a long time. But most of the things I heard about were vague. Even when they weren't vague, they were complicated and filtered through so

many subordinates, it would have been impossible to prove them.

Even if I could prove them, they were the kinds of crimes that no one would want to get involved in: the things the Enforcers turned a blind eye to because as long as someone was going to do it, they might as well know who.

But framing a Vinduthi gang member was different. That was specific. She did that personally. There would have been records of it, and if someone could prove it, the Enforcers would have to take it seriously. The Vinduthi wouldn't let them just ignore it.

*If* someone could prove it.

I pulled my copy of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* out from under my bed. At that moment, it all felt so obvious. Somewhere out there were the clues to solve a mystery. And there I was. Emma Rochester.

“Emma Rochester, consulting detective.”

The words sounded perfect rolling off my tongue.

*I'll do it.* I'll figure out how she framed that Vinduthi, and I'll find the evidence to prove it. Because I'm a detective.

And that's what detectives do.

## TAZHR

---

I was sitting on twenty with the dealer showing eighteen when I felt a tap on my back. My shoulders tensed. Luck was against me that whole night, and the last thing I needed was to get called away just when the cards were being good to me. The Black Star Casino was supposed to be a place where I came to unwind.

“Yeah, what is it?” I snapped. It better be important.

“I’m so sorry, sir,” the waiter behind me said nervously. “When you’re available Alkard wants to talk to you.”

I nodded to the dealer. “Hit me. I’ve got this one.”

The dealer passed me a card. A three. My lucky streak finally started. “Um.” The waiter coughed. He was a human and, like most humans, looked fragile enough to blow over if you breathed on him too hard. “Actually, Alkard was very specific that if you were gambling, I was to keep bothering you until you came with me.”

I turned around and straightened, letting him take stock of my complete Vinduthi bulk. “And you feel like it’s a good idea to follow that order? To bother me, the operation’s enforcer, while I’m trying to have a night off and enjoy some cards?”

The waiter trembled. “Well... it is what Alkard said...”

I laughed and patted him on the shoulder. “Well, good on you. You’ve got spirit. Give me just a second.”

I turned around and flipped over my cards. I raked in the chips I just won, then handed one of the blue ones to the

waiter.

“All right. Take me to him.”

The waiter quickly stashed the chip away and then walked me to the private section of the Black Star.

Alkard took over Draven’s office, looking just as comfortable there as he did on his own.

It made sense.

The Black Star, as well as Draven and his men, were all part of Alkard’s syndicate.

Alkard, as usual, had his feet up at the desk and was listening to some weird, modern music I didn’t understand. He paused it when I entered.

“Tazhr!” he greeted me, smiling. “I didn’t expect to see you so soon!”

“You nearly didn’t,” I said, sitting down on the chair opposite him. “But the waiter you sent insisted. I felt good about the next few hands, so whatever job this is, I hope it’s at least that important.”

“Oh, it’s very important.” He swept his feet to the floor and leaned in closer to me. “It’s about Havek getting framed.”

I cracked a smile. “Probably one of those mercenary companies. With all the prisoners using them to buy assassins to take out Havek, they’ll double their business in a week.”

Alkard scowled. Apparently, he wasn’t in the mood for humor. “Tazhr, do you ever take things seriously?”

“Not really,” I answered. “Everyone goes out the same whether they take things seriously or not. So I figure I might as well have a good time while I’m stuck here.”

“You don’t really think that,” he said. A statement, not a question.

I gave another shrug. “I don’t know what I think. All I know is I’ve seen a lot of beings get killed. I’ve done a few myself, as you know, and I haven’t yet seen anyone who seemed like they were happy to go.”

I didn't mention the war, but I didn't have to. Alkard knew that's what I was talking about. Did it screw me up? Maybe. But when you work as muscle for a gang, there are worse things to be than a little screwed up.

Alkard shook his head. "I don't know if you mean it, but if you do, that makes me sad."

"I mean less of it than I say, more of it than I think. That's usually how it works."

Again, not even a smile. "You're a good Vinduthi and you're loyal. But I also worry about you. I worry that you're just drifting. That you haven't found anything you care about or anyone."

"I care about doing a good job," I said. "I care about being loyal."

"I know you are," said Alkard. "You've been invaluable in the past and you're part of the family. But you're a little too quick to temper and you fly off the handle. You need to learn to get stable."

I didn't know what to say about that. It was a question I thought about once or twice, in different words. But if there was one thing the war taught me, it was that no one knows exactly what they're gonna do when the shit really hits the fan. Or at least, none of the young ones who ended up going off to war did.

"I won't let you down," I promised, but I wasn't sure if he believed me.

"Everything we've heard tells us it was Conii who framed Havek." He took a deep breath before continuing. "But it's no good unless we can prove it. That's your job. Prove that Havek's innocent, and if you can, prove Conii was the one who set him up."

Alkard wasn't wrong. I knew I wasn't the first person you'd pick for a mission like this. I was the muscle of the gang, not the brains. I wasn't ashamed of that. It was just a fact. That, however, was definitely a brain's mission, and I couldn't help but feel nervous about it.

“I can do it, boss,” I said. “I’m not going to let one of our brothers go down.”

Finally, Alkard smiled. “Remember what I said. Find something you care about. Or someone. You do that and you’ll make it through anything.”

“I’ll do it,” I answered. “I’ll even make sure it’s something other than breaking stuff and hurting people.”

He laughed. “Get out of here.”

On the one hand, that wasn’t my kind of job at all. I cracked legs, not cases. On the other hand, Alkard was right.

I knew for years now. There was something missing in me. Other than my brothers, I couldn’t take anything seriously. I just didn’t care.

But maybe it was time to change that.



# EMMA

---

**M**y investigation into my owner's crimes got off to an admittedly slow start. I had to wash all the floors and bathrooms the next day, and none of the stains or balls of random dust I came across looked much like clues. By the time I finally got a break, I was tired and hungry, and then it was time to prepare for dinner again.

And we were out of greenberry spirits, so I needed to walk over to a bar across the way.

*At least I finally have a moment of quiet*, I thought as I walked out the servant's door. As I came around the corner, I noticed someone very large standing in the shadows across the street, watching the house.

Very, very large.

Without thinking, I walked just a touch faster.

It was okay, really, I decided. Even Sherlock Holmes didn't solve all his cases in just one day. I would figure it out eventually. Once I got a little free time.

Not that I ever got much of that.

First, I needed to know exactly what it was Havek had been framed for. That was probably public information, but I'd need some time alone with a computer panel to access it. I knew a few servants I could talk to about that. Once I knew what the evidence was, I could work out what she did to fake it.

Once I knew that, all I'd have to do would be to find a receipt or a record or anything that would pin her to it.

*Would Conii really be dumb enough to leave something like that where I could find it? Then again, could she really be smart enough not to leave anything at all somewhere?*

Whatever. It didn't matter right now. Right now, I needed to focus on my real job. In the bar, Iitar was behind the counter, as usual. That was good. Iitar was about the friendliest human man I ever met, either back on Earth or here on Thodos III.

"Well, if it isn't the consulting detective herself!" he beamed. I told him about Sherlock Holmes the second or third time we talked. He teased me about it, but in the same way he teased everyone. "And what can I get for you?"

"Four bottles of greenberry spirits for Conii," I answered.

"I should have that on the shelf in the back," he said. "I've never sold the stuff to anyone but her, but at least she seems to like it. Go ahead and take a look."

"Have you ever tried it yourself?" I asked.

"Too bitter for me. Supposedly you develop a taste for it, but with so many other things to drink, why bother?"

"Too bitter," repeated one of the beings drinking at the bar. "That sounds like Conii, all right!"

"Well, I certainly have better things to do than develop a taste for her!" Iitar laughed. A second later, he caught himself and looked at me. "You're not gonna tell her I said that, are you?"

"Tell her what? That you don't like greenberries?"

I slipped around the bar and into the backroom where all the extra bottles were kept. It took me a little longer than usual to find them; they were tucked away in the back corner. While I did, I heard the doors to the tavern opening once, then twice. I didn't think much of it.

As I was about to walk into the room, I saw the Vinduthi.

And froze.

Vinduthi were all pretty striking to look at, but that one was striking even by their standards. His skin was a dark gray. His eyes were sharp and golden, and the horns were a short row going back from each temple. His muscles were enormous, and his skin had a patchwork of scars and gold tattoos.

Iitar stood directly in between me and the Vinduthi, hiding me from him.

I stood there, straining my ears, as the stranger asked soft questions.

Then he moved quickly to the door with heavy steps and walked out into the night. As he did, I suddenly became able to move again.

“Quite a customer, huh?” said Iitar as I walked around the bar.

“Yeah,” I said absentmindedly, the four bottles still tight to my chest. What was I going to do? Did I have time?

Without another thought, I hurried out onto the promenade behind him.

My mind raced. A Vinduthi who wanted information about Conii? It had to be connected, didn't it?

*If so, he could be a powerful ally.* I could research anything within the compound, but if I needed to look at things outside it, I needed someone else. There was also the question of what I'd do with evidence once I gathered it.

*He could solve a lot of my problems if I could just get him to talk to me.*

The Vinduthi walked quickly, taking long strides, every once and a while, glancing behind him. I already struggled to keep up when, without warning, he ducked into a barely used maintenance corridor.

I broke into a run to catch him before I lost him. The service corridor was dark, much darker than the main promenade, and before my eyes could adjust to it, a hand shot

out of the shadows, grabbed my neck, and slammed me against the wall.

“How many other people are with you?” a deep voice growled.

“No one!” I said. “There’s no one else with me! Please don’t hurt me! I just wanted to talk.” I clutched the bottles tighter against my chest.

There was a long pause. I could make out two golden eyes staring at me from the dark.

“I’m going to let you go,” the voice finally said. “But if you run or scream or do anything stupid, I’ll kill you. Do you understand?”

“I understand,” I squeaked.

“And are you going to be smart?”

I did my best to nod. The hand on my throat released, and I gasped for air.

The Vinduthi from the bar stepped forward into the light. Those gold eyes were fixed on me, and it was all I could do to make myself look away from them.

“Is it okay if I put these bottles down for a second?” I asked. “I’m trembling a little, and I don’t want to break them.”

“Go ahead,” the Vinduthi said. “Just remember what I said.”

Death threats didn’t help with the trembling. Still, I managed to get the bottles lined up against the wall, safe. As soon as I was sure of that, I stood up to face him again.

“All right. Now why were you following me?” he asked. “And you’d better make it good.”

I realized that he wouldn’t like my story very much. It sounded like a lie and a pretty silly one at that. If my brain was working, I would have tried coming up with something better, but all I thought about was how strong he was and how confident he sounded when he promised to kill me.

“My name’s Emma Rochester. I’m an indentured servant in Conii’s employment.” The words came tumbling out of my lips, an unstoppable babble. “I heard you asking about information in the bar, and I thought it might have something to do with her framing some Vinduthi because you’re a Vinduthi, and she said she did that. And so I followed you because I’m looking into the same thing, and I want to know...”

His finger on my lips stopped me. “Wait a second. So you’re a servant.”

“Yes.”

The narrowing of his eyes didn’t exactly seem like he trusted me. I didn’t blame him. “But you just decided that you wanted to figure out a crime that your owner did.”

“Pretty much.”

“And then you heard me talk to someone else about it and decided to follow me into an alley alone.”

“That’s right.”

I didn’t even believe myself, and I was the one who did it.

This was never going to work. My chest tightened. If I was lucky, he’d kill me quickly. Vinduthi were known for being brutal and by the scars on this one, it didn’t seem like he was the exception.

“Sounds legitimate,” he finally said. “In the future, never do any of that again. But I can definitely use someone like you.”

“Wait, you believe me?” I replied, stunned.

“Sure, I believe you,” he said. “Anyone who planned something would have come up with a better story than that.”

“T-thank you,” I stuttered and leaned down to pick up the bottles. “I’ll just grab these and be out of your way. I’m so sorry for bothering you.”

“Now, wait a second,” he said, and I froze again. “I said that I could use someone like you. You work inside the

compound, right?”

My poor brain scrambled to catch up.

“That’s right. Mostly I do the cleaning and serve meals. Run errands for the chef.”

He tapped my nose lightly. “Well, that’s just perfect. Good news. My name’s Tazhr. You work for me now.”

I stared at him. “I... I do?”

“And Conii, too. But also me. I’d offer you three times your salary, but for an indentured servant, that’s still nothing.”

“That’s okay.” I glanced at the opening of the alley, but it was way too far to run. *He’d be on top of me in a second if I run.* “What do you need me to do?”

He smiled, revealing his sharp fangs. “Nothing too much. I need you to copy everything on Conii’s computer and get it to me.”

“Her computer?” I said. I knew enough about computers that I could do it if I could find a datastick and enough time in her office. But the office was one of the few places I was never supposed to go. Besides, if I got caught with a datastick on me, Conii would know immediately what I was up to.

“Yup,” he answered. “Get me everything on it. Can you do that?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I might get caught.”

“Well, don’t,” he snapped. “And don’t tell anyone about this. Especially not Conii. Because whatever she can do to make your life miserable if she catches you, I’ll do a lot worse if you betray me.”

The way he said it was the same way he seemed to make every threat. He wasn’t trying to frighten me, just inform me of a fact. There was no way to doubt someone who talked about hurting you with that kind of confidence.

But... I wanted to find evidence of her crimes, right? Sherlock Holmes would take advantage of this unexpected ally, I was sure.

“I won’t betray you,” I promised. “I’m just scared that I’ll get caught.”

“Well, being scared’s no good,” he said. “Being scared makes you freeze up. It’ll get you killed.”

I nodded nervously. “That doesn’t make me less scared.”

“No, I guess it wouldn’t.” He thought for a second, then smiled. “Here, why don’t you do this? Whenever you get scared, pretend to yourself it’s all just a dare.”

“A dare?” I repeated.

“Yeah, a dare. Like when you were young, and you dared other kids to do stupid stuff. Just pretend it’s one of those. Then, you can feel afraid, and it’s okay, because you wouldn’t get dared to do it if it wasn’t scary. But you also remember that this is your chance to prove that you’re brave and that fear doesn’t stop you.” He shrugged. “Anyway, that’s what I do when I get scared. Maybe it’ll help you, too.”

“Okay,” I said. “Is that all you need? The computer?”

“For now,” he said.

*This is a dare, I told myself, instinctively following his directions. I just have to get out of this alive and without losing the four bottles. That’s the dare, and I can do it.*

I gathered the bottles back into my arms and held them as tight as I could.

“One other thing,” I said, turning back to him. “Once I have the computer stuff, where do I find you?”

“You don’t,” he answered. “I’ll find you.”

# TAZHR

---

E mma.

An indentured human female.

And suddenly the most important being on the whole station.

The tension I experienced with her was enough to make my heart race faster than it ever did in a killing I had done before. I never felt anything like the strong, magnetic pull she had on me, although we were shrouded in darkness.

I had been called dramatic my whole life, along with other things. Extreme, psychotic, insane, and wild were all words that rolled off other beings' tongues when they spoke of me. It was something I almost took pride in. They all knew I would go the extra mile to ensure any job was done well. Maybe not well, but done in general.

If the being in question was dead, that was all that mattered, right? At least, that's how I thought of things. Nothing was gray; everything was black and white. Alive, dead, good, evil, happy, sad. Everything had an opposite, and anything that didn't was much too complicated to keep my attention.

If I told anyone about the severe tension I felt with her in the darkness, they would say those same words. They would say I was insane, I was being dramatic; I was on another wild binge, a victim of a sudden, temporary passion.

I even fantasized about it briefly before she left the alley. She might not have known that I noticed her beautiful blonde



hair and wide blue eyes in the dim light we had, but I did. They were all I could think about before my natural and eminent mistrust kicked in again.

I left the alley after taking a deep breath and trying to focus.

I usually had a general disdain for everything and everyone that wasn't a Vinduthi and wasn't part of my chosen family. The rest of the galaxy could fuck off and get out of my way as far as I was concerned. And if they didn't... Well, there was an easy fix for that.

*Would the knowledge of that part of me scare her?*

I paused and shook my head. I didn't understand why I would have cared if a human woman was afraid of me or not. There was no reason for me to be thinking such things when I had clear-cut directions.

*We don't have time for this, Tazhr. We have to follow her.*

The logical side of me was correct, but I wanted to stay in fantasyland for a moment longer. Right as I thought that, voices from the promenade crowded into the darkness, shaking me from my reverie.

Time to get moving.

Once the voices disappeared, I left the small alley and walked around deeper into Conii's territory. My head turned back and forth while I kept an eye out for any guards who might have seen my little chat with Emma.

If any of them did, there were plenty of alleyways to dispose of their bodies. They would rot within twenty-four hours, and the smell would definitely be obvious after forty-eight hours, but that was plenty of time for us to escape.

*Us? There is no us.*

I shook my head and kept walking. While I tried to go into my usual clear-headed state of mind, Emma's face kept popping up. It was annoying more than anything.

The paranoia I knew all too well crept into my gut, and I thought of all the ways she could have betrayed me. She could

have gone to Conii the second she left my side.

She could have told one of Conii's lieutenants the second she rounded the corner. She could have been even more manipulative with the information and waited to tell someone of my presence a few days later so I wouldn't have killed her that day.

For some reason, even just the thought of her hurting or betraying me made my gut hurt. I went through blood family members planning my murder, friends trying to turn me in to law enforcement, and even being framed for murder myself once or twice.

*I guess I should just be grateful that I didn't wind up on Deathgate with Havek.*

Betrayal, deception, lies. It was part of our life.

But that's not what I wanted from her. It was stupid, but I couldn't forget the feel of her lips under my finger, the movement of her mouth as she talked, her wide blue eyes.

I just watched her to make sure she wasn't going to betray me right away.

That was all.

Finally catching another glimpse of her long, blonde hair, my heart caught when I saw it bounce, her hips swaying from side to side. She had the bag swung over her right shoulder. It moved enough hair out of the way so I could see her ass perfectly while she walked down the dimly lit passageway.

Wasn't she going back to Conii's compound?

Following her, I felt a little like a stalker, but it still gave me a thrill. Sneaking around wasn't usually how I did things, but I wanted to be able to look at her for as long as I could. I needed her cemented into my mind before I left her alone.

I knew Conii's office would be guarded heavily. Obviously, I wouldn't have been able to follow her there, but I wanted to see what else she had on her to-do list for our terrible enemy.

*What is her title for Conii exactly? Errand girl? Bus girl? Human slave?*

She turned toward another marketplace, the noise of the crowd getting louder.

Grumbling, I looked around for cover. If I was going to follow Emma any further, I needed a disguise.

I got close to the marketplace and heard the bustling and roaring of salesmen and merchants.

“Prishem samples made straight from the pot! Beans are bagged and ready to go, harvested yesterday!”

“Latest percomms only 2,000 credits!”

“Try your luck at the credit lottery! Only happening this week until next year!”

I rolled my eyes. The lottery. What a joke. Luck wasn't a real thing; it's imagination for fools.

I peered around the corner and saw Emma getting lost in the crowd. I marked her direction, and slid back into my hiding place as I saw a large sentient walking toward me in a floor length, black cloak. *Perfect.*

As he came around the corner, I caught him in a chokehold and snapped his neck. I glanced down either side of the hallway and ensured no one was looking before I checked under his robes.

*Thank the seven galaxies, he's wearing clothes under this.*

I took off his cloak and pulled it over myself. Putting the hood up, I walked through the marketplace, only taking small glances when needed.

Despite heading in the direction I knew she went, I didn't see Emma. Uneasiness crept through me. I had to find her. I needed to know what else she was doing. I wanted to see what a normal day looked like working under Conii.

That was a lie.

I wanted to see what *she* looked like on a normal day working under Conii.

The amazement didn't leave me as I bumped into various beings shifting through the crowd. I tried my best to keep my head down, but it was difficult when trying to keep an eye on someone. Then again, she would have stood out in any crowd.

She was remarkable.

Most humans would have crumbled from the fear of being shoved up against a hallway by a Vinduthi. She maintained her calm in a crisis, something I barely saw from any being and never from a human.

There she was. But why was she going there?

Speeding up my pace, I walked into a dingy curiosity store, wrapping my hand around the bells on the door to keep them from jingling as it closed behind me.

In a moment, I found her entering a small section to the side of the shop. I snorted at the shelves. There were books in all alien languages but by far the greatest number of books were in human languages.

Even on their dying world, the humans still valued their paper books. They held them as sacred, even bringing one or two books in their cargo when they traveled as refugees.

Once on the station though, the sacredness wore off fast enough when faced with hunger. And so the books ended up here. Well, not here, exactly, but in any number of curiosity shops that catered to those with enough disposable income to enjoy fanciful things.

It always struck me as absurd, this human fascination with reading. I studied the books, pacing the aisles and tracing one of my fingers over the spines of the books. The last time I read something from cover to cover was probably when I was much younger, barely able to talk.

Curling up with a story never felt that important. It didn't win a battle, or outthink my enemies. I had no use for it.

Not so for humans. One or two of the refugees who earned out their contract had even gone on to establish small presses on the station. They put out pamphlets and translated books

from various alien languages into human languages. Who bought them, I never cared to find out.

But apparently the answer was Emma.

“Do you have this in a human copy?”

My eyes closed, and my heart leaped as I froze in an aisle. It was her voice, soft and smooth like a lullaby. *Please, tell her yes. Let her have what she wants.*

“I can check in the back,” the clerk snapped.

“Oh,” she replied sheepishly. “Okay, thank you.”

I could have slit the Talimarian’s throat for that tone he used with her. She bought one of his stupid things, for seven galaxy’s sake. Why would he be so up in arms about checking in the back? It made no sense to me. How could he not have fallen over or swooned over her from just one glance at her face?

“Here you go,” the clerk said. “Only one copy. Not many people ever want to read the original Mondian version and I don’t get that many human customers that want to read it. But you’re welcome to buy it.”

I turned around slightly, peering out from the side of my hood as I surveyed her by the merchant’s desk. She had a volume cracked open to one of the first pages.

*She doesn’t skim. She reads through things. Meticulous. I like it.*

I couldn’t read the human language, but one sight of the Mondian subtitle on the cover made me shiver. ‘The History of Deathgate.’ *Either this is an insane coincidence, or she knows more about the plot against Havek than I realized.*

*I picked a good one to bring to my side.*

“This is perfect, thank you.”

As she reached for her percomm, I spun around back to the shelf. I heard her pay for the book and watched as she walked out the door. She held the book so daintily, and when she

cracked it open, she didn't stretch the covers or pages. She wanted to keep it preserved in its old condition.

Even if she knew about the plan against Havek or that he was sent to Deathgate, why would she have wanted an older copy? That didn't make sense.

*Unless she cares enough about history, which, judging from the way she held the book so gingerly as not to bend the spine, I assume she does.*

That only made her more attractive to me. I turned back to the books. I had to concede. She wasn't going to leave my thoughts. I had to have her, and maybe then I could continue the mission Alkard sent me on.

*If I seduce her and get this obsession out of the way, I might finally be able to do this job with a clear head.*

*Technically, I would be doing this for the sake of the mission...right?*

# EMMA

---

While I made my way out of the marketplace, I thought of Tazhr.

While I was shocked at his brute strength, his forceful nature, there was a strange delicateness to his touch.

My cheeks burned as I put a hand to my lips, as if I still felt his finger resting there.

Maybe the fear kicked up some adrenaline in my veins, but there was something more to it than that.

Could my life be something more than running errands for Conii, waiting on eggshells for her temper to explode, for her to sell my contract to a terrible place?

My books, my dreams of Sherlock Holmes were my desperate attempt to have any meaning in my life.

Could I really get the information that could save an innocent man?

Tazhr seemed to think I could. It was nice knowing that somehow he picked me for the job. I wasn't sure why, but I almost wanted to prove to him that I could take her down and wanted to, just as much as he did.

Once out of the marketplace and down near Conii's quarters, I sighed and looked at my percomm.

It was time to get some information.

First, I took the groceries to the kitchen, unpacking them while the chef chatted away with his line chefs. I remember

being shocked when I found out she had ten kitchen staff working for her in total. I guess when you have billions of credits from scamming and framing other beings, you can afford whatever you want.

Leaving the kitchen, I glanced around the hallways for any sign of movement. I checked my percomm again. Six thirty. She definitely wouldn't be in the office.

But would there be guards or not? I never paid attention to their schedule before. Was it a regular pattern? Were there only guards when she was in there, or only when she was out?

Time to learn.

I made my way to the stairs, hoisting my bag over my shoulder with the book in it. I hoped the pages wouldn't fray or the spine wouldn't bend as I rounded the corner to her office. Four guards stood at the door, and as one they all turned to look at me.

*Shit.*

"What business do you have here, girl?" one of them asked, stepping toward me.

"I-" I cleared my throat. "I was just looking for Conii."

"She's busy," a second one responded quickly.

"I just needed to-"

"Needed to leave." The first guard spoke, leaning forward even closer.

I pursed my lips. I was unsure what type of penalty being a sort of double agent carried in the Nazok gang, but I didn't want to find out, either.

"Thank you," I replied quietly before walking in the other direction. Sherlock Holmes couldn't make bricks without clay, and I couldn't get into Conii's office without learning the schedule of her guards.

"Emma!" the chef bellowed from downstairs.

I closed my eyes and threw my head back, looking at the ceiling. *Now what?*



“Yes?”

“You got the wrong type of peppers!”

I exhaled through my nose and cracked my neck. I forced a smile and walked down the stairs. “Oh no, I’m so sorry!” I chimed. “What would you like me to do?”

He knew I was being cheeky, but luckily he never faulted me for it. Part of me always wondered if he was just as miserable as I was.

“Go get the right ones.” The chef walked out of the kitchen, holding the pepper in his hand. “These are Tortens. I need Yirrupps.”

“Yirrupps...” I squinted at the pepper, racking my brain for alien equivalents of human peppers. “Oh!” My face lit up. “The super spicy ones?”

He rolled his eyes and tossed the pepper at me. I barely caught it, and my bag almost took me down as it swung over my shoulder. “Yes, the super spicy ones. Now go. Leave your bag.”

*Leave my bag? What if they find the book?*

“All right, I’ll go put it in my quarters,” I commented before walking back up the stairs.

My heart raced as I entered my room. I took the book out of the bag, threw the bag in the closet, and shoved the book spine-first into my shelf. No one was going to care about my detective collection, anyway.

Grumpily, I left Conii’s personal quarters and walked back to the marketplace, turning the pepper over in my hand.

*I wonder if I can eat this raw? Is this the sweet one, or is this the one that’s too spicy? I can’t remember.*

As I rolled the pepper over and thinking about how hungry I was, a movement to my right startled me. I dropped the pepper as a hand covered my mouth and pulled me into an alley by Conii’s quarters.

I tried to keep up with the quick pace of who had me, and I inhaled deeply while trying to calm my heart rate. Instantly, I knew it was Tazhr. The smoky scent would have caught my attention anywhere.

“Don’t scream, don’t even whimper.”

For some reason, I wanted to reply, “Yes, sir,” but settled for nothing at all. The notion was insane and reckless, but it was also exactly what I wanted.

He pushed me against the wall, and I got another glimpse of his gold eyes and tracery. I felt my nipples harden, and it wasn’t even cold in that alley. It was warm, especially beneath his skin that was pressed up against me.

His eyes ran down to my chest, and I closed my eyes in response, hoping he wouldn’t see that I was turned on by the encounter. When he raised them back to me, the horniness immediately switched to terror.

*He could kill me right now. I don’t have what he wants.*

“Are you going to be good?” he whispered on the back of his hand.

I nodded and closed my eyes again, thinking how much of an idiot I was to think of him in a new light. He blackmailed me; he could have ruined my life if he wanted to. All he had to do was send one anonymous letter to Conii, and I was done for.

“Good,” he whispered as he slowly removed his hand from my mouth. “Talk quietly.”

I took in a gasp of air and shook my head before I whispered. “I-I haven’t gotten the information yet. There are guards, and I couldn’t get into her office. I just don’t know the schedule yet.”

He stood still, looking at me with those mesmerizing and terrifying eyes that made my heart stammer. He remained silent, which only heightened my nerves and made my whole body tingle with anticipation.

“Please,” I asked as my chest caved in and out from the heavy breaths. “I’ll try again.” I pointed to the entrance of the alleyway. “I just have to go to the store, and then I can go back!”

He cocked a sly grin and shook his head before looking at the exit to the alleyway.

“I’m sure you’ll get your chance at some point.” He returned his gaze to me, and I froze.

*What? He’s not angry that I didn’t get it? Then why is he here? Is he just checking on the progress? How soon does he want this thing? Should I ask for a deadline?*

I decided it was better not to push, but he still remained silent, just looking at me. My eyes flickered to the pepper on the ground outside of the alleyway.

“Well...” I exhaled, almost dizzy with the swirl of emotions running through me. “They’ll look for me if I’m not back soon because, um...” I pointed to the pepper. “I got the wrong...” My eyes met his, and my sentence trailed off.

*Why the fuck am I talking to him about the pepper?*

I shook my head. “I just, I guess I’ll get going since I don’t have what you want yet.”

I tried to move from the wall toward the exit, but he placed his hands on either side of my chest while leaning over me. I felt so small looking up at him and being encapsulated by his large, muscular body. The fear faded into the background, and I felt myself begin throbbing. No one ever cornered me like that, and none had done so in such a confident manner.

“You may not have the download,” he whispered before biting his lip and looking at mine. “But you still have what I want.”

I opened my mouth to ask what he meant, but before any words could slip out, he kissed me. His body pressed against mine, and I felt my back sink deeper into the metal wall behind me. It hurt, but I didn’t even care. I gave in immediately to his lips and ran my hands over his arms, as his fingers gripped my waist.

“You’re delicious,” he murmured, breaking away just long enough for me to gasp for air. “I need to taste more of you.”

Slowly, he licked down the side of my throat, nuzzling open the collar of my shirt as I clung to him.

“Tell me I can have more, Emma.” His breath was hot against my skin, and I melted against him. “Please.”

It was the last word that undid me completely.

When did this gorgeous, massive warrior ever needed to say the word please?

What was the last thing he asked for with such longing in his voice?

It didn’t matter, not really. With every touch of his body, with every breath of his intoxicating scent, I wanted him, wanted him to do whatever he wanted to me.

One hand slid around the curve of my hips, brushed my aching mound through the fabric of my pants.

“Tahzr,” I moaned. “There, there.”

Without another word, he moved like lightning, wrapping the cloak around us both, stepping even closer to me so that his body shielded me completely from sight, his fingers unfastening my pants so that he could reach inside to touch me.

“Yes.” I whispered, my hips moving on their own as his fingers ran over my clit. “Oh, yes.”

“You like that?” he asked before sliding two fingers inside me.

I wasn’t prepared for it, at least not mentally, but from how easily they went inside me, I knew I must have been soaking wet. I wasn’t surprised that I was.

“Yes!” I cried out before remembering he told me to stay quiet. I put my hand over my mouth to stifle my moans. He pulled it away from my face quickly.

“Be loud,” he whispered while pushing his fingers deeper inside me. “I don’t give a shit about that now. I want to hear

how much you like it.”

I moaned loudly. I *wanted* to be loud, louder than I normally was in the situation. It was almost like I needed him to know how badly I wanted him.

I gripped his arms hard as I came, my legs shaking against the wall while he bit down slightly on my neck, sharp fangs just grazing my skin. My skin under his tongue tingled, and it sent shivers throughout my body before I came back to reality.

He held me up, his eyes fixed on mine as he licked his fingers clean, then carefully redressed me, brushing the hair out of my face, his hand cupping my cheek for just a moment before he stepped away.

“Get back to work,” he commanded before walking down the other direction of the alley. “I’ll see you soon,” he said over his shoulder with a grin before he kept walking.

I stood in the darkness for a moment, my heart still racing from the interaction. Nothing ever felt as good as that. Nothing in my entire life.

Nothing I ever imagined.

And we didn’t even fuck. We barely did anything.

I glanced at the exit of the alleyway. Tazhr was long gone. All I was left with were dirty thoughts, soaked panties, and a damned pepper.

# EMMA

---

The shrill beep of my alarm practically vibrated through my skull, jolting me awake. I fumbled to silence the wretched thing, scared it would wake the whole compound before the crack of dawn. But today was too important—I couldn't risk sleeping through my chance.

I lay awake half the night, mind racing, as I tried to anticipate all the ways my plan could go wrong. But I knew in my gut that today was destined to be different. Today would be the day I finally figured out how to get into Conii's office. I just had to focus and be ready.

As quietly as I could, I slipped out from under my thin blanket and crept upstairs on bare feet. The floor felt like ice, but I barely noticed, too wired with nervous excitement about the day ahead.

At the top of the stairs, I stopped and listened intently. Only the soft hum of electronics and the occasional echo of a snore from the guards' bunk room next to Conii's office. Good—everyone was still asleep. For now, I had the run of the place.

I scurried down the hall to a supply closet and grabbed my cleaning cart. It squeaked traitorously as I maneuvered it toward Conii's office. I winced at the shrill sound slicing through the calm. So much for subtlety. Hopefully, no one important was within earshot.

Approaching the office, I slowed my pace, straining to see or hear any signs of activity. The usual two guards stood

stoically outside the door, looking bored. Neither bothered to glance my way as I inched past them.

*Just keep ignoring me*, I prayed silently. Nothing to see here, just a lowly human performing her dull domestic duties, unworthy of even the slightest notice.

The ruse seemed to work. The guards continued scanning the hallway, oblivious to my presence. Their posture seemed more sluggish than usual, no doubt longing for the end of their shift and a few more hours of sleep. Perfect. Their lethargy might make them less observant of my snooping.

I busied myself wiping down the wall fixtures nearest the office entrance, careful to avoid eye contact. As I rubbed each section, I tracked the guards' movements peripherally.

One suppressed a yawn then adjusted his stance. The other scratched his neck before resuming scanning the hall. Neither seemed concerned by my presence. Just as I hoped.

I needed an excuse to linger here, to have a reason to keep monitoring their patterns and behavior. Suddenly inspired, I turned toward them with a bright smile.

"Excuse me, would either of you gentlemen care for a prishem?" I asked hopefully. "Happy to fetch some from the kitchen if you'd like."

The guard nearest me frowned, looking mildly annoyed by my offer. "We're on duty," he said gruffly. "No food or drink allowed."

His tone left no room for argument. I ducked my head apologetically. "Of course, my mistake. Sorry to bother you."

Strike one. I grabbed my cart and scurried away, feigning meekness. But inside, the gears were turning. I just needed to try again from a different angle.

Over the next few hours, I invented several more reasons to pass by the office entrance. Each time, the guards grew more wary of my presence. My spine prickled under their suspicious glares.

“Don’t you have floors to scrub somewhere, girl?” one asked pointedly as I checked for nonexistent dust near the door molding.

“These fixtures need special attention,” I mumbled lamely, avoiding his eyes. His skepticism was palpable. I couldn’t afford too many more missteps.

By early afternoon, I was desperate for a new tactic. I couldn’t keep wandering this hall all day—someone would notice and ask questions. I needed an airtight excuse to linger here.

A potential answer came as I helped the chef prepare Conii’s lunch tray in the kitchen. If I could discover her lunch plans, it would justify returning upstairs. I tried to sound casual as I grabbed a bowl of her favorite marrow soup.

“Oh, I forgot to ask earlier: is Conii eating in her office today?” I asked breezily.

The chef didn’t look up from the stove. “How should I know her plans?” he grumbled. “Just bring the tray to her room as usual.”

I suppressed a sigh. It was worth a try. I just have to get creative again. Balancing the tray, I rushed upstairs before the chef could interrogate me further.

Outside the office, I took a steadying breath and approached the guards with what I hoped passed for a guileless smile.

“So sorry to bother you again!” I gushed brightly. “But I wanted to quickly check: is Conii currently in her office? I wasn’t sure whether to bring her lunch here or to her room.”

The guards exchanged weary, exaggerated looks. Clearly they were onto me.

“She’s out for the day,” one informed me smugly. “Now stop pestering us with these useless questions, girl.”

I mumbled an apology and slunk away, cheeks burning. Strike two. No way could I risk another attempt without



raising Conii's suspicions. I would need to regroup and try again another day.

But first, I had to get back to work.

Amarron root was on the menu, and in the intensity of my meeting with Taz yesterday, I forgot it. A faint tickle of memory had me hoping that there was another one in the pantry.

As I rummaged through shelves and bins, a ventilation shaft along the far wall caught my eye. It had a loose, rusty cover that looked like it could easily be pried off. Would it work? Would I fit?

"There you are!" The chef's irritated bellow made me jump. I spun around guiltily as he filled the pantry doorway with his impressive bulk. "What are you doing lollygagging around down here?"

I wanted to scream in frustration. But forcing a smile, I followed the chef back upstairs, my hopes sinking. There was no way I could investigate that vent further today. I could only pray it would still be accessible tomorrow.

Preoccupied with thoughts of my near miss, I proceeded to spill two drinks and forget the segundo course entirely while serving Conii's dinner that night. She snapped her fangs in annoyance, but was appeased when I groveled sufficiently for forgiveness.

Afterward, I collapsed into bed but couldn't sleep, my mind racing. Tomorrow, I might finally have a way into Conii's office—that ventilation shaft could be the perfect secret entrance. And I couldn't wait to tell Tazhr the exciting news. Just picturing his pleased smile made my pulse quicken delightfully.

I hugged my pillow, imagining the handsome Vinduthi's reaction. He'd be so thrilled by my discovery. Maybe he would pin me against the wall again in appreciation, like before, his hard muscular body pressing urgently against mine as he devoured me with kisses...

I squirmed happily at the memory, mind spinning with anticipation of our next encounter. Suddenly, I knew I couldn't wait till morning.

I needed to talk to him, share my triumph.

Cold reality hit.

But I didn't have a way to contact him. And even if I did, the compound was shielded. Only authorized percomms could call out.

I'd need to sneak out.

Find him in person.

Let him take me any way he desired, to celebrate.

My heartbeat drummed in my ears as I slipped out of bed and dressed silently. The compound was still; everyone slept as I tiptoed downstairs and picked my way through shadowy corridors toward freedom. Soon I'd make Tazhr proud. And then I'd let him make me his once more...

He said he would contact me, but this was important, right?

And if the rumors were true, I knew just where to find him.

---

I GLANCED down at my clothes, the typical ones Conii had us wear. Nothing special, a beige top and black pants.

*Maybe I should have bought or stolen something else to wear before I left.*

"Hi, I-"

A Dargun stepped in front of the entrance of the Fallen Star, holding the red rope in front of me. "No entrance for women unless they're employed here."

"Employed?"

"Dancers and waitresses only."

“Oh!” I shook my head and grinned. “Of course, I’m sorry. I’m actually here to apply for the open position.”

The guard scanned me up and down. “You’re taking Vihanna’s place?”

“Hoping to,” I replied gently.

I tried to put on my best flirty grin, but I was unsure how well it worked. When he lifted the red ribbon, I realized I must have done a better job than I thought. “Back through the red curtains,” the Vinduthi bouncer directed.

“Red curtains.” I nodded. “Got it.”

I walked past him, eagerness surging through me as the bass entered my body through my feet on the floor. The club was packed, unsurprisingly, I realized once I saw the women dancing on stage. There were humans, Vinduthi, and even a Mondian spinning around poles under the strobe lights. They were all beautiful, graceful, and sexy, and my pride was minimized once I saw them.

*These are the beings Tazhr is around all the time? Why in the seven galaxies would he want me?*

I suddenly wanted to turn around and race out of that club. I felt like an idiot for even going.

*I really must be out of my mind. I’m working undercover for a Vinduthi. I let him finger me in an alleyway, I could be killed for the crimes I’m committing, and I think there’s a chance that an alien has feelings for me. No. This really is insane.*

I was about to turn back when a hand clamped over my mouth, and I was pulled into a hallway. *Another hallway? The hand over the mouth thing again? Really? Does this Vinduthi not understand that he could say hello and ask me to come to talk to him in the hallway instead?*

Apparently not. After I was dragged through another hallway and pulled into a side room, I was pressed up against a wall. Again.

Despite myself, my pulse quickened. Tazhr was in front of me, glaring at me with those golden eyes that took up so much of my headspace.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” he hissed. “Are you insane coming here? To the Fallen Star?”

I tapped his hand over my mouth, keeping my expression one of dissatisfaction. He looked at it and then lifted it off my face slowly. I breathed in quickly once he broke contact with my face.

“Can’t you just tell me you want to talk? Why do you keep pulling me into strange, dark places?”

“You’re always *in* strange, dark places, Emma. Now tell me what you’re doing here.”

I sighed, looking aside, all of my previous excitement swept away.

“I found a way into Conii’s office.”

He shrugged and scoffed. “Okay.”

The look in his eyes was cold. The stupid feeling intensified within me as I tried to keep justifying my presence at the club. “I just wanted to update you on the mission. I didn’t want you to think I wasn’t working hard.”

“Working hard and being stupid are two different things,” he stated before sighing and hanging his head. He chuckled before looking back at me, his face so close to mine that I felt the warmth of his breath on my lips. “But you have worked very, very hard.” I felt my muscles tighten as I looked at his lips. “And you deserve a reward for that.”

I closed my eyes and parted my lips, ready for him to kiss me like he did in the alleyway. To my surprise, my percomm dinged and vibrated in my back pocket. I opened my eyes to see him putting his own percomm back in his pants pocket with a grin.

“That should be enough payment for you,” he stated.

“Credits?” I asked, annoyed. I didn’t even care that he knew I was. He saw me going in for a kiss, and he just *paid*

me?

“Three thousand.” He shrugged. “I think it’s a substantial amount.”

“I mean, yeah, it is, but...”

“There you go, sweetness.” He grinned. “Like I said,” he sighed while backing away from me, “a substantial amount.”

I was mortified. I couldn’t even say another word. I walked out of the room, furious with myself for getting so wrapped up in a stupid fantasy. I walked past the supermodels on the poles and only felt more shame. My eyes watered when I finally walked through the exit of the Fallen Star.

He wasn’t attracted to me. He didn’t even think about me in such a manner. He probably just thought I was a stupid human woman, and at that moment, I thought I was, too.

## TAZHR

---

I paced the cramped, filthy passageway, frustration simmering through me. No matter how many times I replayed it in my mind, I couldn't understand why Emma seemed so upset when I transferred those credits to her.

I meant the money as a gift, a small token of appreciation for all her risky efforts so far. Surely she realized that the work she was doing for me was dangerous. She deserved some kind of compensation for the danger she put herself in.

When she gazed up at me in that dingy back room at the Fallen Star, her full, tempting lips parted invitingly, I was certain she anticipated a passionate kiss. In that charged moment, with her bright eyes fixed on me and her body angled toward mine, I was convinced she wanted a physical reward, one I was happy to give her.

Yet as soon as I sent the funds, her eyes flashed with anger and that delicate mouth twisted into a scowl. She stormed away without another word, leaving me confused and unfulfilled.

Clearly, I misread her intentions. But why? What else did she want from me? We barely knew each other. Was she truly so incensed at the idea of accepting payment from me?

Bah, there was no time to dwell on the mystery of her moods now. I had an urgent meeting to get to, and these informants were notoriously unpredictable. If I showed up late, or seemed distracted, they might scatter back into the shadows with their secrets. I couldn't risk that.

Rolling my shoulders to loosen tense muscles, I set off through the winding backstreets. I kept my pace unhurried, my posture relaxed. But all my senses were on high alert for signs of surveillance or traps. These contacts were jittery at best, paranoid at worst. If they suspected betrayal or capture, the situation could spiral violently out of control fast.

My meet point was a filthy, rarely-used back room at one of the seedier drinking holes in the ring district. I slipped down the narrow stairwell into the dank room, nose crinkling at the mingled stench of vomit and unwashed bodies.

In the farthest corner, obscured by deep shadows, two cloaked and hooded figures sat waiting at a rickety table. I recognized them as Arkani, a race of shifty information brokers. Their features were completely obscured by the hoods drawn low over their faces.

I sauntered over casually then slid into the seat across from them. Under the table, I rested my hand near the handle of the wicked blade sheathed at my belt. Its familiar weight offered some reassurance.

“You have something useful for me?” I queried, keeping my tone light despite the tension thrumming through me.

The Arkani hunched lower over the table, glancing around nervously despite the empty room. This cloak and dagger routine was their trademark, but it wore thin on me.

“Yes, very useful,” one finally muttered. “But don’t talk so loudly here. Too exposed.”

I clenched my jaw, fighting the urge to grab and shake them. Their games grated at me. “Then speak quickly,” I bit out. “I haven’t got all night.”

The other leaned incrementally closer, pitch black void under his hood giving no hint of his expression. “There’s a very large shipment of glitterstim spice arriving tomorrow. The Karavak gang has all the details on the exchange.”

Now this was interesting news. I sat back, thinking rapidly. “And how have you come to possess this information?” I asked. Their intel was usually good, but I had to be sure.

“We have an informant among the Karavak,” the first hissed, eyes darting about the empty room. “There is to be an exchange at a small warehouse near the docking level 37. Mid-morning when it’s quiet. That is when and where the shipment comes in.”

I nodded slowly. “Very useful indeed. You’ve both done well.” I tossed a credit chip across the table to each of them.

They snatched up the chips and swiftly secreted them away into their cloaks. “Well then, I believe we’re done here,” one rasped. “Best get going now. Good fortune.”

Before I could respond, they slipped from the booth and scuttled from the room like cockroaches avoiding the light. I sighed in exasperation but didn’t bother following.

Leaning back in my seat, I stroked my chin thoughtfully, considering how this unexpected windfall of information might prove useful. If I could intercept that spice shipment, the Karavak gang would be deprived of a massive payload. They’d then be indebted to Alkard’s Syndicate for agreeing to “overlook” their folly. A tidy bit of leverage there.

While finding the information to exonerate Havek was crucial, our ongoing operations didn’t stop. Having leverage with another gang might even be helpful.

*Yes, I mused, an ambush would be perfect. The exchange point was isolated, out of sight. I could easily plan a covert attack and be gone before their wrath turned in my direction.*

Anticipation flowed through me, awakening my battle instincts. After endless boring weeks of political machinations, I was eager for action. The thrill of the hunt quickened my pulse. Soon, I would taste blood again.

Finally satisfied I’d extracted every morsel of information from this encounter, I departed the dingy cellar and slipped into the maze of streets. I took a meandering path, stopping often to ensure I hadn’t picked up any tails. Satisfied I was alone, I turned toward Conii’s compound.

Emma should be safely back in her bed, but still, something called to me. I wanted to be closer to her, even if I



couldn't see her.

“And tomorrow you'll explain why you're so upset with me, little one,” I muttered. I didn't like the hurt that was in her eyes. It made a strange, uncomfortable sensation writhe in my chest.

But the closer I got to Conii's, the more uncomfortable I felt.

Even though they were deserted now, I could almost trace the path Emma took through the crowded market, just from the traces of her scent.

I took a deep breath, letting the bewitching aroma wash over me.

But this was wrong.

Too fresh.

Did she just pass through here?

Frowning, I scoured the marketplace.

She should have returned hours ago. Why would she still be outside?

And then it didn't matter anymore. The sound of cries and scuffling, seeming to originate from the next alley over.

Emma's voice begging for release.

With a roar of fury, I leapt across the divide and hit the ground in a battle-crouch. I took in the scene instantly—Emma shoved against the alley wall, surrounded by a gang of filthy Ewani. Their lewd taunts and groping hands filled me with berserker fury.

I tore down the alleyway with a primal roar, blood pounding in my ears. The Ewanis had no chance to react before I was upon them.

My fist crunched into the first opponent's face, cartilage and bone giving way under my knuckles. He spun and collapsed against the brick wall, stunned.

Another came at me with a rusty pipe. I side-stepped his wild swing and buried my elbow in his gut. As he doubled over wheezing, I brought my knee up sharply into his forehead. He crumpled to the ground in a heap.

The biggest of the bunch grabbed Emma, holding a vibroshiv to her throat. "Come any closer and the girl dies," he spat.

Emma's eyes were wide with terror. A haze of red rage clouded my vision at her distress. With lightning speed, I hurled my own knife, sending it slicing across the thug's wrist.

Howling in pain, he released Emma and clutched his gushing wound. In a blink, I closed the distance and unleashed a devastating series of blows, ending with a crushing uppercut under his jaw. Teeth and blood sprayed as he sagged against the brick wall before sliding down, unconscious.

Another Ewani rushed me with a perma-steel bar. I side-stepped his wild swing then grabbed the arm holding the metal, twisting brutally until I felt the pop of breaking bone.

He shrieked in agony, dropping the pipe to clutch at his mangled limb. I silenced him with an elbow smash to the temple, flipping him head over heels into a pile of rotten garbage.

The three Ewanis still standing backed away, eyes darting about for an escape route. With a guttural snarl, I grabbed a fallen can and hurled it at them. It struck one in the chest, knocking the wind from his lungs.

While they were distracted, I seized the edge of a window and vaulted feet-first into the group. My boots smashed two of them in the face in rapid succession. They crumpled to the grimy deck, disoriented and moaning.

The last Ewani pulled a mini-blaster, the shaky movement of the muzzle betraying his fear before he turned to flee. I clamped one massive hand around the back of his filthy coat and swung him face-first into the alley wall. The metal denting under the impact before he slid to the ground limply. Pulling the weapon from his slack grip I spun, checking for any more enemies.

Silence descended on the passage, only the sound of my breathing remained.

The Ewanis were dead, the threat eliminated. Emma was safe.

I turned to check on her, bracing for her reaction. Would she see me as her savior? Or fear the brutal violence I was capable of, even in her defense? Her wide eyes gave no indication, seeming to stare through me in numb shock.

My shoulders slumped slightly. She saw the savage beast inside me unleashed.

I could only hope I hadn't lost myself in her eyes forever.

# EMMA

---

I stared in numb disbelief at the carnage surrounding me. Bodies littered the alley, some groaning in pain, others laying ominously still. My stomach churned at the grisly sight.

And at the center of it all stood Tazhr, chest heaving, fists and clothes splattered with blood. His eyes were wild, lost in some feral haze. I scarcely recognized him as the alluring lover who pleased me just days before.

This was a beast unleashed. I awakened a monster.

Blind panic seized me. I turned and fled down the alleyway, sharp breaths tearing from my lungs. The pound of pursuing footsteps drove me faster. I darted around rusty bins and slippery piles of rubbish, desperate to escape the fearsome wrath bearing down upon me.

I careened around a corner into a narrow side passage. Dead end. Rough brick halted my flight, scraping my palms as I braced against it. Nowhere left to run.

An instant later, Tazhr's solid form crashed into me, pinning me to the wall with the bulk of his body. I shuddered, anticipating cruel retribution for trying to escape him.

"Why were you out here?" he demanded, voice a harsh rasp. "What are you doing outside the compound?"

My teeth chattered as I stammered out an answer. "I-I was locked out. Missed curfew."

His blazing eyes raked over me. "You're shaking," he accused. "Why?" His tone was suspicious, dangerous.

I squeezed my eyes shut, willing myself not to weep. “You scared me,” I confessed in a whisper. “Seeing you like that, I didn’t know you.”

He made a small, pained sound. I felt the press of his body ease slightly, though he still kept me pinned.

“Don’t run from me.” His lips grazed my ear, breath stirring my hair. “It only makes me want to chase you.”

Despite everything, desire kindled low in my belly at his closeness, his warm solidity enveloping me. I sagged back against him as his fingers trailed down my neck, gentle now.

“I would never hurt you, Emma,” he murmured, his lips so near. “Never.” He nuzzled into my hair, inhaling deeply. “You are mine to protect now.”

I trembled still, though now more from his intoxicating nearness than fear. “Tazhr,” I breathed, tilting my head back against his shoulder. An open invitation should he choose to accept it.

He made a small, hungry sound low in his throat. Then he spun me, his mouth falling on mine, devouring me in a searing kiss. My knees went weak, sensations overwhelming. I clung to him lest I melted completely.

When we finally broke for air, I gazed up at him dazedly. “Do you want me as much as I burn for you?” I asked boldly.

His eyes smoldered. “More than you could possibly know,” he rasped. “You fill my mind completely.”

Joy surged through me at this confirmation of our shared desire. I reached up to trace the alluring curve of his full lips. “Then why don’t you let me know.”

With a growl, Tazhr grasped my thighs, lifting me effortlessly. I wrapped my legs around his waist, lips finding his hungrily. Still trapped against the unforgiving brick, our bodies fused together.

My slender fingers urgently worked at the fastenings of his tunic, desperate to feel his bare skin against mine. I needed to erase any lingering barriers between us, physical or emotional.

At last his muscular chest was revealed. I splayed my hands across the plane of etched muscle, tracing each scar and contour, the golden glow of his sigils. Tazhr's breath grew ragged, his self-restraint fraying.

"Emma," he ground out in warning, even as his hips canted urgently against me. "We shouldn't...not here..."

"I don't care," I breathed, punctuating it with a nip at his sculpted jawline. My recklessness emboldened me. "Make me yours, Tazhr. Please."

That was all it took to break him. With a feral snarl, he pulled my flimsy shirt open, baring me to his hungry gaze. I gasped as the cool air hit my fevered skin.

Then his hands and mouth were worshiping every newly exposed inch as I did to him moments before. We were lost to anything but raw passion and blistering need.

Right and wrong ceased to matter. There were only his powerful hands pinning me in place, his hips nestled between my eager thighs, his pulse hammering against my lips as he ground against my core, his hard length pressed against me, sending sparks even through the fabric that still separated us.

"We should leave this place," Tazhr decided, reluctantly withdrawing from my embrace. I mourned the loss of contact. "It isn't safe for you on the streets after curfew."

I nodded. "I can't go back to the compound tonight." Uncertainty tinged my voice. Where would I go now?

Sensing my distress, Tazhr enfolded me against his chest once more. "You'll come with me," he soothed. "I have hidden quarters where you can stay until it's safe."

I stumbled down the debris-strewn passageway, but Tazhr hoisted me onto his waist and kissed me ferociously. I wrapped my legs tightly around him, feeling his thick erection against my legs, and rubbing it. All I wanted was to give him pleasure.

He parted my lips with his tongue and sucked. He explored my mouth like a conqueror, taking control. He nibbled on my lower lip and dug his fangs in just slightly, a sharp piercing

sensation that quickly tingled, like candy entering my veins. I could taste blood on my tongue.

“You’re so distracting to me, Emma. We need to get downstairs before I fuck you right here on the stairwell,” he said.

We stole through the shadows, avoiding detection. Before long, we reached a nondescript hab-unit.

Tazhr keyed in a complex code and the door slid open soundlessly. He drew me inside to a small, dimly lit living space, securing the entrance behind us before tossing the tiny blaster he took from the Ewani onto a rickety table.

“Make yourself comfortable.” He gestured to a bed along one wall. “No one will find you here.”

I sank gratefully onto the mattress. My body ached, but I was too keyed up to rest. Glancing around, my curiosity got the better of me. “How did you find this place? It’s quite cozy.”

One corner of his mouth quirked up. “It’s amazing what falls through the cracks on a station this size. The previous occupants abandoned it quickly when they ran into...trouble. The space now suits my purposes nicely.”

The atmosphere between us quickened my blood and sent my pulse racing down below. At the end of the bed were leg irons, and next to the wall were ropes and manacles.

“I hope you’re not thinking of keeping me here,” I said, only half worried.

“You never know.” He came to the bed, pushing me back, kneeling over me. “But first, I want to know why you were upset before.”

“What?” my brain blanked, still dizzy from his touch. We talked about that, right?

“Back at the Fallen Star. I sent you extra credits, a gift. But you looked like I hit you.”

Oh. The lump in my stomach threatened to return. “It felt like you paid me off,” I whispered. “Like I didn’t mean

anything to you. Like just another whore.”

His fingers gripped my shoulders. “Never. You’re not just another anything....” Carefully, he rained kisses down my neck, pushing aside the fabric of my shirt as he moved down my shoulder.

“I can’t stop thinking about you. Worrying about you. Wanting you.”

I could only groan, swept away by his touch.

“You’re the only one I’ve ever met that does this to me. Even that taste I had of your nectar only left me hungrier.”

HE LEANED over me and kissed me again, his soft lips cleaving to mine, practically gulping with desire. I felt him grow even harder, his cock reaching up, and a second later, he knelt over me and tore off the rest of my clothing, hovering above me.

He licked my breasts with his long velvety tongue, dabbing my nipples, his saliva leaving tracks of pleasure across my skin.

His breath grew shallow and he tilted his head back to get a better look and massaged them with his hands.

“God, you’re fucking beautiful, Emma,” he said, his eyes slitted with desire.

He stood up above me, touching my breast one more time, and quickly took off his shirt, then shoved his pants onto the floor.

My desire for Tazhr consumed me, setting my blood aflame. Never before had I craved another being so intensely.

As we came together in a fiery kiss, my hands roamed greedily over his muscular form. He groaned into my mouth but did not stop me.

At last, his clothing fell away, baring him fully. I drew in a shaky breath, eyes riveted to his magnificence. His cock stood rigid, far larger than any human’s. The gray shaft was striped with pulsing veins, the broad head tapering to smooth points.



But what drew my rapt attention were the rows of slender, flexible flanges lining the sides. They rippled gracefully with each throb, an entrancing, alien beauty. Tentatively, I reached out to brush one. Tazhr's sharp hiss was all the encouragement I needed.

I explored him reverently, caressing each velvety ridge. They flexed under my fingertips, guiding me to the most sensitive areas. When I wrapped my hand around his heated length, the flanges embraced me snugly.

"Emma." My name was a plea torn from his throat. I was thrilled at how completely I unraveled this powerful male with just a touch. Yet despite his obvious need, he let me set the pace.

At last, I could wait no longer. I guided him to my slick entrance, shivering in anticipation. Ever so slowly, he filled me, each ridge stroking an exquisite sensation throughout my core. I cried out at the delectable fullness as he stretched and molded me perfectly to him.

Our bodies moved as one, the rhythmic glide of his flanges intensifying each glorious pulse of pleasure. He cradled me close, murmuring fervent words I could barely understand as I clung to him, awash in ecstasy.

"Shatter for me, sweet Emma," he crooned into my hair as his gold tracery glowed electric, and the gold of his eyes burned with fire as he pounded into me, grunting and moaning with every thrust. I felt the electricity from it, on my skin and inside of me, crashing upward to fill me as far as he could go.

His muscles rippled above me as he used every atom of physical power to bury himself inside me over and over again.

He pressed his thumb against my neck and his mouth followed, as he sank his fangs in gently, scratching rather than biting.

Pounding me with fierce strokes, the muscles inside me pulsing in circular waves, and his teeth on my neck, biting gently and sucking, pushed me over the edge.

"Tazhr," I begged. "Please, please."

With a roar, whatever was left of his control broke, his hips bucking into mine as I came undone, desperately clinging to him, needing him to keep going, never wanting to stop.

Until finally he slowed, pulling my limp body into his arms, cradling me gently.

And all I could think about was how much I wanted to do it again as soon as possible.

## TAZHR

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I was certain that sleeping with Emma would banish these vexing feelings from my mind. I thought it was merely an itch that needed scratching before I could focus clearly on my mission again. But I was wrong. So very wrong.

If anything, having her only intensified my obsession. The sex was unlike any I'd experienced before. It transcended mere physical release, forging an emotional bond I never allowed myself to form.

I was accustomed to brief trysts—hard, fast gratification and nothing more. The women never even left an impression. But with Emma, I was attuned to her every gasp and tremor. Giving her pleasure eclipsed my own desires. And the heavenly feel of her soft skin seared itself into my memory.

This protectiveness that came over me was new as well. Ordinarily, I wouldn't spare a passing thought for past lovers' well-being. But now visions of Emma in distress plagued me, physical safety no longer sufficient. I yearned to shield her tender heart from all hardship.

Even her smiles and laughter enchanted me as no other's did. The musical sound was a balm to my battered soul. I found myself making ridiculous jokes just to elicit that magical giggle. Anything to briefly glimpse the unguarded joy sparkling in her eyes.

Everything about her drew me in—her compassion, her resilience, her keen mind. Her willingness to solve a problem,

to right a wrong. She decided for herself to gather evidence to free Havek before I ever met her.

How could one little human female be so clever, so brave?

As she now traced the lines on my palm, brow furrowed in concentration, warmth bloomed in my chest. This miraculous woman who weathered the storms of my mercurial moods. I was awestruck by her, captivated even by mundane motions like the turn of her delicate wrist.

She raised her eyes to meet mine and smiled. Usually, it would have made my heart leap out of my chest, but that time, my heart sank instead. My gut twinged, and my muscles tensed.

*How did I ever get her into this? Why did I do this to her? She doesn't deserve to be a part of the crazy life I live. It's not safe.*

I cleared my throat as she went back to looking at my palm. My eyes locked with the ceiling while I tried to think of anything to say to her. I knew I had to call off her part in the investigation. I couldn't live with the guilt of her not making it out alive or even slightly being in peril, but I also didn't want to make it seem like she was doing a lackluster job.

"Emma," I croaked before patting my chest and clearing my throat.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes," I replied, locking eyes with her. "Look, I've been thinking," I sighed. "Stop trying to get the computer files."

"What?" she asked, sitting up in the bed abruptly.

*Oh no. Did I just fuck up?*

"For your own sake," I responded, putting my arms over my head and looking at her. "It's dangerous. It's not something I should have involved you in."

She scoffed and looked at the wall. "You're joking, right?"

I frowned but tried to keep my cool. "No, actually, I'm not."

“What?” she asked, wrapping the sheets around her. “Because I’m a human, I can’t do it? Or is it because I’m a *woman*?”

*Oh no.* “What?” I got defensive, sitting up in the bed and crossing my arms while looking at her firmly. “No! It’s not either of those things!”

“Then, what is it?” She shrugged. “Be honest.”

“I don’t want you in danger,” I pleaded. “You could be killed for what you’re doing!”

“So could you!” she shouted. “What’s the difference?”

“The difference is, *I’ve* been doing this my whole life! This is the life I *chose*! You didn’t choose this, Emma!”

My chest caved in and expanded out with each heavy breath I took. I didn’t mean to lose my temper like that, especially not with her, but what I said wasn’t wrong. She was forced into that life, and it wasn’t something I wanted for her. She was too pure, too kind, and I had to drive the point home.

She looked at me skeptically for a few moments in silence. Everything was still except for her eyes blinking occasionally. The longer she remained silent, the more guilt seeped into me. I shouldn’t have raised my voice like that.

Finally, she nodded slowly and smacked her lips before looking at the bed. “I *want* to choose this,” she murmured before a long sigh. Her head lifted, and she shrugged her shoulders, looking at me with a sad smile. “I want to help.”

Her eyes were wide, and something I had never seen from another being in such a clear light showed on her face. She was being completely genuine. There wasn’t a hidden motive in sight. She really did just *want* to help, despite the consequences.

“I know.” I exhaled, holding my hand out to her. Her eyes dragged to my palm, and she put her hand in mine gingerly. “But it’s dangerous, Emma. I don’t know if you’re aware of just how dangerous this all is.”

“Oh, believe me, I get it.” She replied, keeping her gaze on my eyes. “I might be a human, but I’m not stupid.”

I wanted to tell her I knew she wasn’t, that I never thought she was, but something foreign took over me. At that moment, I knew it was better for me not to speak and listen rather than try to fix the situation by any means necessary.

She sighed again before chuckling sadly, running her hand over the pattern on the sheets. “Do you know who Sherlock Holmes is?”

I shook my head, rage filling my chest. “No. Did he hurt you? Is he on this station?”

She laughed, throwing her head back in a way that made my heart swell, even through my anger and concern. “No. He’s not on this station.” She shrugged. “At least, I don’t think so. He could be.” She grinned at me before shaking her head. “He’s a detective. They’ve written thousands of books about him. He’s really popular with humans.”

“Oh.” I nodded slowly, feeling like an idiot for wanting to murder a man who wasn’t even on Thodos III just because she said his name. It was almost a reflex at that point to defend and protect her. I couldn’t help myself.

“Anyway.” She waved her hand, dismissing her previous words. “I have, like, *way* too many of his books.” She chuckled, but her expression was still morose. “It’s almost an obsession with mystery stories. I just...”

Her face lit up, and she lifted her head, looking at the wall while talking with her hands. “It’s like a puzzle, right? All the pieces are scattered everywhere. I mean, even here, with you, right? Conii is one piece, and she’s over here...” Her hand moved to the right side of the mattress. “And Havek is *way* over there...”

She pointed to the left-hand wall. “And somewhere in here...” She circled the space between the two points. “There’s the truth.” She jammed a finger into the middle of the mattress. “That’s what I want to help find.”

*That's why you asked about the files. You were just curious. You just wanted to know.*

The ambition awakened something inside me. It was more than attractive to see her become so passionate, especially about something I loved, too. While killing was always my main course, the pathway *toward* the end of the missions became more appealing the last few I took.

Eventually, once taking on enough hit jobs, I found that the end result wasn't always that fun. There was always a 'now what' feeling left over when I was done. Especially since meeting Emma, that gray area became more appealing. I understood some of the human cliché's of 'enjoy the journey' or 'it's about the journey, not the destination.' I still didn't understand why most of the quotes had arrows attached to them, though. That was something I was going to have to ask her about.

"So basically, you rule things out, right? Say there's a suspect in the case. You go to their home and ask them about an alibi."

"That's pretty cool," I enthused, honestly intrigued by the matter. It seemed much more intriguing than cold-blooded killing.

"No, but wait, it gets better." Her smile stretched all the way to her ears, and it filled me with so much joy. "But the *real* reason you're there is to look around their home. You examine if there's mud on their shoes because the victim was killed on a rainy night, or if there's a knife missing from the knife block because that was the murder weapon and things like that! It's just so amazing the guise that he uses when really he's *examining everything*."

I was too stunned to speak. I could only stare at her while she kept explaining, example after example falling from her plump lips.

She trusted me enough to be vulnerable about the thing she loved the most.

Emma trusted me.

And there was more.

*Maybe I did pick the right woman to help me after all. Even with the consequences of the danger, she's living for it, just like I do.*

I brought my attention back to the here and now. “I overheard one of Conii’s guards say she’s going off the station tomorrow. They didn’t say what for, but I know she’s departing early in the morning.”

She looked at me with a piercing stare. I knew that stare well. It was the fierce desire that some of my victims would give me before they tried to put up a fight.

That was one fight I would concede to before it even began. She wanted to take on the mission, she could do it, and I fully believed in her.

I was wrong to ask her to stop, to try to make her into something smaller than she was. She didn’t deserve that. She deserved a partner who would treat her as an equal.

But I’d still destroy anyone who laid a hand on her. That went without saying.

Decision made, I took a sleek card out from the drawer of the bedside table and handed it to her. “I’m certain that you and your Sherlock could figure it out, but I don’t want you in Conii’s office any longer than you need to be. This is a password cracker. I’ll be ready to receive the download if you can get it.”

My voice was lower than I expected, almost submissive, which was foreign to me. For her, though, I would have a moment of weakness. She could have anything she wanted, even if it went against my wishes. She deserved that. She deserved the whole galaxy.

“Let’s meet at Realta at the mid-afternoon chime,” I commented, reaching out to take her hand. “Does your schedule let you do that?”

“Realta?”



“The human bakery. Makar and his mate started it. It won’t be suspicious if we’re both there, and we’ll have them as a backup if anything goes sideways.”

She placed her palm in mine and shook it. I tried to hold her hand, but I pulled away quickly like I only meant the handshake.

She got up and dressed herself before turning around and glancing at me with her hands on her hips. “I won’t let you down.”

I adjusted my position in the bed, getting comfortable and taking in the view of her. It was something I never wanted to forget, the first few hours after the first time we made love.

“I know you won’t,” I responded before she walked out the door. “But as brave and clever as you are, you’re going to need a little something more.”

I grabbed the mini-blaster from the table. “Take this,” I said darkly as I handed it to her. She looked up at me with nothing other than confidence, and if she didn’t have to go, I would have taken her again right there from just that look. “Only use it if you need to.”

“Yes, sir.” She grinned and put it in her waistband before winking and walking out the door.

When it shut, I was alone. At least, that’s what it looked like.

But in truth, I never felt more connected to anyone in my life. I was the farthest thing from alone, something I never experienced before. I felt whole, filled with care and joy, something I knew only Emma would be able to give me for the rest of my life.

# EMMA

---

**M**y heart pounded as I pried the rusted ventilation cover off with trembling fingers. Getting back into the compound after my night was easier than expected.

I guess all that time meekly following orders meant that people didn't look twice at me, just assumed I was on a legitimate errand.

After the rush of morning chores and then serving lunch, I barely managed to slip away unnoticed to investigate the shaft I spotted yesterday in the pantry. Now I had to move swiftly before the chef or anyone else realized I was gone.

The gaping dark tunnel loomed before me, just big enough to crawl through if I squeezed. I took a deep breath to steady my nerves. Getting caught in these restricted ducts meant severe punishment. But the risk would be worth it if I could access Conii's office undetected.

Hoisting myself up, I wriggled into the claustrophobic passageway. The metal walls pressed in oppressively as I dragged myself forward on elbows and knees. My coveralls provided scant protection from the grimy floor.

Up ahead, a faint echo of voices drifted through the shaft. I paused, holding my breath, but the words were indistinguishable. After a tense moment, the sound faded again. I continued my slow advance, ears straining for any other activity.

The duct angled upward and I scrambled awkwardly over the incline. Ahead, it split into two branches. I wracked my

brain trying to visualize the building layout and choose the correct path. Conii's office had to be to the right. I hoped.

The further I crawled, the clearer the voices became again. This time, I could make out a few disjointed phrases.

"...can't believe she expects..."

"...more than we're paid for..."

Guards. Had to be. Meaning I was getting close. Renewed excitement quickened my pace, heedless of the noise I made now. My goal lay just ahead.

Too late, I heard the approaching stomp of footsteps from around a bend up ahead. I froze, but there was nowhere to hide in the exposed shaft. Mere seconds later, a helmeted head appeared in my path.

"Hey!" The Nazok guard's shocked face quickly morphed into anger. "What are you doing in here, human?"

Panic screamed through me but I forced myself to meet his glare steadily. "Just assessing the duct integrity per Conii's orders," I lied, praying my voice didn't shake and pulling at the cleaning apron I wore. "She wants them all inspected for faults."

The guard's eyes narrowed, trying to determine if my claim was legitimate. I held my breath, knowing my life likely hung in the balance of his decision.

After an agonizing pause, he huffed in annoyance. "No one tells us anything around here," he grumbled. "Fine, but make it quick. And no snooping around!"

With that, he turned and receded down the duct, evidently believing my ruse. I sagged in relief as his footfalls faded. That was far too close. I would have to proceed with greater caution.

Edging around the corner, I saw the shaft end ahead at a vent cover. Holding perfectly still, I listened intently but heard nothing beyond. Conii's office must lay just on the other side.

It was time.

Slowly, carefully I pried the cover off with the paring knife I grabbed from the pantry.

*No wonder she's taking over half the space station from here.*

The size of the room alone spoke to her wealth and status on the station. It was larger than most living quarters, with vaulted ceilings that soared high above.

Her desk appeared carved from a single massive kauri tree imported at astronomical expense from a distant forest world.

The surfaces were adorned with artifacts from across the known galaxies—bejeweled daggers from Tarkai, jewel-toned Mondian glass sculptures, ornate tapestries from far-flung human colonies.

In the seating area, the chairs were upholstered in luxurious vrax leather, dyed in vibrant hues. The low table looked to be carved from ivory-hued fossilstone mined from the quarries of Alton V.

As a stark contrast to the finery, the computer interface sat utilitarian upon the desk. It was a standard station model, as impersonal as the pre-fab metal walls of the lowest decks. But it contained the secrets I desperately needed.

I tapped the pad of the computer, and the screen turned on, requesting a password.

It was tempting to try to figure this out by myself. Would Conii have chosen something random, or used the act of typing her password as a ritual, a reminder of something she loved?

But Taz was right. I needed to get out of here as quickly as possible.

With a breath of gratitude, I slid the thin slip of metal that he gave me out from my apron pocket and into the port, watching the flickering lights as it worked.

I put my elbows on the desk and rubbed my temples with my hands while watching the screen.

What would it be? What would it tell me about the way Conii's mind worked?

A quick flash, and the password appeared.

Alkard7264.

My jaw dropped, and I smirked before frowning. That was a little creepy and obsessive for her to have her greatest enemy's name as her password, but it made sense.

What was most important to Conii? Power. What was the one person who stood in the way of that power?

Alkard.

But what was the string of numbers about?

Right now, it didn't matter. I had a job to do.

I scrolled through the files, desperately searching for anything that looked promising.

They ranged from operations to personal photos. Each operation folder had a different code name, but none of them seemed like what I was looking for until I found a folder titled Deathgate. Perfect.

I pulled out my percomm and downloaded the file to it, tapping my foot anxiously on the ground while waiting and staring out at the stars. It wasn't only that I was nervous about getting caught; I was anxious to get back to Taz.

When I was with him, my mind was clear. I had no lingering thoughts or repetitive numbers rushing through my mind. I was able to be fully present with him, something that was still becoming familiar.

He was loving and caring, whether he believed it or not. I was determined to prove that he was, so he could see himself in the same light I did. But first, I had to get that download.

Complete. The computer almost screamed the words at me with a loud noise signaling the finishing percentage. I quickly pulled my percomm out of the side of it and closed all the windows I opened. I even went back in the history of the

computer and ensured the recent activity from what I searched through was cleared.

I shut the computer and stood up, taking one last look at the broad galaxy before shoving the percomm into my pocket and crawling back into the ventilation shaft. Carefully, I worked the cover back into place, and then retraced my path back to the pantry.

But as I emerged, strong hands gripped my shoulders and pulled me aside. *What is Tazhr doing here?*

When I was slammed against the wall so hard my head felt dizzy, I realized it wasn't Taz. When my vision stabilized, I saw it was the chef standing before me, holding me tightly against the wall.

He shook his head. "I always knew you were no good."

"I-I was just..."

"What? What could you possibly need to do in there?" He chuckled and shook his head again. "When she gets back, I'm going to get a great reward for turning you in." He moved one of his hands to my neck and pressed it against the wall aggressively. "Conii hates nothing more than a rat."

"I'm just cleaning," I coughed, trying to get any breath I could. "What else would I be doing?"

"That's what I'm going to find out," he growled before digging in the pocket of my apron for my percomm, holding me by my neck while scrolling through it. I tried to wiggle out of his grip and smack him, but he was too tall and heavy for me to deter.

"Deathgate, huh?" he asked while waving the percomm at me. His eyes narrowed into a glare, and he leaned in close to my face. "Who the fuck are you working for?"

"No one! Nothing!" I stammered gasping for my next breath.

This wasn't good. This was past not-good. Logic and deductive reasoning weren't going to get me out of this.

But another skill I learned from my past back on Earth might.

With all my might I kicked him, the tip of my shoe catching him squarely in the crotch.

He stumbled back, throwing me to the floor hard enough that my vision swam.

“You little bitch!” he roared, then his fist swung down at me.

Panicked, I scrambled backwards on my butt until I cowered beneath him, pressed against the wall.

And there was something else, something hard against the small of my back.

The mini-blaster.

Grabbing it, I waved it in front of me wildly. “Stay back!” I tried to be brave, to be fierce, but my voice wasn’t even a whisper.

“What are you going to do with that?” the chef sneered. “Pitiful little human like you can’t even hold a weapon straight.”

He was right.

I never held anything like a gun before. Had never wanted to.

But he didn’t leave me much choice.

Hunching my shoulders, I raised the blaster, aiming for his leg. “I don’t want to hurt you!” I cried.

Laughing, he lunged towards me, his face twisted into cruel amusement.

And I fired.

Before I even fully caught my breath, his body fell to the ground next to me with wide-open eyes, dark blue blood pooling out from a terrible hole in his thigh as his eyes glazed over, my percomm crashing into the far wall as he spasmed.

My breathing slowed, but my heart rate increased drastically. My mind was blank. I don't know how long I laid there staring at him until I got to my knees and felt for his pulse.

*Oh, no. Oh, seven galaxies, no. He can't be dead. Please don't be dead.*

But there was no denying it.

I sat back on my knees and looked at my bloody hands, trembling much more than before I went into Conii's office.

*I killed him. I'm a killer. I've killed a being on Thodos III. I'm a murderer.*

I wanted to vomit. Moreover, I wanted to cry. I was so overwhelmed and immediately thought of the consequences of my actions. I wasn't afraid of getting in trouble with any Enforcers, the act would be considered self-defense if it was told truthfully, and I took pictures of my wounds, which I planned to do just in case. I was more terrified of what Conii or her hitmen would do if they figured out it was me who killed him.

*Should I hide the body? Should I clean off his hands? What about my hands? Anything I touch will be smeared in his blood.*

I picked up my percomm and the gun and jammed them into my pockets. I probably stood there for another few minutes, just looking at the soulless body on the ground. Granted, he was an asshole, but still, I committed murder.

It said more about me than him, even if it was self-defense. I couldn't even recognize myself at that point. The only thing I knew for sure was that I had to run.

Before I could make my escape, I had to clean up. There was no way I could have made it to Realta with the clothes I had on and blood on my hands without others noticing. I fled to my room and ripped off my clothes before rushing to the sink and washing my hands, ensuring I got every drop of his blood off my fingers.



When I was done, I pulled on a new shirt and pants before glancing around at the room I called home for so long. It was unlikely I would ever return.

My eyes shifted to the books on my shelf, and I looked at all the Sherlock Holmes titles I managed to collect over the years, wondering if I would ever see them again. Then, my eyes got caught on one book in particular, one with pages facing the outside of the shelf.

Deathgate.

I walked over to it and knelt down before pulling it out and holding it for a moment. I barely had time to skim the book. I just wanted to get a better understanding of what was going on, and reading about it was my first instinct.

I held the book in my hands, feeling like I knew what Deathgate was. It was an alien substitute for what humans used to call hell when we lived on Earth. It was a way of replicating the terror that came from the notion we used to hold onto.

Taz's Vinduthi brother was locked in hell, and killing that chef was a part of the equation to free him from it. He wanted our help. He *needed* our help.

But still, I didn't want to kill anyone.

Those thoughts were what propelled me forward. Before I knew it, I was out of the front door of Conii's quarters, dashing like a madman through the streets. I darted in the direction of Realta, desperate to be with Tazhr.

He would hold me, help me.

He would know what to do.

As my feet carried me far from the scene of the murder, one thought kept repeating in my mind, strange and terrifying.

*My life just changed forever.*

## TAZHR

---

*She should know better than to be late. Does she not know what this does to me?*

*Does she not understand the fear that rushes through me when I think something happened to her?*

“What’s eating you, Taz?” Makar asked with a sigh.

I turned around, lifting my elbow off the counter of his cupcake display to face him. “She was supposed to be here thirty minutes ago.”

He shrugged. “Maybe she’s just on her way.”

“Yeah,” Sophia chimed while wiping where my elbow was. “She might have just gotten lost. Has she been here before?”

I shook my head and exhaled. “No, but it’s not like her to be late. If anything, she would be early.”

“You’re overthinking it, Taz,” Makar announced, shutting the display case and turning out the main overhead lights.

“Why are you turning those off?” I asked in a panic, whirling around to face him.

Makar threw his hands up in surrender and smirked. “Easy. I’m just acting like we’re closing early, so we have a little more privacy.”

I sighed and put my hand on my chest. “Don’t scare me like that.”

Makar only laughed, annoying me more.

“What’s so funny?”

“Taz, you’re a psychotic killer, and you’re scared because your informant is running late? What is going on with you?”

I glared at him, and slowly his eyes widened.

Sophia caught on just as fast. “No!” she exclaimed, covering her mouth. “Not you, too!”

“Oh, this is perfect,” Makar teased, spinning up the rag used for cleaning and flinging it at me. “He’s one of the club now!”

“Shut up,” I snapped. “I’m not. I just can’t risk Conii getting her hands on anyone on my watch.” I cleared my throat and turned away from them, hoping they wouldn’t notice the lie on my breath. “It’s not about her. Alkard would kill me if anything happened to the plan.”

“All right,” Makar replied with a grin before walking towards the back with Sophia. “Whatever you need to believe.”

I heard them whispering in the kitchen but tried to pay it no mind. I couldn’t focus on it even if I wanted to.

I was too angry with Emma for being late.

At least, that’s what I told myself.

In truth, I wasn’t even angry with her. The anger was just a coverup for the fear that sent shivers through my body. My gut twinged as I tried to lean back onto the counter. My eyes darted to the clock every thirty seconds, thinking another half an hour passed. I had to stop my leg from constantly bouncing up and down on the floor. I couldn’t remember the last time I felt like that.

Granted, patience wasn’t exactly a virtue I had, but it wasn’t something that made me that uncomfortable, either. The fact that it was Emma that was involved had me jumpy and irritable.

I saw a silhouette cross by the opening of the shop, and my heart leaped. The figure continued walking quickly past, and I leaned back on the counter, rubbing my face over my hands.

*Should I go to Conii's quarters? I can't just stand here. I have to find her. Something's not right.*

I lifted myself off the counter and walked briskly to the front of the store. I was about to open the front door when the figure appeared again and opened it in front of me. Emma walked in and closed it behind her before spinning around and looking at me.

“What is wrong with you?” I snapped. “Do you have any idea how long it's been? I thought you were taking this seriously!”

Then I noticed the look in her eyes. Something *had* gone wrong. Almost immediately after I finished my sentence, she collapsed into my chest and began crying, sinking to the floor, and I went with her until we were both kneeling on the tile.

I just held her. I didn't know what else to do. I wanted to know what happened, but I knew whoever hurt her was going to die because of their actions.

I wasn't sure if I had room in my schedule for another killing that week. Of course, for her, I would always make an exception.

“Hey,” I whispered before pulling back from our embrace. I kept my hands on her arms lightly while she dried her tears. “Breathe.” She tried to take deep breaths, but they were choppy and filled with sharp inhales. I tipped her chin up to meet my gaze and breathed slowly in front of her. “With me. Focus on me.”

She tried, and after a few more choppy inhales, we got there together. The tears slowed, but her muscles were still incredibly tense. I looked at her and pressed my forehead to hers. “What happened?”

“I-I was getting the files.” She sniffled. “I was in her office, and it was huge, it was, there were bookshelves and—”

“And what?” I asked gently, moving my hands downward, motioning for her to slow down. “What happened?”

She exhaled and shook her head, looking down at the floor. After a moment of silence, she looked at the ceiling and

blinked a tear away before locking eyes with me again. “When I came out of the shaft into the pantry,” she sighed. “The chef found me. He pinned me to the wall, and I didn’t know what to do.” She hyperventilated again, and I forced her to look at me.

“Emma, whatever you did, was what you had to do.”

“No!” she screamed, pushing me away. “It wasn’t! He didn’t have to die!”

*Die. She killed him. How did she...* The thought struck me hard. *The blaster.*

I didn’t give a shit about the chef being dead. If she hadn’t killed him herself, I would have purely because he put his hands on her.

He deserved it, I was sure. What bothered me had nothing to do with him. It was the crisis she was in that made me insane.

And I did that to her.

“He was going to hurt you,” I replied, cupping her face with my hands. “Emma, you did the right thing.”

“No!” she cried. “They’re going to find him. The body is just *there* in the pantry. Conii’s guards, they’re...”

“They’re not going to find shit,” I cut her off firmly before looking over my shoulder. “Makar!” I yelled toward the back. He came running out and looked at us on the floor, astonished. “We need to clean up Conii’s personal quarters.”

“Her *personal* quarters?”

“You’re a chef, aren’t you?” I barked.

“Well, I...”

*Dammit. He’s a Vinduthi. The cameras will catch him sneaking in.* “Sophia!”

She came running out promptly and stood beside Makar. “Sophia, you go to Conii’s quarters. It’ll take some makeup but use it to cover your sigils. Find a way to get him in.” I looked at Makar sharply. “Then you clean up the body in the pantry. If anyone else saw it, kill them on the spot.”

Makar nodded and looked at Sophia, and with that, they were off. Before they closed the door behind them, I whistled, and Makar turned around to look at me.

“Do you have a computer here?”

“Yeah.” He pointed to the kitchen door. “In the back.”

“How safe is this place?”

“Safehouse proofed.”

I nodded. “Good. Go.”

He ran out the door with Sophia, and I glanced back at Emma, stroking her hair gently. “You’re okay. Nothing is going to happen to you.”

“I murdered someone...” Her voice trailed off as she looked at the ground.

The pain in her eyes reminded me of the shock I felt when I saw a dead body by my own hand for the first time. I had to tap into that feeling. She *needed* me to tap into that feeling.

I sighed and looked into her eyes. “I felt the same way.”

She scoffed. “You kill for a living,” she chuckled, wiping a tear from her cheek.

I shook my head. “Everyone has a first.”

“Not everyone,” she sighed. “I was never supposed to have a first.”

“Hey.” I tipped her chin up. “He was going to hurt you. You killed him out of defense. Okay?” She nodded but still looked unsure. “Hey,” I repeated. She looked at me. “Say it. Say it was defense.”

She exhaled slowly and nodded. “It was defense.”

“He was going to hurt you.”

She nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, it’s true. He was going to hurt me.”

“You did the right thing.”

“I did the right thing.”

She exhaled and stared at the floor for a moment. I wasn't sure where she went mentally, but when her gaze snapped back to reality, she dried her tears and fished around in her pocket. Once I saw her break from the emotion, I knew exactly what happened. She shoved it down, just like I did after my first time.

She'd be okay. I'd make sure she was.

And she'd never be alone.

If she wanted to focus on the job, that was what we would do. When she handed me the percomm from her pocket, I knew we had to take care of the files first.

"Good." I leaned in and kissed her forehead. My hands shook while I did it.

I didn't know the last time I showed physical intimacy without it leading to sex, but if anyone needed it at that moment, it was Emma. "Come on."

I led her back into the kitchen and found Makar's computer. All systems in the Vinduthi family were strictly coded and protected, thanks to a software Havek designed years ago. No one understood technology like him.

"Come on, load," I whispered as I synced the percomm into the loading computer.

*Maybe when he gets back, he can make these damn things faster.*

I looked over my shoulder and saw Emma standing behind me. I smiled, and she grinned back, but I knew both expressions were fake. I would keep up my act, if for no other reason than to make her feel like everything was as normal as it could be.

"Is it working?"

I shook my head and was about to reply 'no,' when the file popped up on the computer. "Got it," I declared before sitting down at the desk.

"What are those?" she asked, leaning down to look at the files.

“Did you select one file in particular?”

“I thought I did.”

I shook my head. “You downloaded every file on the computer.”

“Shit,” she whispered before running her fingers through her hair. “I’m sorry.”

“Hey.” I spun around in the chair and took her hands in mine. “It’s better that you did. Okay? You did *nothing* wrong today.”

She nodded, and I went back to examining the files. Conii was highly protective of her information, even her personal files. Everything had code names, and some even had password protection, especially the file called ‘Deathgate.’

Emma informed me of the general password to her computer, which made me chuckle. What a crazy bitch Conii had to be to have Alkard’s name as her password.

Unfortunately, the password didn’t work on the folders that required a password, and I wasn’t going to waste time trying to guess every single one. I made my way to her ledger. The general password worked for that one.

“Come on,” I whispered, my eyes scanning every column. “There has to be something.”

“Taz...” Emma murmured from behind me.

“Yes?” I spun around in the chair and looked at her.

She shook her head, leaning against the kitchen island. “You know I can’t go back there, right? What good am I to the mission now?”

“Emma,” I responded as I stood from the chair and walked over to her. “Everything will be taken care of. Makar is amazing at what he does. The whole family is. Anyone that saw anything will be disposed of. We’ll have a cover story ready to go by tomorrow. You just have to go along with it. You won’t be faulted for *anything*.”

“Are you sure?”



“Positive.” I brushed her hair behind her shoulder and looked into her eyes. “Do you want to go back? You don’t have to.”

“If everything is taken care of. We don’t know what else we’ll need from Conii.” She raised her chin. “I’m absolutely going back.”

# EMMA

---

“Stay here tonight,” Tazhr murmured into my hair, setting my body on fire.

Exhaustion of both body and mind weighed me down, turning my thoughts to lead. But despite everything, I still craved his touch.

Reluctantly, I pushed away.

“If everything is really taken care of, I should make sure to be back in place for the dinner service tonight,” I insisted. “Unless you don’t think Makar finished the job?”

Tazhr scowled. “He’s good. It’ll be done.”

His hand cupped my cheek, and he gazed at me. “Be careful. Lay low. Don’t try to get any more information, just pretend you’re as scared as everyone else.”

That would be easy. I might sound tough, but I was terrified.

As we headed back towards Conii’s compound, I circled through every worst-case scenario.

I would be killed at the front door, or maybe the guards would wait until I wasn’t looking. Maybe they would string me up in front of everyone in the marketplace by her home and speak of my misdoings before slicing my head off.

In the darkened passageway where Tazhr first embraced me, he took me in his arms. I barely hugged him back. I didn’t know what to do. My nerves exploded in all directions, and I felt myself shaking beneath his grip.

“You’re going to be all right. Makar took care of everything.”

“Okay,” I muttered into his chest. “I have a day off in five days. I’ll be back at Realta then.”

“I’ll be waiting for you,” he promised.

Pulling myself from his arms, I turned away.

I couldn’t look back. I didn’t want to. I trusted that he *thought* Makar took care of everything, but as far as it being true, that remained to be seen.

My heart thundered as I approached the side entrance to Conii’s compound. I kept my gaze low, avoiding the penetrating stares of the guards. Their faces betrayed nothing, giving no hint if they knew of the grim events that unfolded here mere hours before.

One nodded curtly for me to enter. Taking a shaky breath, I stepped through the door into the wide foyer, braced for confrontation. Yet no one accosted me. The space was eerily still, with no signs of alarm or suspicion.

Cautiously, I made my way toward the kitchen, ears straining for any indication the chef’s absence had been noted. But the usual clamor of dinner preparations echoed ahead, the staff gossiping and laughing as they worked. How could they not know?

I hovered in the doorway, peering in. A Mondian woman I didn’t recognize bustled about directing the preparations, tasting sauces and checking oven temperatures. The chef was nowhere to be seen, yet no one questioned his disappearance.

“You!” the woman barked, catching sight of me gawking. “Don’t just stand there staring, girl. Make yourself useful and start chopping garnish.”

She shoved a cutting board loaded with colorful vegetables into my hands. I fumbled for words, but no explanation came. Ducking my head submissively, I carried the board to a prep station and diced vegetables, hands trembling.

Did I imagine everything? Was the terror and guilt tormenting me just a vivid dream? But no, I still felt the phantom weight of the blaster in my palm, smelled the acrid smoke and tasted the chef's blood in the air. It was horrifyingly real.

So where was the outrage, the manhunt for his killer? Why was the kitchen staff calmly prepping dinner as if this was any normal day? It made no sense.

Unless... could Tazhr and Makar truly have erased all traces of my crime so flawlessly in mere hours? Had the body vanished as if it never existed, the grisly evidence somehow wiped away?

I didn't know whether to weep with relief or scream in frustration at being robbed of any closure. I was Schrodinger's killer—simultaneously guilty and exonerated. The uncertainty was maddening.

But I hid my turmoil well. Outwardly, I was the picture of obedience, silently chopping and fetching and serving without complaint. Anything to avoid notice or suspicion.

The absence of questions surrounding the chef's disappearance seemed proof enough of Tazhr's claim. By some miracle, Makar cleaned the scene thoroughly, disposing of all remnants of the murder. No one but they and I knew the truth. And for now, I had to keep pretending I was equally oblivious.

The hours dragged by excruciatingly. I flinched each time footsteps approached, certain my guilt was obvious to anyone who looked closely. Yet the staff remained cheery and oblivious. My secret remained secure, buried beneath layers of lies and subterfuge.

I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop—Conii to return home early and demand answers no one could provide. Or for someone to stumble across evidence the Vinduthi overlooked. But the evening passed without incident, my role in it seemingly erased.

Finally, the dinner service ended, and I was permitted to slink off to my quarters for the night, exhausted mentally and physically. Tomorrow I would have to do this all again, maintaining the ruse that nothing was amiss. Smile blankly, feign ignorance, trust Tazhr's assurances that I was safe.

One day down, a lifetime still ahead. The thought kept me tossing and turning all night, pondering the impossibility of my new reality. I was a killer living on borrowed time, my fragile freedom purchased with another's blood. The few fitful hours of sleep I managed were haunted by visions of the chef's accusing stare as the light drained from his eyes.

Morning came too soon, the cheery dawn at odds with my bleak mood. With leaden feet, I dragged myself to the bathroom, avoiding my reflection in the mirror. I felt certain my guilt and shame must be etched on my face for all to see.

But again, no one at breakfast gave any indication of suspicion or distress. The guards milled about stone-faced as always. The kitchen staff laughed and joked as they prepared plates. When Conii herself swept imperiously into the room, not a flicker of worry creased her ageless features.

My stomach roiled at being so close to her, the architect of all the chaos and misery in my life. Acting normal in her presence took every ounce of willpower. But I knew any twitch or stammer could prove fatal, so I forced myself to meet her serpentine gaze unflinchingly.

After an endless meal where I choked down each bite, Conii departed, off to attend to more pressing business than her obedient humans. The knot in my chest finally loosened once she disappeared from view.

I spent the day dreading her return, certain somehow she would discern my deceit and guilt. But the hours passed uneventfully. Wherever Conii was, investigating the chef's absence wasn't a priority. Likely, she assumed he'd turn up sooner or later with some excuse about an illness or family emergency. She considered us all interchangeable servants.

I almost envied her that callous indifference now. What I wouldn't give to view the chef's death with the same casual

disinterest, just another minor staffing issue of no real consequence.

But for me the visions still lurked behind each mundane task, threatening to overwhelm me if I didn't keep rigid focus. Chopping vegetables, scrubbing floors, washing dishes—single-minded concentration on each mind-numbing chore was all that kept madness at bay.

That night I lay sleepless for hours again, thoughts racing feverishly. Was this watchful paranoia my new normal? Would I spend my remaining days on this station constantly peering over my shoulder, flinching at shadows? Perhaps eventually I'd grow numb like Conii and forget I ever valued life.

A humorless laugh escaped my lips at the irony. I wanted excitement, a chance to play detective and prove myself clever. But I now understood the terrible price paid by those who dared disrupt the natural order. My childish quest for "adventure" warped me, opening a door that could never be shut again.

Sometimes ignorance really was bliss. I yearned for the oblivious days when chopping and scrubbing were the peak of excitement, not the tricks I played to keep my mind distracted.

But it was too late for regrets. The only way out was forward, through the maze of deception I'd chosen to enter. Trusting Tazhr was my lifeline. Without him, I'd surely drown in guilt.

With that dismal thought, I finally drifted off as the pale light of dawn crept into my spartan quarters. But my reprieve was short-lived. Mere hours later, the morning bells jolted me from fitful sleep to start another day of charades.

By the third morning after the murder, the anxious edge dulled slightly, my mind and body accepting this tense new status quo as an inescapable reality. The chef's death was the monster under my bed—unseen but always lurking.

My jumps and flinches when anyone approached faded, replaced by a weary numbness. I was a prisoner in my own mind, an endless loop of gruesome memories I couldn't voice.

But even that became monotonous in its own warped way. The first day felt momentous, each following one less and less remarkable. My coworkers remained oblivious, Conii aloof. No revelation or reckoning occurred. The crime simply vanished without a trace, as if it never happened at all.

By the fifth day, I felt lulled into a kind of twilight state, simultaneously hyper aware, yet detached. I moved through each day mechanically, an actress performing grief and shock I no longer felt. Only the nagging fear of what Conii might do if she uncovered the truth still pierced the haze.

Surely she'd scour the station for answers if she suspected foul play. The lack of inquisition or retaliation meant we were still safe. For now.

But the cloud still loomed. I longed to unburden myself, confess everything to Tazhr and have him absolve me. Our planned meeting spot seemed impossibly far away, each hour apart an agony. His strength was the only balm for my wounded spirit.

When the day finally arrived, I flew through my tasks feverishly, nearly slicing my fingers instead of the ingredients in my impatience to finish. Every glance at the timepiece felt like an eternity.

At last the pace slowed as the dinner hour approached. I begged off to "run errands," not even waiting for permission before dashing outside into the bustling station thoroughfare.

I weaved urgently through the crowds, heart racing faster with each step nearer to the cafe. Tazhr's towering form came into view through the doors, and my breath caught.

My nerves went into overdrive, partially from terror and the other half from excitement. Before I could respond, he kissed me, and I immediately wrapped my arms around him. He picked me up and sat me on the kitchen island, and I wrapped my legs around him.

Just as we were getting into it, he pulled back and chuckled before exhaling deeply. "We don't have time right now."

“Why? What’s wrong?” I grinned, leaning in to kiss his neck.

“I have a lead. I think.”

I pulled back, and my legs unwrapped from his hips. I stared at him blankly. “You do?”



## TAZHR

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It had been a long five days.

The cryptic data files taunted me, their secrets buried under layers of subterfuge. Endless hours spent scouring the multitude of logs, messages, and transactions yielded more frustration than insight. Conii excelled at obscurity. But I would unravel her lies—I had to, for Havek’s sake.

The first enigmatic thread I seized upon was a string of clandestine payments to one “KV.” I cross-checked shipment logs and inventory records seeking any aligning activities, but found nothing overly suspicious. KV was a specter, leaving no tangible traces. Still, the timing of the payments made me certain they were instrumental in Havek’s downfall. I had to locate them and extract the truth.

I descended to Thodos Station’s seedy underbelly on my hunt, flashing Conii’s name and credit to loosen tongues. While she still lived, it afforded access and fear few dared refuse. After greasing enough palms, whispers of an elusive information broker surfaced.

Finally, I banged on the dingy backdoor of what appeared to be an abandoned hab-unit in the unfashionable lower decks. A battered Nazok female emerged, reeking of sour ale.

“KV here?” I demanded without preamble. Her bulbous eyes widened in alarm, hands raised in surrender.

“Don’t want trouble, sir.” Her gravelly voice shook. “Ain’t no KV here. You must be mistaken.”

I stepped forward menacingly. “I suggest you end this charade quickly, unless you’d like me to come in and tear the place apart? Or perhaps start cutting pieces off you until you remember?”

She cowered under my glare. “No need for violence! I’ll fetch who you want.” She scuttled off muttering, “Blasted clients can never use the front entrance...”

Moments later, a spindly, pockmarked female emerged scowling. “This had better be important, interrupting my work like this—” She froze upon seeing me looming in her foyer.

“KV, I presume?” My hand rested meaningfully on the knife at my belt. “You and I need to talk.”

Her eyes darted toward a hidden control panel and I laughed harshly. “Go ahead and call your security. I could use the entertainment.”

With a sigh of defeat, she beckoned me to follow. I had to duck entering the low-ceilinged room cluttered with monitors, aged computers, and tangled masses of wires. KV fidgeted nervously as I surveyed the space.

“What is it you want? Why are you harassing me and my staff?”

I tossed a credit chip onto her console by way of explanation. “I’m investigating certain payments you received from one Conii Haldek in the past few months.”

KV visibly paled at the mention of Conii’s name. “I provide services at my clients’ discretion,” she replied carefully. “The details are confidential.”

My fist crashing down made her jump. “Not when they involve framing of my family members! Tell me what she paid you to do.”

“Nothing!” KV insisted shrilly. “I never asked what she wanted the documents for, I swear on my life!”

My blood ran cold. “Documents? What documents?”

“Fake identity documents.” The words spilled out in a panicked rush. “New background, criminal records. But I

don't know who for! I turned the job down!"

Rage flooded me at her confirmation of Conii's deception. Only with great restraint did I resist crushing KV's skull right there. "If I find you've lied about your involvement, you'll pray for death before the end."

She collapsed, sobbing and begging incoherently as I stormed out. One more vile pawn in Conii's games. At least now I knew how she must have manufactured "evidence" against Havek. But KV was useless for connecting Conii directly to the crime. I needed more.

The next name to arise in my search was an elusive Agent Velas who exchanged encrypted communications with Conii in the weeks preceding Havek's arrest. The content was indecipherable, but my gut said this Velas figure was integral. I had to unmask them.

This time, my inquiries led me to a private docking slip in Thodos Station's affluent inner rings. Supposedly this was a business front for a Zentari mercenary who offered discrete, no-questions assassination services.

An ideal middleman for Conii's scheme.

Approaching the nondescript hangar, I noted the peculiar lack of any identifying markings. I nearly reached the access panel when the barrel of a carbine pressed to the base of my skull halted me cold.

"You are trespassing on restricted property," a rasping mechanized voice intoned. "State your business immediately or you will be neutralized."

I raised my hands slowly. "I'm seeking Agent Velas at Conii Haldek's behest. She assured me Velas could assist with a matter of mutual interest."

"Lies," the automated voice replied. "You are syndicate filth, here to threaten or coerce. But you will find no mercy. Leave now and you may yet escape termination."

The pressure of the gun ground painfully against my vertebrae. I had seconds to turn the tide before this sentry executed me.

In a move too fast to follow I spun, knocking the weapon upward as I slashed with my knife. The blade lodged deep in the metal chassis of the combat mech, sending up sparks. Wrenching the knife free, I dove for cover as blaster-fire streaked overhead, the mech's calm tones alarmingly dissonant against the onslaught.

From behind a cargo container, I launched into a sprint for the hangar entrance. The heavy footfalls of the damaged mech pursued me as searing plasma bolts bored into the perma-crete at my heels. I slammed my palm against the access panel and dove through as the door hissed open.

Blaster smoldering in the mech's grip, I snarled in frustration as the impenetrable entrance sealed shut once more. This Velas would remain untraceable for now. And I was no closer to clearing Havek's name.

But I would not be deterred. The threat of more false leads and bloodshed could not stand between me and justice. Conii's web would unravel, no matter how I had to tear it apart. Havek's freedom depended on my persistence.

Returning to the safehouse, my bleak mood sinking lower, I nearly missed the innocuous payment entry to one "JP." I traced back, heart pounding. There—a meeting with Jaxus Plarr mere days before the falsified reports condemned Havek.

This was it—the connection tying Conii to the frameup directly. After days of dead ends, finally, my vital lead!

Tomorrow could not come fast enough.

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I WATCHED Emma closely as I shared the scant details about Plarr, hungry for her insights. Her gaze grew distant in that endearing way which meant her agile mind spun into overdrive. Moments later, her eyes refocused, alight with revelation.

"He met with Conii right before the evidence appeared?" At my confirmation, she continued eagerly. "Then the timing

is key. We need to look for changes—anything out of the ordinary that happened right after.”

We poured over the files she copied, searching for the breadcrumb that would lead us to JP. Somewhere in this labyrinth of figures and aliases, the path to freedom awaited. We just had to find the first step.

“There has to be something we’re missing,” Emma muttered, scrolling intently through shipping inventories for the third time. “Some detail we glanced over that will make the rest fall into place.”

Her unwavering faith fueled me. My extraordinary mate, worthy partner in this quest. With her at my side, no mystery could elude us for long.

My eyes scanned columns of transactions, blurring together. There—an anomalous entry, a payment to “Kesh Ventures” days after Plarr’s meeting with Conii. Ventures implied business dealings. I cross-checked Conii’s recent meetings and messages. Nothing. Dead end.

I pushed back from the terminal with a frustrated growl. We were running out of time. If I couldn’t decode Conii’s web of deception soon, there would be no hope for Havek.

Sensing my darkening mood, Emma squeezed my hand. “We’ll find it,” she said firmly. “There’s always a clue, remember? We just have to keep...”

She trailed off, staring fixedly at the screen. I followed her gaze to the payment log, heart suddenly pounding. Kesh Ventures, with an address. KV. The informant who crafted false documents to frame Havek.

But this address was somewhere different from where I had been before.

“KV helped manufacture evidence against Havek, didn’t they? What if JP is their contact with the underworld, recruiting false witnesses?” Emma’s eyes shone with excitement. “Maybe even one himself?”

I pulled her into a crushing embrace.

“You’re right. Plarr is our link to KV, and through them, to Conii herself. We found him, we have our proof.” I clasped her face between my hands. “I could not do this without you, Emma. Stay close to me.”

Venturing once more into the lawless underbelly of Thodos Station, hope quickened our steps as we headed to the mystery address. The grim maze no longer seemed quite so bleak or endless with Emma beside me.

We slipped inside a cramped, choking bar, its smoky haze stinging my eyes. I cornered the bartender, a wizened Fanaith female playing with the latest percomm.

“We’re looking for Jaxus Plarr. Seen him?”

She didn’t bother to look up from the screen. “Sorry, never heard of him. We see a lot of people here. I don’t ask for names.”

I knew how to deal with this. People remembered a lot more after you shook them for a bit.

But, Emma interjected, pointing to a tiny red dot in the corner by the ceiling, the paint around it bright against the rest of the faded walls.

“That security camera—it’s newly installed, yes? Added after a windfall, just like that percomm?”

The Fanaith fidgeted nervously under Emma’s scrutiny. My clever mate’s intuition struck a nerve. I leaned in, teeth bared. “This Plarr. Is he worth enough to you to risk bringing the wrath of the Vinduthi on you?”

Sweating, the Fanaith gestured desperately to a heavy iron hatch built into the rear wall. “Back there! All I know is I was paid to hide him!”

I shot Emma a triumphant grin. She flashed a delighted smile in return, obviously pleased to have advanced our cause.

Then she surprised me yet again. “I’m so sorry for the inconvenience. How can we make it up to you?”

She elbowed me lightly, and I blinked for a moment before catching on.

I pulled out a handful of credits and handed them to the bartender. “For any damages.”

We burst through the hatch to find a lumpy blue Meaux clad in a filthy black and leather coat sprawled back on a cot, eyes fixed on a triD porno. I hauled him up, fangs glinting. “Why did Conii pay you? What lies did you tell about my friend?”

He squealed denials until Emma gently interrupted. “Those marks on your wrists—restraints? What made you so afraid that you’d go to such lengths to hide?”

JP’s eyes darted wildly at her second damning observation. He licked his lips, voice quavering. “S-she said she’d kill me if I didn’t testify against the Vinduthi! It was all Conii’s idea, I swear!”

Emma met my eyes, radiant with achievement. At that charged moment, I longed to seize her in my arms and never let go. But answers still remained to be coaxed from the sniveling coward.

“Keep talking,” I snarled at him. “Or shall my mate deduce more uncomfortable truths?”

JP collapsed against the filthy wall, whimpering. Emma’s gaze traveled over him clinically before catching on his left boot. Kneeling, she pointed out a strange modification.

“This custom steel capping around the toe. Smugglers sometimes use similar compartments to hide contraband from searches. What are you concealing in yours?”

JP erupted into fresh sobs at her third damning observation. “The datastick! With the evidence against the Vinduthi! She made me store it in case the Investigation Bureau had questions!”

He pried off the steel cap with trembling fingers, revealing the incriminating gap within.

But it was empty.

“Believe me, I didn’t kill anyone!”

I let him see my fangs. “Trust me, I can tell. Me, I’ve killed people. I’ve killed a lot of people, and I can tell someone who’s a killer from someone who’s a cheap crook for sale to anyone who asks. I bet you can tell that, too, can’t you?”

“She made me!” he said. “It wasn’t my idea! She said she had a job and when I met her where she told me too, there was some other guy and then they killed him! Right in front of me! And then she said she’d pay me if I took a stick of evidence to the magistrate!”

“And did you? Did you tell the magistrate that? Think carefully now.” I lifted him slightly off the ground.

“Yes! I told them what she said to tell them! I had to! She would have killed me if I didn’t!”

“Interesting. And what do you think I’m going to do if you don’t do what I tell you to do?”

“You’re gonna kill me,” he said miserably.

I nodded. “Good answer. But I’m a nice guy, so I’m gonna give you just one chance to live. Got it?”

“Anything,” he said. “I’ll do anything.” I could tell he meant it.

“You just need to stay still.”

Outside of the bar, I called for a squad of the Syndicate’s soldiers to come watch Plarr’s bolt hole.

“Why aren’t you taking him to the magistrate right away?” Emma asked.

“Because the son of a bitch that convicted Havek is an old enemy of ours,” I admitted. “Now that we have evidence to present, we need to get it to a more... sympathetic ear.”

I pulled Emma to me urgently. “You are incredible,” I told her fervently. “How did I ever get on without you before?”

She flushed prettily at my praise, demurring it was nothing special. I silenced her protests with a fierce kiss. “You saw what I overlooked. Never diminish your gifts.” I tenderly



brushed a stray hair from her eyes, awestruck by this woman who had become my entire world.

Wrapping her hand in mine, I led her way.

“Where are we going?”

“To the safehouse,” I answered. “There’s work we need to finish.”

“What kind of work? Isn’t that it? If Alkard takes Plarr to the magistrate in the morning, then it’s all over, isn’t it?”

I smiled. “Of course it is. I wasn’t talking about the case. I’m talking about far more important work.”

“Then what other kind of—”

That was the moment she figured it out.

# EMMA

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I mportant work or not, we still had to get back to his hideout.

And apparently it was market day, the crowds making my head spin. But after the squalid hideout where we found Plarr, I relished the energy and vibrancy around me. For a few moments, I could pretend I was simply another carefree shopper, not a fugitive bound on a dangerous quest.

Pausing at a booth adorned with vibrant fabrics, I impulsively held up a length of gossamer cloth, its colors shifting mercurially. “Aren’t they lovely, Tazhr?” I asked, hoping he could share a fraction of my carefree delight.

“Very lovely,” he agreed solemnly, the corners of his stern mouth softening. My heart swelled that this ferocious warrior would pause to appreciate such a delicate beauty. Each glimpse beyond his gruff exterior was a treasure.

As we made our way out of the organized chaos, I gasped in delight when Tazhr guided me toward a stall displaying engraved percomm charms and decorative covers. Selecting an intricate pendant, he gently attached it to my device.

“A little something to brighten your days,” he rumbled. His thoughtfulness took my breath away.

“Tazhr, you didn’t have to...” I protested faintly, fingers tracing the metalwork.

Cupping my chin tenderly, his fiery eyes held mine. “I know the shadows we walk, but you deserve any small joys along the path.” The gentle press of his lips on my brow made me tremble.

For an instant, nothing existed but Tazhr's warmth and the emotion in his gaze. I wished we could linger forever in this perfect moment, trials and dangers forgotten. But too soon, he drew back.

Unable to restrain my delight, I threw my arms around his sturdy frame in an enthusiastic hug. "It's beautiful, thank you! I'll keep it always." Standing on tiptoe, I pressed a swift, grateful kiss to his sculpted lips.

As I pulled back, impishness seized me. "Don't think sweet gifts will distract me from our mission," I teased with mock sternness. "You can shower me with finery after we bring Conii to justice." Laughing, I dashed off into the energetic crowd, Tazhr's amused chuckle trailing after me.

The pungent aroma of frying oil and sizzling meat wafted through the crowded streets as Tazhr and I came back to the promenade level. My stomach rumbled, reminding me that neither of us had eaten since morning. Down here, away from Conii's compound, appetizing scents teased from every corner.

"Hungry?" Tazhr asked, no doubt hearing my traitorous stomach's complaints over the lively din.

I nodded ruefully. "I suppose our interrogation worked up an appetite. I hope JP's cowardice didn't spoil your meal, though."

Tazhr chuckled, a rich warm sound that spread delight through me. "It will take more than a sniveling false witness to ruin my appetite. Unlike you fragile humans, we hardy Vinduthi can go weeks without food if needed."

To demonstrate his fortitude, Tazhr squared his massive shoulders and sucked in his abdomen. I burst out laughing at his exaggerated posturing, eliciting a rare grin in response.

"See if you're still laughing after you try my planet's cuisine," he mock-threatened. "Our spices are legendary for a reason."

Intrigued, I followed his gaze to a nearby food stand tended by a willowy Atlonian. Crimson smoke wafted from

the sizzling grill topped with skewers of meat and iridescent vegetables. My mouth watered at the enticing perfume.

Tazhr stepped up to the counter and exchanged a rapid flurry of his native tongue with the chef, who hurried to prepare a sample. I watched, fascinated by this rare glimpse into his alien culture.

When Tazhr pressed the loaded skewer into my hand, curiosity overcame caution. Eyes watering from the first searing bite, I forced myself to chew the fiery morsel. An explosion of flavors followed the heat, rich and smokey and strangely addictive.

Tazhr watched my reaction closely. “Well? Will your human palate endure true Vinduthi cuisine?”

Still coughing, I managed a thumbs up. He laughed again, wiping a stray tear of mirth from his eye. The sound enveloped me in warmth despite the lingering fire on my tongue.

We continued on, Tazhr snacking on the rest of the skewer. I was hyper aware of his nearness, attuned to each casual brush of his arm against mine in the crowd. Even such fleeting contact with his solid strength made my pulse flutter wildly. I slipped deeper under his spell with each passing hour in his intoxicating company.

The thrill of the chase still thrummed through me as Tazhr and I emerged from the dingy warrens of the undercity. The confrontation with the sniveling JP electrified us both, our quarry finally flushed out into the open after weeks of fruitless searching. I saw the fierce triumph in Tazhr’s eyes at the breakthrough, mingled with lingering battle-fire, ready to tear through any other obstacles blocking our path. No one could stand against his indomitable will when bent toward a cause, not even the formidable Conii Haldek and her web of lies. An unstoppable force, backed by an unquenchable flame of loyalty and justice.

And I helped fuel that flame, adding my feeble spark of insight to reignite his belief when frustration threatened to smother all hope. My small deductions broke through the riddle that eluded Tazhr’s mighty strength alone. Together we

formed an unbeatable team, shards of a fractured whole made complete in each other. I never dreamed I could complement someone so perfectly.

My gaze stole to Tazhr's imposing profile as we navigated the bustling station thoroughfares. Back among the orderly crowds, the primal thrill of the hunt left his shoulders and the pervasive wariness returned. Out here, danger wore smiling masks, concealed blades behind decorous words and demure demeanors. His eyes never stopped scanning for hidden threats, attuned to subtler cues than my senses could discern. Always vigilant, always ready to unleash his fury against anyone foolish enough to endanger what he held dear.

And despite his gruff reservations, somehow I was counted among those precious few things. Sheltered in the sanctuary of his protection now, whether I willed it or not. Those piercing golden eyes dared the crowds to test his resolve, proclaiming to any watching that I belonged to fearsome Tazhr—touch me at your peril. It should have rankled, being relegated to a mere possession in his eyes. Instead, a little thrill of delicious anticipation shivered through me.

My thoughts drifted guiltily to how securely those muscular arms lifted me, pinning me effortlessly. How vulnerable I was to his whims in those electrifying moments. Yet no harm came. Only bone-deep pleasure and a tantalizing promise of more. Surely such gentleness belied something deeper, beyond the beast glimpsed in battle? Some hidden chamber of his soul accessible only to me. I longed to lay bare all of his secrets in turn.

The brush of his fingers against mine startled me from my musings. I glanced up to find Tazhr's golden eyes boring intensely down at me, molten fire banked behind his inscrutable gaze. The charged moment hovered, stretched. My tongue darted out to moisten my lips, suddenly gone dry. His pupils dilated at the subtle movement, a predator catching an alluring scent.

And then we arrived at his hideaway.

My pulse roared in my ears as Tazhr kicked the door shut, caging me against it with his hulking frame. The smoldering look in his golden eyes left no doubt about his intentions. That feral intensity should have terrified me, but instead, it only amplified the liquid heat already pooling urgently in my core.

“Emma,” he rasped, my name a plea and a command on his tongue. “I’ve waited long enough.”

“Yes,” I breathed, baring the pale column of my throat—totally surrendering.

A rumbling purr of satisfaction vibrated through his chest. His callused hands encircled my wrists, lifting my arms above my head and pinning them to the cold metal door. I squirmed delightedly at being rendered so helpless, so vulnerable beneath his solid strength.

Leaning in, he trailed his nose along the hammering pulse in my neck, inhaling deeply. “Your scent drives me mad, Emma. Like the most addictive drug coursing through my veins. I can’t resist a taste...”

I cried out then moaned as his tongue flicked over my tender flesh, followed by the barest graze of fangs. My back arched, pressing every inch of me tighter to him. I needed more of the exquisite danger he tempted me with.

“Please, Tazhr...” I wasn’t even certain what I begged for in my delirium of need. But he knew exactly what I craved.

With a fierce snarl, he claimed my mouth, plundering its soft depths. I opened eagerly to him, savoring the mingled taste of spice and smoke on his tongue. It stoked the flames of my desire ever hotter.

My wrists still pinned overhead, I couldn’t reciprocate beyond straining wantonly closer. Tazhr drew back with a wicked grin, his eyes raking my helpless form.

“That’s it, little one,” he purred. “Struggle all you like—you’re not escaping me now.”

To emphasize his point, he ground his hips forward, the unyielding rigid length beneath the fabric leaving no doubt of

his arousal. I gasped and clenched reflexively at the promise of that dominating intrusion, earning another pleased rumble.

Slowly he released one of my wrists, trailing his claws down my arm and over the frantic flutter of my pulse. Lower, he stroked, until finally his palm cupped my breast through the thin fabric of my tunic.

We both groaned at that electric contact, my back arching to fill his hand. “Yes, Emma, just like that,” he encouraged huskily, talons circling and teasing my taut peak. “Show me how much you ache for my touch.”

I was helpless to resist his seductive murmurs and deft caresses, my body writhing in an increasingly shameless display of need. All that existed was his hands and mouth expertly stoking the raging fire within me ever higher.

When clever fingers at last slipped beneath my waistband, finding slick evidence of my arousal, I sobbed in relief. “Please, Tazhr, I need you now!”

In answer, he freed himself one-handed and drove into my wet core in one smooth stroke. My wail of ecstasy rang off the metal walls, drowned out only by his exultant roar.

We moved as one, my legs wrapped around his pistoning hips, lost in primal rhythm. Every pounding stroke took me higher, until finally I shattered in his embrace, keening his name like a prayer. With a final bone-shaking thrust, he soon followed with a shout of triumph.

Still entwined, we slid to the floor in blissful exhaustion. But even replete, I knew one taste would never sate this addiction between us. I needed him like air, and his fierce kiss told me the craving was mutually tenfold. We were bound now, two souls merged beyond any hope of separation.

I trembled in anticipation as Tazhr deftly stripped me bare, his smoldering gaze devouring every inch of newly exposed skin. When I lay nude before him, he drew back, raking his eyes over me possessively.

“Exquisite,” he purred. A claw traced delicately down between my heaving breasts. “I could gaze upon your beauty

for eternity and never be sated, Emma.”

Despite the flush suffusing my entire body under his scrutiny, I managed to arch a teasing brow. “Is gazing all you intend to do for the rest of the night, then?”

That earned a wicked chuckle as he leaned over me, bracing his arms on either side so I was caged beneath him. “Believe me, I intend to do much more than gaze, my treasure. I intend to claim every sweet inch of you, again and again...”

As if to demonstrate, he dipped his head to capture one taut nipple between his lips, lapping it with slow strokes of his tongue. I arched and cried out at the bolts of electricity the delicate attention sent spearing straight to my core.

When I writhed mindlessly from just those teasing tastes, he drew back, tracing a claw lightly around my neglected breast. “Tell me what you want, Emma. I want to hear you beg for it.”

Pride briefly warred with desperate longing before capitulating. “I want your mouth on me,” I confessed breathlessly. “I need to feel your tongue tasting every part of me. Please, Tazhr...”

I begged shamelessly, too far gone to care about anything beyond reaching that peak.

And he was happy to comply.



## TAZHR

---

The smell of her desire flooded my senses, my inner beast snarling in triumph, threatening to shatter what little control remained.

*Not yet*, I told the darkness. I would take her slowly, savor each gasp and moan torn from her pretty lips. Only once she was truly mad with need would I allow us that ultimate joining.

I lifted her effortlessly, laying her across the ruffled bedding. Caging her smaller body beneath mine, I claimed her mouth again fiercely. Emma responded beautifully, writhing and panting into the kiss, small hands clutching my back to pull me closer.

When I finally released her swollen lips to trail kisses down her delicate throat, she moaned in protest. The sound sent hot lust spiking through me. I wanted to hear more of those sweet cries.

“Patience, my treasure,” I purred, continuing the path down her heaving chest. Emma strained up encouragingly as I traced the outside curve of one breast with my tongue. Her breathy sighs urged me on until I finally captured a taut nipple between my lips.

Her answering whimper of need was the sweetest music. I lavished the bud with firm strokes and flicks until Emma arched desperately into my mouth, wordlessly pleading for more.

“Please, Tazhr!” she finally sobbed when I would not yet relent. “I’m burning up, I need you!”

Hearing her beg so prettily for me tested my restraint. With a rumbling growl, I turned my attention to her other breast, licking and sucking until she thrashed mindlessly beneath me. Only then did I begin kissing lower, down across her quivering belly.

I draped her trembling thighs over my shoulders, breathing deep of her scent at the source. Emma’s whole body tensed in anticipation, legs wantonly spread to grant me access.

With one long slow lick through her slick folds, I feasted on her dewy center in earnest. Her flavor was exquisite, addictive, and I lapped hungrily at every drop of nectar from that honeyed flower.

My name on her lips became a rising litany of ecstasy as I brought her swiftly to a first shattering peak under my mouth and fingers. I did not relent until a second climax overtook her, back arching taut as a drawn bowstring in euphoria.

Only when she collapsed limp and spent did I rise over her again, aching erection poised at her entrance. With infinite care, I slid into her velvet depths, hissing at the scalding perfection as her sheath rippled around me.

Emma’s eyes flew open wide, lips forming a shocked ‘O’ at the sensual invasion. I held myself still through sheer force of will, letting her adjust to my considerable girth.

At her eager nod, I moved, withdrawing part way before sliding home once more. Each deliberate stroke stretched and molded her tight channel to fit me flawlessly.

Gradually, I increased the depth and force, driven by Emma’s husky encouragement. “Yes, more, please Tazhr, I need all of you!”

With a snarling roar, the last of my restraint shattered. I drove into her powerfully, claiming her with each pounding thrust. Emma’s nails raked down my back, urging me on feverishly even as her walls clenched and spasmed around my plunging length.

Our gazes locked, bodies joined to the hilt. Emma's lips parted, exposing the vulnerable arch of her throat in total surrender. *I should take her, claim her now, make her my mate forever.*

Then I froze. Not yet. Not until the shadow of Conii's treachery was burned away.

And for now, I unleashed myself upon her delicate body, wringing every possible ounce of ecstasy from our joining.

By the time bliss finally shattered us both, Emma sobbed my name deliriously, clinging to me like I was the only solid thing left in her world. Her exhausted fulfillment was proof enough of my mastery over her pleasure.

As she drifted into sated slumber still enfolded in my arms, I pressed a fierce kiss to her brow.

I held Emma's sleeping form against me, her cheek nestled to my chest as she drifted in sated exhaustion. The sweet relief of finally joining with her was tempered by the ragged edges of my lingering hunger. I restrained the beast's urge to fully claim her, but its demands could not be denied forever.

For now, I simply reveled in the feel of her soft warmth meshed with mine. My claws traced delicate patterns on the smooth skin of her back and shoulders, releasing tension even as I memorized every dip and curve.

She was perfection incarnate. I would lavish her with all the passion she inspired, worship her with my body as was her due.

Stirring slowly, Emma blinked up at me with a sleepy, satiated smile. "Mmm...how long was I out?" she murmured, arching into my caresses like a contented cat.

"Only a few minutes, my treasure," I assured, rewarded with a pleased flush at the endearment. "It seems I rather exhausted you for a time."

Her still-flushed cheeks darkened further at the reminder of our vigorous lovemaking. My cock stirred at this evidence of pleasuring her well, leaving her deliciously wanton and willing.

To banish any lingering soreness, I massaged her body, kneading gently at first then more firmly until she was groaning in bliss. Focusing my efforts lower, I slid two fingers into her slick channel, finding her still soaked from our earlier release.

“Oh, Tazhr...” Emma gasped and arched into my hand’s rhythm. Her nails clawed at my back, reigniting the primal need.

I rolled atop her, caging her in my arms as I settled between her thighs again. She welcomed me eagerly, legs clasping around my hips, drawing me into her molten depths.

Her pussy gripped me like liquid silk, so perfect, I had to pause just to regain a shred of control. Emma was having none of it, undulating her hips impatiently until I growled and drove into her.

“Yes, just like that!” she cried, spurring me to increase the force. I claimed her mouth, swallowing her rapturous moans as our bodies came together again and again.

By the time Emma peaked with a wailing cry, any scrap of restraint was long incinerated. I rutted into her with feral abandon, focused only on reaching that blissful crescendo.

Her climax milked my own from me with shuddering force. I sank my fangs into the pillow to muffle my roars, imagining it was the tender flesh of her neck pierced instead.

As sanity returned, I tenderly stroked Emma’s disheveled hair back from her face. Her half-lidded eyes and replete smile told me she was thoroughly satisfied.

“Incredible,” she sighed, nuzzling into me. “I can’t get enough of you, Tazhr.” Her hand drifted teasingly down my abdomen, finding me still semi-hard against her thigh.

I captured her wandering fingers, bringing them to my lips with a groan. “Careful, my heart. You may unleash the beast’s hunger again.”

Emma’s eyes took on a challenging glint. “Maybe I want him unleashed,” she purred.

With a playful growl, I pounced, rolling until Emma sat astride me. Gripping her hips, I guided her to take me inside once more. Her head fell back on a breathy moan as she sank down my length.

“Ride,” I commanded, needing to see her lose all control in ecstasy atop me. Emma obeyed eagerly, undulating and grinding her hips, finding a rhythm that soon had her mewling in bliss.

I thrust up hard to meet each roll of her pelvis, driving impossibly deep at this angle. Her breasts bounced enticingly with every impact and I craned up to capture a taut peak between my lips.

Emma cried out, inner walls squeezing my cock deliciously at the added sensation. I was determined to push her over the edge again while spending myself inside her molten depths.

She was mine.

And I would never let her go.

## EMMA

---

“The Promenade is getting more dangerous every day,” Luvar, the new chef, said as he added another pinch of svanti spice to the sauce. “I tell you, my predecessor wasn’t the last person who’ll get shot out there. It could happen to anyone.”

“Yeah, it’s scary,” I said, laying the latest clean dish onto the rack. That was Luvar’s job before, but now that he was promoted to head chef, I was stuck doing it, as well as the rest of the prepwork.

Frankly, I was exhausted. At least when you cleaned floors, the air wasn’t as hot and steamy as it got when you were half an hour into washing dishes.

“The kind of person who could do that to someone...” Luvar went on, turning his attention to the vegetables. “There must be something really wrong with them. It might have been their first, but I’m sure it won’t be their last.”

“Well, I don’t know about that,” I said, instinctively. Immediately, I regretted it.

“What do you mean?” asked Luvar. “You think a normal person just walks up to someone on the street and shoots them?”

No, I thought. They would have to be very scared. And also pretty angry and maybe thinking about how their scary Vinduthi boyfriend would handle the situation.

“Well, I just think there might have been circumstances. Like maybe they felt threatened.”

“Threatened by the chef?” Luvar laughed. “What would he threaten? That he’d overdo their pasta?”

“Well, I don’t know. It’s just pushing a button, isn’t it? Maybe they didn’t really think about what would happen until they already pushed it.”

Luvar shrugged, and in the same movement, pushed the chopped vegetables onto the pan with his knife. “Maybe. There are probably some people like that out there. But there are also some people who are really scary. Who just love killing for the sake of it.”

“You’re right about that,” I said, staring off into the distance, briefly. “You’re certainly right about that.”

“Don’t slow down now!” Luvar called, clapping his hands. “You’re almost done!”

“Right,” I said, grabbing the next plate and scrubbing. “Just thinking about something.”

“The really crazy ones, right?” said Luvar. “Yeah, I think about that kind of guy a lot. I tell you, we’d all be better off if we could just get rid of people like that.”

“You really think so?” I murmured, putting the plate on the rack.

“Oh, I know it,” Luvar continued. “Of course, they’ll never do it. You’d end up getting too many innocent people if you tried. But it sure would be nice if the rest of us normal people could just get along without them.”

Was I a normal person anymore? The question bothered me for some time. After all, I killed someone. In a moment of panic, sure, but that didn’t change the fact that he was dead.

I also didn’t like his pasta much, another voice in my head added.

Then again, I wasn’t anything like Tazhr. I wasn’t anything like him, but I also wasn’t scared or repelled by him the way Luvar was. He fascinated me. Even when he did something that scared me, even then, there was something I couldn’t help

being amazed by. Something that almost felt innocent and playful amidst all the horribleness.

“You don’t think there might be a place for some people like that?” I asked, placing the final bowl on the rack. “Like, maybe there are times when you need someone like that to deal with things. Even if only because of other people like that.”

Luvar stared at me. “Emma, that’s the craziest thing I ever heard.”

Oh.

I kept working in silence, moving on to the pile of vegetables that needed to be prepped.

I couldn’t stop replaying my last conversation with Tazhr in my head, wondering if we missed some vital clue buried in all those files and records I stole from Conii’s office. We were so close to exposing her crimes and freeing Havek.

I just knew the evidence we needed was in there somewhere. If I could only focus long enough to piece it all together...

“Ow!” I hissed as the knife sliced into my thumb. Dammit, that’s what I got for daydreaming about Tazhr’s sexy rumbling voice instead of paying attention. I shook my hand irritably as a single drop of blood landed next to the cutting board, nearly marring the perfectly chopped piles. Nice going, Emma. The sous chef was gonna have my hide for that.

Right on cue, the Mondian scowled down at me, beady eyes zeroed in on the blood staining her pristine workspace. “Clumsy, foolish girl!” she snapped. “Keep your empty human head focused on the task at hand, not wandering the void!”

“Yes, chef. Very sorry, chef!” I mumbled, quickly wrapping a towel around my stinging thumb to stem the bleeding before I made an even bigger mess. Couldn’t afford to have her notice how utterly distracted I was obsessing over Tazhr and our mission.

With a sigh, I turned back to the endless piles awaiting chopping, trying in vain to shut my brain off and just focus.



But my thoughts kept skipping traitorously back to Tazhr—the way his muscles rippled beneath his skin when he fought, that wicked grin he got when he dug up a promising new lead, the heat in those smoldering golden eyes when we were alone...

I was startled out of my daydream by the chef smacking a heavy pot down loudly near me.

“Girl! Stop gazing at the wall like a vacant-headed fool,” she snarled. “You’d think you never worked in this kitchen!”

*Focus, Emma!* I scolded myself. Thinking about Tazhr was only going to get me in trouble. There was no point fantasizing about his sculpted muscles or intoxicating scent, not right now.

I attacked the vegetables vigorously, trying to vent my frustration. But my thoughts crept traitorously back to Tazhr’s rare, rumbling laughter, the warmth in his eyes when I made a clever deduction...

Those moments when we put our heads together to crack a clue were almost as good as the sex. Almost. I could almost picture his pleased smile when I connected the dots in a way he didn’t expect...

I flushed, and it wasn’t just from the heat of the stove.

I needed to get out of here. Just for a moment.

“We’re out of grimplain tubers!” I shouted, then dashed out towards the market before the chef could say anything.

Once in the swirl of the marketplace, I caught my breath, trying to focus.

I’d see Tazhr later that night. I promised to sneak out after dinner, meet up to work on our puzzle. And maybe, if I was lucky, he’d work on me...

My percomm beeped, interrupting the pleasant daydream.

That was strange. No one messaged me. Especially not Taz.

“Come immediately. T.” Coordinates in the Under. No context or explanation at all. My instincts screamed that it was probably a trap.

But what if he was in real trouble for some reason and actually needed me?

What if he was lying on a floor somewhere, bleeding out, and that was all he could manage?

I had to know either way. Maybe I overreacted...I hoped so. But I couldn't ignore the uneasy prickle down my spine.

My pulse was already pounding as I descended into the chaotic, noisy maze of alleys and corridors that made up the lawless Under. This place always put my nerves on edge even in the best circumstances. And right now, my gut twisted with apprehension about what awaited me.

It took me a while to find the coordinates from the sketchy message in this labyrinth. It led to a dim, cramped dead-end passage far off the main thoroughfares. There wasn't a soul around that I could see, but the hairs on the back of my neck stood up like I was being watched.

Something was seriously wrong here.

Never mind. I should go back, go to that bakery where Taz's brother and his mate were.

Find help.

I edged cautiously back down the alley, peering into the gloomy shadows. And then I spotted the body crumpled on the grimy floor halfway down. My heart seized in my chest, but as I approached with leaden steps, the details became horribly clear.

Bloppy blue body. Red and black jacket. And those tell-tell boots.

Jaxus Plarr. His throat was savagely slashed, dark blood still wet and glistening. Bile rose in my throat as I reeled back before leaning forward to brush my fingers over his hand.

Still warm.

But dead, all the same.

The one person who could definitively finger Conii as the mastermind behind the framing of Tazhr's friend. Which

meant our chances of freeing Tazhr's friend just got a lot slimmer.

I stumbled against the alley wall, head spinning. This was bad. So very bad. Tazhr would be devastated. We needed Jaxus's testimony to ensure Conii faced justice. Without that... a wave of despair crashed over me. All our risky efforts over the last week suddenly seemed futile.

My spiraling thoughts scattered as angry shouts echoed down the passage from behind me. I whirled around to see a group of Enforcers blocking the only exit from the alley, weapons drawn and pointed right at me.

"Murderer! Don't move!"

I threw my hands up desperately. "Wait, you don't understand! I just found him here like this, I swear!" I pleaded.

But they didn't listen. Two of them grabbed me roughly, wrenching my arms behind my back to slap on restraints, while others kept their guns trained on me. I struggled uselessly, my heart hammering against my ribs.

"Save your lies for the magistrate, human trash," a Mondian sneered as he finished securing my wrists in the metal cuffs. "We all know your kind can't be trusted."

I pleaded with them that this was some kind of setup, that I was just lured here, that I didn't hurt Jaxus.

That I wasn't a murderer. Well, that part wasn't true, but they didn't know that.

They dragged me out of the alley into the winding maze of passages that made up this sector of the Under while I craned my neck, desperately trying to spot anyone who might help me, but the streets were largely deserted here.

Wait! Was that the Fanaith bartender I met when we were down here before?

I shouted frantically, but she faded back into an alleyway.

My heart sank, but I couldn't blame her for not wanting to get involved.

I had no choice but to stumble along between the two Enforcers holding my arms in their bruising grip.

But we already reached the transit pod station and there was no more time. The Enforcers shoved me roughly into a waiting pod, their cruel, tattooed faces leering through the door windows as it slid closed.

I was sealed in, alone.

Which made no sense.

I never had a lot of interaction with the Enforcers.

They weren't exactly encouraged company over at Conii's.

But they used official pods. Not battered ones like this.

And they got there so fast, the body was still warm.

It just didn't make sense. Enforcers didn't wander around the Under, looking for crimes to prevent.

*What if they weren't preventing a crime, I wondered. What if they were there to commit one?*

I strained against the metal cuffs digging into my wrists, but quickly realized it was useless. No amount of wriggling or contorting would slip them free.

Sagging back against the wall in defeat, I blinked back tears as the transit pod shot through the streets. Where were they taking me?

If my guess was correct, I wasn't headed anywhere near Enforcer headquarters.

The dim lights in the pod cast eerie shadows, making my reflection in the window look like a frightened stranger. My heart pounded so loudly, I was certain they heard it, even outside. I took a few deep gulps of the stale, metallic air trying to clear the panic from my brain.

*Think logically, Emma.*

Who would try to take me like this?

I wasn't important. Didn't mean anything to anyone.

Except for Tazhr.

If anyone reported my ‘arrest,’ Taz would look for me at Enforcer headquarters.

That would give Conii plenty of time to hide me, to plan an even better trap for him.

*Think, Emma, think!* I berated myself desperately.

Before I could formulate any semblance of a plan, the pod slowed abruptly, sending me lurching sideways.

The doors slid open and I squinted against garish lights, eyes struggling to adjust.

Where the hell was I?

## TAZHR

---

I paced back and forth across the polished perma-crete floor of the bakery, my nerves fraying more with each glance at the timepiece on the wall. Emma was two hours late for our planned meeting, and my mind conjured increasingly dreadful scenarios about what might be keeping her.

Did she decide to pursue a reckless lead on her own, thinking her clever little head immune to danger? The chaotic streets of the lower decks were hazardous enough in daylight, let alone after the curfew alarms sounded. And for a vulnerable human female, the threats lurking in every shadowed alleyway were far worse than a simple mugging.

If any filthy lowlife so much as looked at Emma the wrong way, I would tear their spine out through their throat. Assuming they even had a spine. But that did little to ease the sick tension coiling in my gut.

I should have insisted on escorting her here directly from Conii's vile compound. Trusting her to evade trouble on her own was clearly a grave mistake. She was brave but foolhardy, prone to following her curiosity into peril. How could I have underestimated the risks?

"You're wearing a hole in my floor with all that pacing, Taz," Makar commented drily as he emerged from the kitchen carrying a tray of freshly baked sweet rolls. I halted my restless prowl across his shop to glower at the timepiece yet again. Still no sign of Emma.

“Here, have some pâtis,” Makar offered, setting the tray down on the counter next to me. “Might settle your nerves a bit.”

I shook my head curtly, the thought of food turning my stomach when Emma could be injured or worse. Noticing my grim expression, Makar sighed.

“Look, maybe she just got held up finishing her duties at the compound. Conii runs those poor servants ragged, from what you said. I’m sure Emma will turn up soon, safe and sound.” His tone aimed for reassurance, but I detected the hint of doubt beneath it. Makar was too perceptive not to notice the ominous tension thrumming through me.

We both remembered what happened the last time Emma was late.

“You’re probably right. Thank you for the hospitality as always, but I should begin searching the nearby streets, just in case.” I struggled to keep my voice even. Visions of Emma bound and bleeding, crying out for me, threatened to shatter what fragile calm remained.

Makar’s expression turned grave. “Of course. Be safe, Tazhr. Let me know immediately if I can assist the search.” His steadfast solidarity meant more than he knew. With a final nod, I stalked out of the bakery into the chaotic maze of streets and alleys outside.

I paused just beyond the doors, nostrils flaring as I drew in deep breaths of the pungent air, sorting through the jumble of scents for any trace of Emma’s sweet fragrance. But the medley of smells—machine oil, spices, refuse—revealed no clues to where she went. Cursing under my breath, I set off toward the seedier drinking establishments of the Under.

If Emma went anywhere on her own, it would likely have been to confront that sniveling coward Plarr again, thinking she could pressure more information from him. I should have forbidden her from venturing near that grubby hole where the cretin was hiding.

But Emma's defiant glare whenever she thought I was being overprotective flashed through my mind. She never would have tolerated such restrictions, no matter that they were for her own good.

*You damned stubborn fool*, I snarled silently, even as a grudging smile tugged at my lips. Did any other being ever manage to frustrate and entrance me so completely as Emma Rochester?

Likely not. The woman was an eternal contradiction—both endearingly naive and surprisingly cunning, wavering between reckless daring and sheepish vulnerability. Certainly far too complex and contrary for me to grasp fully.

Yet despite barely comprehending what unfathomable forces drove Emma's quicksilver moods, I knew with unwavering certainty that I would lay waste to entire star systems if that was what it took to keep her from harm.

The passages grew more crowded as I descended through levels, the press of bodies and cloying stench intensifying. I shouldered roughly through the throngs, scanning the mass of faces for the one I sought.

A flash of golden hair had my heart seizing for an instant before I registered the sharp talons and tentacles that definitely did not belong to Emma. Cursing my foolish hope, I continued toward the dingy bar where we found Plarr cowering.

The elderly Fanaith woman was perched on her usual stool inside, fiddling idly with an outdated percomm. Her drooping fleshy facial lobes quivered in recognition as I loomed over her. Clearly, my menacing bulk intimidated, but she made an effort not to cower. I had to admire that flicker of courage, despite her obvious unease.

“You were here several days ago with the human girl, yes?” Even her gravelly voice shook faintly, but she met my searing gaze. “The nice one who treated me kindly, not like most who come around here.”

Emma's gentle compassion left an impression it seemed. I latched onto that, willing my tone to be less harsh. “Just so.



She's gone missing, and I'm trying to find where she was headed. Did she come here?"

The Fanaith hesitated, clearly reluctant to get involved in any trouble. But eventually she gave a slow nod. "Didn't come here. But I saw her, just the same."

My chest constricted, dread clawing up my throat. I leaned in intently. "Where did you see her?"

"About three blocks from here." The Fanaith fidgeted nervously with her percomm. "Heard a rumor that my guest," she glanced over to the hatch that had sheltered Plarr, "That he was gone. Not coming back. So I went looking. Instead, I found what looked like Enforcers hauling that human girl into a transport pod. Heard she was arrested for Plarr's murder."

My blood turned to ice in my veins. "Arrested for murder, here?" Nobody cared about a murder or two down in the Under. "Are you certain they were real Enforcers?" I demanded.

"Fairly sure," the Fanaith said slowly. "The uniforms looked convincing enough. And they were headed toward the judicial precinct, last I saw."

I slammed my fist down in frustration, making her jump.

I wanted to destroy the bar, tear apart the entire district.

But that wouldn't help.

I needed to be smart, like Emma.

Like her friend, Sherlock Holmes.

Taking a deep breath, I forced myself to think it through.

None of this added up at all.

Unless it was some elaborate ploy by Conii to get Emma out of the way and Plarr shut up for good. That conniving serpent was certainly capable of using her influence to arrange such a deception.

Cold fury washed through me at the thought of Emma terrified and alone. Conii would pay dearly for this—just as soon as I got Emma to safety.

I managed a curt thanks to the cowering Fanaith before storming off to find the bumbling squad members who were supposed to be guarding Plarr. Someone would answer for allowing Emma to be taken right under their noses.

It didn't take long to locate the sole survivor, a twitchy youth named Noitc, who nearly collapsed in relief at the sight of me unharmed. Babbling nervously, he confessed that the squad had abandoned their post after getting a message from me.

One I obviously hadn't sent, because after they went to the designated coordinates, they were attacked by a pack of Voleks.

"It l-looked totally legitimate, sir, I swear! The security protocols matched, and everything!"

This was one of the many reasons we needed Havek back.

I barely restrained myself from crushing the fool's throat for his idiocy.

Emma was gone because of his incompetence. But losing my temper wouldn't bring her back any faster.

Seething with quiet rage, I left Noitc quaking in his boots and set off.

I fingered my percomm. I should notify Alkard and the others, let them know what was going on.

Except there was a reason he sent me on this mission alone.

Knowing Alkard, he had at least one other scheme to free Havek underway. More likely, he had a whole stack of them.

I couldn't risk distracting him from that.

Even worse would be drawing attention to the Syndicate's movements. We had too many secrets, too much information that could never be revealed.

I needed to solve this by myself.

Where would Conii take Emma?

Her old base in the Serpentine where Mera and Kovas were captured?

No. Word on the street was that Conii's rival Munk made that sector too hot for her.

Word on the street.

If anyone knew where Emma was taken, it would be one of the Arkani. Those mysterious hooded figures made it their business to trade in secrets and information. And their network of eyes and ears was unparalleled in scope.

Fingers tapping as I ran, I set up another meeting with my contact.

First, I stopped by the bakery to grab something Arkani would consider valuable enough to trade.

"Makar, I'm using your system for a minute!" I shouted, then locked myself in the office.

This was... not exactly orthodox. And Void only knew what Alkard would think about the plan.

But I was ready to blow things up. Just in a different way than usual.

Back to the ring district, to the seedy bar I was at just days ago.

"Why are we meeting again?" the first Arkani hissed. "It is too dangerous."

"If you're as good at rumors as you say you are, you'll know why I'm here, and who I'm looking for."

The two hooded figures turned towards each other, seeming to converse without speaking. But behind those black masks, who knew what they were doing?

"The human female," the second one admitted. "You want her back."

Fury coiled through my gut but I tamped it back down. "I'll get her back. It's just a matter of finding out how many people are going to die along the way."

Right. Apparently the anger was still pretty damn present.

“The Karavak are small players,” the first started. “We risk little by telling you of their secrets.”

“But Conii and her clan,” the second picked up the thread. “They would crush us if they could.”

Slowly, I pulled a data spike from my pocket, sliding it halfway across the table to them.

“I know you can gather data from all over the station.” I moved the spike back towards me. “But can you also send data everywhere?”

As one, they reached for the spike, long fingers stretching for it.

“What is it? Is it good? Is it interesting?”

“Secrets,” I promised. “Secrets like you’ve never imagined.”

“Whose? What do you want for it?”

I wrapped the spike in my fist. “Tell me where my mate is first. How do I get to her?”

The hoods leaned so close to each other now that they touched as long minutes stretched out.

Emma. She was waiting for me.

But strangling the Arkani wouldn’t get me to her any sooner.

I needed the one virtue I spent my life thinking of as useless.

Patience.

Finally, they sat back.

“The human woman is back at Conii’s compound,” the one on the left announced. “There is a hidden section that none of her regular staff know about.”

Secrets upon secrets, indeed.

“Then how do I get in?”

The one on the right reached for the spike, and this time, I handed it over. Sliding it into the slot on his percomm, he froze. Not for the first time, I wished I could see the expression behind the mask.

“Is this...”

“Yup.” I grinned. “Exactly what you think it is.”

“What do you want us to do with it?”

“Whatever you want. Personally, I think it would be funny if everyone got a chance to see what’s on that spike.” I shrugged. “But not everyone gets my jokes.”

A low hiss of agitation. “That would mean chaos.”

“You say that like chaos is a bad thing.”

I stood up. “You’ve got the spike. Now tell me how to get to Emma.”

They sketched a quick map on a scrap of synthplas, detailing a circuitous pathway through rarely-used maintenance tunnels and ductwork.

I committed the maze of turns to memory before igniting the synthplas with a quick twist.

“Many branching paths lie along the way,” they warned. “Follow only where I’ve mapped, else become lost forever.”

Not going to happen.

I cut through the station, heading for Conii’s compound.

Emma was so close now, near enough I practically felt our connection thrumming. Each step brought me closer to where she was imprisoned. Soon I would steal inside the viper’s nest and catch Conii off guard for once.

But I had to be smart, not simply tear through walls roaring Emma’s name. The element of surprise was crucial with the limited forces at my disposal. I needed a thief’s cunning, not a berserker’s savagery. Not yet.

Up ahead, the alley split around an awkwardly jutting maintenance shaft. I scanned the sparse space for anything

amiss. And there, half-buried in debris near the shaft—the glint of metal and glass shards.

My heart seized as I raced over and gently lifted the ruined percomm from the muck.

A twisted shred of metal was all that remained of the delicate filigree pendant I gave Emma.

She'd been here.

*Have patience just a while longer, Emma. I'm coming for you.*

# EMMA

---

There must have been some sort of gas in the transit pod. My head throbbed dully, and my mouth felt like it was stuffed full of cotton. I blinked several times trying to clear the fog from my brain and figure out where I was, but all I could make out was a dim overhead light and featureless metal walls surrounding me.

Fighting down panic, I took stock of my surroundings. The room was tiny, just a few paces across, and utterly devoid of features aside from a rickety cot along one wall and a basic toilet and sink in the corner. Thick metal comprised the walls on all sides, seamless except for the heavy locked door.

I racked my brain trying to figure out how I could have ended up here. The impersonators who arrested me had seemed experienced, their disguises and gear all convincing. This had to have been a carefully planned operation. And that meant whoever was behind it had extensive resources.

A creeping suspicion wormed its way into my mind, but I tried to ignore it, not wanting to consider the horrific implications. I needed to stay calm and focused if I was going to find a way out of this nightmare. There had to be something I could use, some weakness I could exploit. I just had to search every inch of this cell.

I checked under the cot's thin mattress, shoving the piece of furniture around, even inspected the exposed toilet pipes, but found absolutely nothing helpful. These walls were engineered to be escape-proof, even for someone as motivated

as I was. Despair threatened to crush me as I realized I truly was trapped.

Fighting the panic rising in my chest, I forced myself to breathe deeply. What would Sherlock Holmes do in my situation?

Stay cool under pressure, keep observing and analyzing rationally.

What would Tazhr do?

Break things.

Between the two of them, there had to be a way.

Steeling myself, I resumed scouring every centimeter for anything overlooked.

Then I noticed the ventilation shaft.

Unlike in the pantry, this duct was located high on one wall, its opening covered by a rusty grill. It was small, but with some effort I might be able to fit inside. Hope flickered back to life, fueling my determination.

A shaft like that led me to Conii's office before. Surely it would lead me somewhere now.

And anywhere was better than here.

Grunting with effort, I dragged the cot directly beneath the duct. Climbing cautiously atop the rickety frame brought me just close enough to dislodge the cover and shove it to the side. A breath of fresher air from within tantalized me, but I would have to stretch and scramble to pull myself up into the claustrophobic passageway.

Taking a deep breath, I gathered my energy and leapt upward, managing to grab the edge of the opening on my tiptoes. I scrambled for purchase against the smooth sides, gradually hauling myself up as the cot creaked and wobbled below me.

Hell.

I wasn't going to be able to get out this way.



Could I at least get a message out?

Conii's compound was shielded from unauthorized communications, I knew. But this was someplace I'd never seen before.

Maybe from inside the vent, I'd get a signal, just enough for Taz to find me.

But just as I got my torso wedged into the vent, my sweaty hand lost its grip. I cried out as I felt myself slipping, my legs kicking wildly in midair. At the last second before tumbling off, I caught a glimpse of my percomm slipping loose from my pocket.

My desperate grab came too late. I could only watch helplessly as the percomm plummeted down into the shadows below the duct, out of my reach.

I heard the thumps and rattles as it ricocheted along the metal, getting farther and farther away.

A faint crack echoed up a few seconds later. My only means of communicating with the outside world was destroyed.

Forcing down the lump in my throat, I lowered myself shakily back to the cot then the floor. The brief hope of escape through the air duct was gone.

Pacing back and forth across the cell, I racked my brain for a new plan. There had to be some other way out of this nightmare, some detail I overlooked. I just needed to stay calm and focus. But visions of Conii kept intruding, taunting me.

How much did she know? Had one of her spies just reported that I was seen with Tazhr?

Was this just about my hanging out with the enemy?

Or did she know about my invasion of her office, the copying of her files?

I worked for her for too long to have any sort of optimism as to what she'd do to me in either case.

For a moment, all-consuming panic threatened to overwhelm me. I couldn't breathe, couldn't see a way out of this terrifying trap closing around me. Conii had eyes and ears everywhere on this station.

And who knew what cruel torments she devised to inflict on me even now? Alone and defenseless, I was utterly at her mercy. She could make my death as gruesome and prolonged as her sadistic mind desired. I curled into a ball on the cot, shuddering uncontrollably at imagined horrors.

Then Tazhr's face flashed into my memory, stern and strong, those mesmerizing golden eyes blazing. Somehow, I had to survive this ordeal long enough for Tazhr to find me. He would tear the whole station apart bolt by bolt if that was what it took. I believed that with unwavering certainty.

Gradually, my trembling stilled. A new sense of calm settled through me, the calm of resolution. I would not collapse or beg mercy from the likes of Conii. She wanted to see me broken? Well then, my defiance would deny her that petty satisfaction for as long as possible.

I envisioned Tazhr's approving rumble at my show of stubborn resolve. Let Conii posture and threaten all she wanted. She was vain enough that she would want me lucid to appreciate the full terror of my predicament.

That meant time—time for Tazhr to unravel this mystery and follow our bond to wherever I was hidden. Time for me to watch for any opening to aid our chances. I would be ready.

With newfound energy, I inspected every square centimeter once more, seeking weaknesses that might eventually prove useful. The walls were seamless, the door impregnable, but there had to be something I could exploit when the moment was right. I would bide my time and trust in Tazhr. His fierce spirit would guide me through this darkness.

Lost in my meticulous search, I didn't hear the heavy footsteps approaching until the door suddenly clanked open. I whirled around, pulse racing. Two hulking masked guards strode in, wordlessly grabbing me by the arms. My struggles

were useless against their immense strength as they hauled me out into the stark corridor beyond.

Fear threatened to choke me as they dragged me through a maze of sterile hallways. But I forced it down, keeping my face emotionless. I would not let my dread show. The guards would only relish seeing their prisoner frightened and defeated. Holding tight to the thought of Tazhr, I kept my chin high.

After what felt like endless grim corridors, we stopped at a dead end.

One guard raised a sleek black device and held it to a panel set into the wall.

My eyes widened when it slid open to reveal Conii's office on the other side.

She watched me implacably as the guards forced me to my knees on the hard floor before her.

"Well, well. What have we here?" she purred in her deceptively musical voice. "An inquisitive little insect who believed herself clever enough to infiltrate my affairs."

Her cruel eyes bored into me, searching for a reaction. I stared straight back, refusing to be cowed. After an expectant pause, Conii smiled thinly, a predator bemused by its cornered prey's show of defiance.

"To think, I treated you well. Let you live here, eat under my own roof." I swallowed hard, but stayed silent. "Oh, it will be such a pleasure breaking that stubborn will of yours, my dear," she said softly. "We have so much quality time ahead of us now that your intimidating brute of a partner is out of the picture."

My blood turned to ice at the implication, but I kept my face carefully blank. She was baiting me, trying to provoke a response to satisfy her sadism. I couldn't let even a flicker of emotion show.

Laughing, Conii turned away, waving a hand at the guards. "Take her back to her cell. I just wanted to take a look at the

first little human who was so foolish as to betray me. You'll be a lovely example to the rest of your kind."

No.

I wouldn't break.

There would be a way out of this.

But I couldn't think over the pounding of my blood in my ears.

Except...

That pounding came from somewhere else.

## TAZHR

---

I prowled through the cramped maintenance tunnels beneath Conii's compound, following the twisting path the Arkani mapped out. Emma's sweet scent lingered in the stale air, guiding me onward. She had been this way recently. I was closing in.

The tunnels were a maze, but I navigated unerringly, alert for the traps and decoys the Arkani had warned of. A false turn could mean becoming lost in this labyrinth forever, but Emma's fading fragrance drew me like a beacon through the gloom.

Up ahead, the tunnel branched. One path sloped downward into impenetrable darkness. The other ended in a solid metal wall. Emma's scent was stronger from that direction. I pressed my hand against the cold metal, reaching out with my senses. She was near, so tantalizingly near.

With a savage roar, I unleashed my fury upon the obstacle, claws and fists tearing relentlessly at the alloy. The metal warped and buckled under my onslaught. Agonizingly slowly, a gap widened. I wedged my fingers into the tear, muscles straining as I ripped the hole wider.

Beyond was only sterile silence. Was I wrong? Panic rose in my chest. Then a thunderous pounding echoed through the wall, the blessed rhythm of Emma's heartbeat. I bellowed her name, straining with renewed desperation until finally the gap was large enough to slip through.

I emerged into a harshly lit corridor. Emma's fragrance enveloped me, overpowering now. She came this way recently, and not alone. I inhaled deeply, sorting through the other scents. Guards—at least two of them. My lips peeled back, baring my fangs. They would pay for laying their filthy hands on my mate.

Creeping silently onward, I tracked the group's path through a maze of turns and passages until it came to a dead end once again.

But it didn't matter. On the other side, I heard Conii's voice, cruel and taunting.

With a roar, I ripped open the metal, fury bubbling through me at the sight of Emma's slender form forced to her knees before Conii.

No more.

I charged, barreling into the nearest guard and crushing his spine before he could react. The sickening crunch of shattering vertebrae echoed off the walls of the room. The other guard that dared to lay hand on Emma scrambled backwards, but it was too late for him.

Before his limp body finished its descent, two more brutish guards rushed through the open door. The first swung a metal club studded with wicked spikes. I spun out of its path then grabbed his overextended arm and wrenched upwards, feeling the pop of a dislocated shoulder. Howling, he dropped the club which I scooped up and rammed viciously into his gut, doubling him over before a strike to his temple put him down.

The second guard came at me with a crackling stun prod, its tip giving off an ominous hum. He jabbed it toward my chest but I side-stepped the attack and wrapped one hand around his thick wrist, squeezing until I felt the delicate bones fracture. The guard shrieked, fingers spasming open to drop the weapon.

In the same motion, I yanked him off balance and delivered a devastating clothesline blow to his throat. He

collapsed choking and gagging, helpless now. A stomp of my boot crushed his larynx, ending his miserable existence.

Yet more brutish forms crowded through the doorway, these wielding menacing vibro-axes. The first hacked down at my skull. I flipped backwards out of reach, the vicious blade splitting empty air with an angry whine. As he struggled to free it from the floor, I vaulted into a flying kick that crushed his sternum and hurled him limply against the far wall.

The second swung for my legs with a sweeping blow. I leapt over the scything arc then dropsaulted him straight in the face on my way down. Cartilage crunched wetly under my boots and he sagged moaning. A vicious stomp exploded his nose into a bloody ruin, silencing his cries.

The largest attacker yet stalked through the door, a hulking Mondian, easily nine feet tall. Muscles rippled beneath his black battle armor as he hefted a massive two-handed maul. His first colossal swing vaporized Conii's ostentatious kauri desk in an explosion of shrapnel.

Circling warily, I delivered a rapid barrage of blows to his torso but the armor absorbed them with minimal effect. The giant swung again, slower this time. I rolled under the ponderous swing and came up behind him. Gripping his armored head between my hands, I twisted violently until a resounding crack signaled the end. The mammoth body slumped face-first to the floor with a resounding boom.

Glancing around for more foes, my gaze fell upon Emma, eyes wide with shock yet fierce determination still blazing behind her fear. My brave, unbreakable mate. But she was unarmed and vulnerable, unable to aid in the melee.

I spotted one of the fallen guard's discarded stun prods laying nearby. Snatching it up, I tossed the weapon toward her. "Emma, catch!"

She deftly caught the prod and whirled to confront the next wave of attackers. A towering Astran charged swinging a meter long shock-whip which Emma narrowly ducked. Before he recovered, she jammed the stun prod into his gut and triggered it.

50,000 volts of electricity dropped the giant Astran instantly, convulsing helplessly on the polished floor. Emma braced over his prone form, facing the door defiantly.

My courageous mate, standing strong at my side even amidst the chaos. Heart swelling with pride, I spun to confront the next attackers, but none came.

“It’s over, Conii,” I rumbled. “Your guards aren’t fools, and all your secrets have come to light. The evidence of your crimes is irrefutable now.”

Conii’s eyes narrowed, her expression venomous. “You know nothing, fool. I am untouchable on this station.”

In answer, I tossed my percomm onto her desk. “See for yourself.”

With trembling hands, she scanned the news headlines and frantic chatter over the coms. As she took in the scope of the revelations, all color leached from her elegant features.

“No...impossible...I’ll kill you for this!” she hissed. But beneath the bravado, I sensed her desperation. Her house of cards was crumbling.

I bared my fangs in a cold smile. “Your reign ends today. The hunters are coming for you now.” As if on cue, the thunder of the outer walls of the compound being breached thundered through the room.

“Who do you think will get to you first?” Emma asked, her eyes narrowed. “I imagine there’s quite a list of sentients who would like to talk to you now.”

Blaster fire from outside only underscored her words.

With a shriek of rage, Conii dove for a hidden panel and scrambled into an escape hatch just before the office door burst inward once again.

Alkard and the rest of my brothers strode through, taking positions through the room.

But that didn’t matter, not now.



I lifted Emma gently to her feet and into my embrace. Relief flooded me, having her back safe in my arms. Cupping her face in my hands, I tenderly kissed her, heedless of any observers. Against all odds, we survived.

A purposeful cough interrupted us. I turned to glare at Alkard. There would be much to discuss about the downfall of his nemesis and plans for the future. But for now, my universe narrowed to just myself and Emma.

The rest could wait.

# EMMA

---

It was over.

It was over, Conii was gone, and Tazhr was with me, holding me so tightly, I knew he'd never let me go.

The others were talking, bent over the remains of Conii's desk. Whatever they planned, I couldn't care.

I was too busy lost in the heat of Taz's touch. He came for me. I knew he would.

That beautiful, deadly killing machine would never let me down.

"What do you want to do now?" he said when we finally broke apart. "You can do anything you want, anything in the universe."

I leaned forward, falling into his eyes. "I want to stay with you. I don't want us to be separated, ever again."

His fingers tightened on my arms. "Do you know what that means? Are you certain?"

I swallowed hard, but didn't take my gaze from his.

I heard the rumors about Vinduthi mating, seeing the truth in Sophia's eyes, in the marks that danced down her skin.

As Makar's mate, she was changed forever.

And she didn't look unhappy about it in the least.

Stretching up on my toes, I whispered against the skin of his neck. "Take me home." I kissed the gold tracery. "Make

me yours.” Another kiss, and his breathing grew ragged. “Claim me as your mate.”

Maybe I pushed it a little too hard. In a moment, Tazhr lifted me into his arms, striding out of the room, his eyes fixed again.

“Hey! Where are you off to?” Makar shouted.

“I have business to take care of,” Taz yelled back over his shoulder.

“Aw, shit, we have another one, boys,” Razov commented while the rest of them laughed.

---

DID I pay attention to where Tazhr carried me?

No.

I wasn't collecting clues, or trying to deduce anything.

Logic flew out the window.

I barely noticed when we entered the Fallen Star, going up a lift to the living quarters above.

I'd investigate later.

Right now, there was only one mystery on my mind.

What would it feel like to be claimed?

He opened the doors to his quarters, and his scent immediately let me know that this was home. This was where I belonged.

He spun me around in his living room, and he carried me in the back to the bed. I expected a bachelor's rundown apartment, but his bedroom looked more like a sanctuary. The bed was enormous, with gold and red brocade sheets and blankets.

“These will not do,” Tazhr said, pulling the uniform I still had on from work.

He tore it in half, literally ripping them from my body, his slate gray muscles bulging.

“You will never, ever be forced to wear anything against your will again,” he said as he knelt down and kissed my neck. His whole body glowed, especially the molten gold tracery vibrating and pulsing in time with the beat of his heart.

A wicked grin lit his face. “If I had my way, you’d never dress at all.”

He slid off his shirt and trousers, and led me to the bathroom, turning on the shower, adjusting the water to a perfect warm cascade.

“Let me care for you, my treasure,” he murmured, guiding me under the steaming spray. I sighed in pleasure as the water sluiced over my skin, washing away the lingering taint of my ordeal.

Tazhr gently massaged sweet-scented oil into my hair, his claws tenderly scratching my scalp in a way that made me tingle. I leaned into his strength, tension melting away.

When I was fully lathered, he drew me back under the water to rinse, his hands gliding reverently over every curve and plane of my body. My nerves sparked wherever he touched.

Unable to resist, I turned in his embrace, pulling his mouth down to mine. Our kiss quickly deepened, all the passion and fear of the last days pouring out. I felt his rigid length pressing urgently against my belly.

“Emma, are you certain?” Tazhr rasped, breaking the kiss to search my eyes.

“Yes,” I breathed. “But not here. Take me to bed.”

Scooping me up, Tazhr swiftly carried me to the expansive bed. He laid me across the decadent golden covers and gazed down hungrily.

“You are exquisite, a goddess and I intend to worship every inch of you properly.”

He began a sensual exploration of my body, tasting, teasing, stroking every sensitive spot he discovered in our past trysts. My back arched and pleasure mounted as he lavished attention on my breasts, my throat, the tender insides of my thighs. I was soaked and aching for him long before his clever mouth found my center.

When his tongue finally stroked through my slick folds, I cried out, tangling my hands in his hair to pull him closer. He growled approvingly, the vibrations intensifying the delicious sensation. My peak crashed over me in moments, legs clamping around his head as I wailed his name.

But Tazhr did not stop, carrying me higher again with his lips and fingers until I thrashed mindlessly from the ecstasy. Only then did he rise over me, my juices glistening on his grinning mouth.

“Please, I need you inside me!” I begged shamelessly. Chuckling, he guided my legs around his hips and slid home in one smooth stroke, every flange that ran the length of his huge cock hitting my clit with each thrust.

Braced above me, Tazhr set a steady rhythm, rocking deeper with each thrust. I moved with him, our bodies perfectly in sync. His ridged length massaged my sensitive walls with delicious friction, pleasure coiling tighter.

“You feel incredible, Emma,” Tazhr gritted out between pounding strokes. “So hot and tight and wet for me. I can never get enough of you.”

“Yes, more, don’t stop!” I sobbed, raking my nails down his flexing back. I was so close again, balanced on a knife’s edge. His golden eyes burned into mine as our movements became frenzied.

“Come with me, my mate,” he commanded. “Let me feel you shatter.”

Reaching between us, his fingers found my throbbing clit, rubbing in firm circles. The added sensation hurled me over the brink with a wailing scream. My spasming release

triggered his own, hips driving forward powerfully as he emptied himself inside me.

We clung together, shuddered through endless waves of bliss. But even in the afterglow, desire still simmered. I needed more of him.

I pushed Tazhr onto his back, straddling his waist to take control. Leaning down, I caught his earlobe between my teeth, nibbling the sensitive tip. He groaned, talons reflexively kneading my hips.

“I want a ride now,” I purred. Understanding my intent, his cock hardened rapidly beneath me.

Bracing my hands on his sculpted chest, I took him inside my slick channel. We both moaned as I sank down his thick cock.

Finding my own rhythm, I rolled my hips, grinding my aching clit against him on every downward stroke. His ridged cock hit new angles inside me, sparking explosions of pleasure.

“Emma, you feel incredible,” Tazhr gritted out, eyes slitted with bliss. His big hands roved my skin reverently as I pleased us both. “So perfect having you above me like this.”

I increased my pace, chasing another shattering release. When my movements faltered from sheer sensation, Tazhr gripped my hips, thrusting up powerfully to meet each downward slide.

The combined friction quickly pushed me over the edge again with a breathless cry. My writhing inner muscles locked down, coaxing Tazhr’s own climax from him.

Utterly spent, I collapsed atop his broad chest. Tazhr’s arms wrapped around me securely as I drifted, his rumbling purr of satisfaction lulling me.

But even satiated, I craved more—the ultimate union to bind us eternally. I tilted my head, baring the smooth column of my throat in offering.

“Make me yours fully,” I whispered. “I’m ready.”

Tazhr stilled beneath me. Slowly, he shifted us until I lay cradled in his embrace, trusting gaze fixed unwaveringly upon him.

“My beloved, Emma,” he murmured, tracing my lips tenderly. “It will hurt, but only for a moment. Then we will be one forever.”

At the first prick of his fangs against my skin, I shuddered, then moaned as the tingle of his saliva worked its magic, making me crave more.

Crave him.

And then I was swept away into the dark, unable to do anything more than cling to him.

---

I FLOATED BACK to awareness slowly, a pleasant ache suffusing my body. Blinking against the dim lighting, memories of the passionate hours with Tazhr flowed back. Our joining, the rapture of the claiming bite...

Was it real, or only a feverish dream? I shifted slightly, wincing at the lingering soreness between my legs. No, we definitely made love with quite vigorous enthusiasm.

But what of the bond? Did I imagine the mystical merger of our essence in the throes of passion?

A rumbling chuckle answered my unspoken question. “Welcome back, my mate.”

I rolled toward that beloved voice to find Tazhr watching me, eyes tender. Tracing my cheek, he smiled. “How do you feel?”

I considered, taking stock. “Different...” I murmured. Was my hearing sharper? I could make out the hum of generators many levels away. And the room seemed brighter, details more vivid to my eyes.

Sitting up, I glanced down and gasped. Lacing across my side were swirling patterns of metallic gold, mirroring Tazhr’s

own glowing markings. I trailed a wondering finger over the shimmering tracery, feeling it tingle at my touch.

“It’s real then? I sense you, here.” I pressed a hand over my heart. Through our link, his emotions resonated within me—joy, desire, protectiveness.

Tazhr clasped my marked hand, interlacing our fingers. “We are one now. My strength is yours.” He drew me against his chest and I sighed, feeling complete.

I was changed, inside and out. But I never felt more like myself. We belonged together, two parts reunited. I sent my own love and contentment through our bond, seeing his eyes light up as he received it.

Whatever came next, we would face it side by side, our shared power unbreakable. No secrets or fears could come between us any longer. For the first time since arriving on Thodos Station, I was truly home.



## TAZHR

---

I rolled over and shut off my percomm. I didn't know who had the audacity to call me that early in the morning, but I wasn't having it. Emma and I were still exhausted from moving all our things into one place and redecorating.

Who knew getting the apartment set up just the way she wanted it could take a month?

Leaning over to brush the hair back from her cheek, I couldn't help but smile. If she wanted to do it all over again, I'd be willing.

It was worth it to see her excited steps through the market, the way she bounced on the balls of her feet when we set up a shelf just for her books.

The one we didn't bring?

The history of Deathgate.

It was part of our story, part of what brought us together.

But that was the past. We had a long, bright future to look forward to now.

With Conii's dealings broadcast everywhere, Alkard had time to dig into her old records, getting the proof we needed to clear Havek to the Grand Judge of Thodos III.

Havek was acquitted of all his crimes and returned to the station with a new mate, Payton.

And just like that, our family was even larger.

I gazed over the gold lining on her face. I didn't think anything could have made her more beautiful, but seeing my tracery on her only made her more astonishing. It was like the color was made for her skin, eyes, hair, all of her. It just fit, like everything else about us.

Her eyes slowly opened, the smile on her lips making my chest skip a beat.

"You're gorgeous," I whispered before kissing her.

She giggled beneath my kiss, but her laugh was interrupted by my percomm going off again. I groaned and rolled over, checking the name that time.

*Havek.*

"Hey," I chimed as I answered the call.

"Are you going to the meeting today?"

"Do I have a choice?" I laid back in bed while Emma cuddled up to me.

Havek scoffed. "Do we ever?"

"I'll be there," I sighed. "What else do you have going on today?"

"Payton is going shopping with Tessi; that's about it."

"Good that she's getting out some."

I knew about the struggles Payton had since returning to the ship. It was understandable that she was anxious after all she and Havek went through. As I said the words, Emma's percomm buzzed. She picked it up and read the message before turning to me and mouthing 'Tessi.'

"Looks like your girl's going to have another joining up for the fun," I told Havek while rubbing Emma's shoulder. "Emma's going to be there, too."

"How did we all wind up with human mates, Taz?" Havek laughed.

"I don't know," I replied, looking down at Emma while she messaged Tessi back. "There's something otherworldly about

them.”

Emma playfully slapped me on the chest. I laughed. “I gotta go, Havek. I’ll see you soon.”

“Sounds good,” Havek replied before hanging up the phone.

I turned to Emma and tackled her with embraces and kisses. Once she came down from the laughter, I lay next to her and lightly touched her arm.

“I love you, Emma,” I murmured.

“I love you, too, Tazhr,” she replied before kissing me.

Looking at the time, I sighed and kissed her again before getting out of bed.

“Alkard will have my head if I’m late.”

Especially since I had an errand to run first.

There was something I needed to take care of, and Emma couldn’t know about it. I wasn’t sure how she would feel about it, but I knew it had to happen.

I hated keeping secrets from her, even if I had the best intentions.

Standing outside in the marketplace, I looked at the sign for a moment, debating if I was doing the right thing. I hoped I was, and she would think so, too, but I wasn’t going to know unless I took the chance.

My hand pushed the door open, and a human man greeted me happily from behind the counter. “Morning! Don’t see many Vinduthi around these parts.”

I rubbed the back of my neck and chuckled. “Yeah, it’s a special occasion.”

He nodded and grinned again before waving his hand to the rings in the display case behind him. “Please, take all the time you need.”

Emma and I were formally mated by Vinduthi law, but I wanted to ensure I incorporated her culture as well. She

deserved that. She deserved much more than that.

I exhaled and walked forward, looking at all the various designs. I shook my head while stroking my chin. “I never say this.” I looked at the man. “But I have no idea what I’m doing.”

He laughed. “It’s not something very typical for Vinduthi. Don’t be nervous, son.” He leaned on the counter. “What’s her personality like?”

I grinned and looked at the wall with my hands on my hips. “She’s...” I paused. *How can words even describe her?* “She’s brave and vibrant and just...” I sighed. “She’s beautiful in every way. She would die for the ones she loves. She’s selfless and loving; she’s everything I never knew I needed.”

I closed my mouth when I realized I was getting sappy about her with another man. *Who am I?*

He chuckled. “No need to be embarrassed. Here.” He leaned over the display case and brought out a ring with golden stones on the sides. In the center, there was a beautiful hexagonal diamond. He handed it to me. “To match your mating traces, I assume she has them, too.”

I nodded, taking the ring from him and looking at it. Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out a piece of string I carefully tied around her finger while she slept, holding my breath the entire time, more nervous than getting ready for battle.

After a slight examination, he nodded. “That’s the right size, son.” He looked at me and grinned. “Looks like a perfect match.”

I inhaled deeply before looking at the ring again and pulling out my percomm. “How much?” The answer didn’t matter. Emma was worth everything.

I walked out with a black box in my pocket and spent the whole time walking to the Fallen Star, thinking about what came next.

# EMMA

---

My hands trembled as I held the thick cream-colored envelope addressed only to “Emma.” What could it be?

Curiosity spiked through me as I fumbled to open it.

Taking a deep breath, I unfolded it to read the spiky script:

MY DEAREST EMMA,

Please join me this evening on the observation deck of Ring 7 at precisely 20:00 hours. There is an important matter I wish to discuss with you. I eagerly anticipate your arrival.

Forever yours,

Tazhr

TAZHR WROTE ME A LETTER. What could he want to talk about?

We were mated. That was forever. I knew it was.

But a written note and an “important matter?” My nerves were going to eat me alive long before the meeting time.

As the appointed hour neared, it took monumental self-control not to rush straight to the observation deck. I forced myself to move deliberately, neither hurrying nor stalling. Either extreme might betray my eagerness and anxiety. I would meet this pivotal moment with poise.

At last, I arrived, heartbeat thundering in my ears. The vaulted chamber was deserted except for Tazhr's imposing silhouette leaning against the viewport, the nebula's rosy glow softly illuminating his pensive profile. He turned at my approach, golden eyes warm with affection.

"You came," he rumbled. "I feared you might not. That it was too soon..."

I crossed the space between us and took his hands in mine. "You are my mate," I said simply. "How could I not come when you call?"

Tazhr exhaled slowly. Nodding, he sank gracefully to one knee before me. My vision blurred with tears at this ultimate gesture of devotion from my proud warrior.

From his pocket, Tazhr withdrew a small velvet box. Nestled inside was a dazzling golden ring accented with shimmering gems. "Emma Rochester, will you do me the honor of becoming my mate?" His voice shook slightly despite the formal words.

"Yes!" I cried joyfully, no longer trusting myself to speak. "Of course I will!" Laughing through my tears, I pulled him up into a fierce embrace.

Tazhr's relieved laughter mingled with mine. Taking my hand with reverent care, he slid the ring onto my finger. "A perfect fit," he pronounced, eyes suspiciously bright. "Just like you and I."

No further words were needed. We clung together in blissful silence as the nebula blazed around us. The path ahead seemed limitless, the universe ours to explore together.

---

I STUDIED my reflection critically in the full-length mirror. Was the embroidered lace too much? Did the gauzy sleeves hang properly off the shoulder? My nerves made every tiny flaw seem disastrous.

“Oh, Emma, you look absolutely stunning!” Tessi gushed from the couch where she lounged, already dressed in her pale blue gown as my attendant. “Tazhr’s jaw is going to drop when he sees you walking down the aisle.”

I managed a shaky smile, smoothing imaginary wrinkles from the white satin skirt. “I hope so. I want today to be perfect for him.”

Hard to believe our wedding day was finally here after months of joyful planning. Though still more comfortable avoiding public spectacle, Tazhr indulged my enthusiasm for the occasion with fond bemusement. The chance to declare my love before the station felt too momentous to neglect.

Of course, the gathering itself would remain relatively small and private, attended only by Tazhr’s closest Syndicate brothers and my handful of trusted friends. Intimate or not, the reality of binding myself to Tazhr forever before witnesses suddenly felt daunting. What if I stumbled over my vows? What if he realized mid-ceremony that free-spirited Emma wasn’t the mate he needed after all? Cold feet seemed inadequate to describe the icy dread congealing in my stomach.

“Emma.” Tessi’s voice broke through my spiraling thoughts. Her expression radiated empathy and understanding from across the room. “It’s okay to be a little nervous. But don’t forget—Tazhr loves you more than anything. He lives for you. I know that kind of passion never fades.” Her hand drifted unconsciously to her swirl of marks.

Bolstered by her steadfast faith, I inhaled deeply until the bands of anxiety loosened from my chest. She was right. The depth of Tazhr’s devotion was proven beyond doubt by now. A mere ceremony could not change that, no matter my irrational fears about insignificant details. All that truly mattered was our joy in the journey ahead together.

Squaring my shoulders, I turned from the mirror. “Come on. We shouldn’t keep the others waiting.”

Tessi beamed approvingly. “There’s my girl! Let’s go get you your Vinduthi for life.” Laughing, she hooked her arm

through mine and led me out the door toward my destiny.



## TAZHR

---

**B**efore I met Emma, I thought I was clueless when it came to patience. Then, I realized I was absolutely oblivious when it came to love. Cue the human proposal, which taught me even more about how uneducated I was about human culture and matters of the heart. All that, I was sure I knew nothing about. I thought I had experienced true bewilderment until we had the human wedding.

So many parts of it didn't make sense. I didn't say anything, of course, because I wanted Emma to have her perfect day, but I did have a lot of questions.

*Why have so many flowers if they're all going to wilt soon? Why does she need a sheer cloth covering her face until she walks to the end of the aisle? Is there a meaning to the flower I have pinned to my chest?*

While standing at the altar and waiting for her to come down the aisle, I looked down at the strange thing. It was almost wrapped in something. Was there symbolism? Was I supposed to take it off at some point to signify we had been married?

I caught Alkard's eyes in the crowd and pointed to it. He snickered and shook his head as he mouthed, 'Leave it alone.' *So it's here for decorative purposes?*

Before my questions continued, the music began playing. I did have to give the humans a nod for their musical tastes when it came to those events. They were quite talented at choosing tunes that would make one's eyes water.

Everyone stood up. I wondered if they just wanted to get a better view of her in the dress. Wasn't I supposed to be the one with the view?

Emma walked around the corner, and I heard members of the audience gasp. I saw her head moving through some of the crowd but not the full view. My muscles tightened, and my throat got dry.

*Do they make human men wear these things to constrict them? Why would they do that if they would just get nervous? It all seems counterproductive.*

When she appeared in my full range of view, none of my griping matters mattered anymore. I had never been so blown away by another being. With a grin, I finally understood why humans did these weddings. Maybe I didn't quite grasp the meanings of the flowers, veils, and outfits, but I did understand why they were so special.

Because as the love of my life walked down the aisle toward me, I realized the wedding was a display of her grace. It was all curated to highlight the purity and amazement she brought into her life. The small items of decorum were there to emphasize her beauty. It was all worth it.

She grinned at me as Alkard walked with her to the front. I took her hand and gave him a nod before helping her up onto the altar. She turned her head toward the priest but kept her eyes on me.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today," the priest began. Who knew the human man running the ring shop was also an officiant? It only seemed appropriate to have him be the one to bind us together the human way.

"Tazhr?"

"Hmm?" I looked at the priest, broken from my trance.

"Your vows?"

"Oh, yes." I reached into my pocket and glanced at the crowd. The whole family came out for our special day. The last thing I wanted was for them to see me bare my heart to Emma, but she deserved it. I cleared my throat and looked at

her, trying to keep my hands from obviously shaking while holding the paper.

“Emma,” I sighed. “You have brought connection to my life. Something I always wanted but didn’t know how to achieve. It is because of you that my life is full today.” I glanced at her and saw her wide smile. Again, she made the embarrassing and vulnerable moment worth it. “I vow to care for you, love you, protect you and honor you every day for the rest of our lives together.”

I knew it was short, but she also knew how big that was for me to read those vows in front of everyone.

“Emma?”

“Tazhr.” She reached out and held my hands. *Damn. She doesn’t have a paper. She memorized it.* “I actually didn’t write anything for today.” *Thank the seven galaxies, I feel better now.* “But I wanted to speak from the heart.” *Damn.* “You are the most insane being I have ever met.”

The family in the crowd laughed. I couldn’t help but chuckle. She wasn’t wrong.

“I’ve learned to live this life to the fullest with you by my side.” She grinned. “I vow to love you, care for you, support your wild decisions, and follow you to the ends of this galaxy for the rest of our lives.”

*Damn. That was good.* I had to stop myself from tearing up.

“Please present the rings.”

We slid them onto each other’s fingers. I knew the family would poke fun at me for wearing it, but it was more than a decorative symbol. It was the unification the priest was so excited about. Together, Emma and I were going to change the culture and future of Thodos III. It was time.

“By the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife! You may kiss the bride!”

*That’s it? It went by so fast!* I shoved the thoughts aside and kissed her, dipping her slightly while she laughed beneath

my lips. The crowd cheered, and the family was overjoyed. I don't know if I had ever seen them so happy.

As we walked down the aisle, Emma beaming beside me and unable to wipe the stupid grin off my face, I looked at all the beings in the crowd. Every one of the Vinduthi in our family stood joyful with their human mate by their sides.

I came to realize, walking down that aisle, that everything we did had come full circle. Alkard was secure as the head of our family, as he should have been. Makar opened his own bakery, Razov opened his heart to love, Kovas recovered from his injuries, and Havek was back home. We made it, despite Conii's schemes.

And our mates were the turning part for it all.

I looked at Emma. She had no idea how much she had done for the family through her bravery and determination. She was much more than a human working as a servant under Conii. She was one of the bravest beings I ever met, and I intended to remind her of that every day for the rest of her life.

"That's a lot of promises," Makar said as he handed me a drink. "Think you'll remember them all?"

I shoved him aside while watching Emma and the other women dance on the floor before us. I had never seen Tessi let loose like that or Payton come out of her shell so much. All of them were completely carefree, a deserved treat after all they conquered.

"I hate you all," I said with a grin while taking another bite of the cake Makar baked.

"Ah, you love us," Alkard said with a pat on my shoulder.

Huh.

That night, my love for Emma was enough that it could spill over to the rest of my family, just a bit.

But damned if I was going to tell this band of jokers that.

Those words were for Emma alone.

# EMMA

---

Tazhr scooped me up effortlessly the moment we crossed the threshold into the lavish room the family rented for us, his mouth finding mine in a fierce kiss. I clung to him, euphoric laughter bubbling out between heated caresses. At last, we were truly alone, free to celebrate our marriage properly.

“My wife,” Tazhr growled approvingly against my neck as he carried me toward the bedroom. The new appellation sent delight racing through me. After so many obstacles, the reality of becoming his mate still stunned me.

Tazhr set me on my feet next to the bed and regarded me hungrily. My skin warmed under the smoldering desire in his hooded gaze. With tantalizing slowness, he undid the intricate lacing of my gown, nuzzling each new expanse of bare skin revealed.

I clung to his broad shoulders, quivering with anticipation as his deft claws made short work of the delicate fastenings. When at last, the gown slipped free, pooling around my feet, I stood before him clad only in lace undergarments.

Tazhr’s appreciative rumble raised goosebumps across my newly exposed flesh. “Exquisite,” he pronounced, the heat in his eyes belying the tender brush of his fingers along my collarbone and down between my breasts. I leaned into the feather-light caress, silently begging for more.

With deliberate care, Tazhr finished undressing me until no barriers remained between us. The raw hunger etched on his

chiseled features was almost enough to undo me right then. But I needed to reciprocate, to worship my husband in turn on our long-awaited wedding night.

Guiding his hands to my hips, I slid down his muscular form, fingers working to unfasten his formal robes along the way. Tazhr groaned in mounting urgency but let me set the pace.

At last, I knelt before him, nuzzling against the impressive bulge still trapped behind black silk shorts. Locking eyes with him, I mouthed my husband through the thin fabric until he snarled my name. Then ever so slowly, I eased the shorts down, freeing his rigid cock inches from my parted lips.

“Emma, please...” Tazhr choked out hoarsely, fighting to remain still as I teased my tongue along his length. His obvious desperation to bury himself inside my mouth made my own arousal spike higher. But I intended to savor every gasp and shudder tonight.

Finally, I relented, taking him fully into my throat and setting a maddening rhythm of sucking and stroking guaranteed to fray what little self-restraint remained. Hips bucking helplessly, Tazhr fisted his hands in my hair to guide each plunge between my eager lips. I relaxed my tongue and throat muscles, determined to give him the same mind-shattering release he never failed to grant me.

Just before his climax took him, Tazhr wrenched himself free of my mouth with a ragged groan. In one smooth motion, he swept me up and tossed me onto the bed, pinning me beneath his hulking frame.

“You’ll pay for that exquisite torture, wife,” he threatened against my racing pulse. I only whimpered and arched up invitingly in response. We were beyond words now, our heated bodies communicating everything necessary as we joined at last.

## EPILOGUE: EMMA

---

I shrieked with laughter, clinging to Tazhr's muscular shoulders as the ornate sled careened down the sheer icy track. My hair streamed behind us in the freezing wind, cheeks flushed crimson not just from the cold. Tazhr's arm encircled my waist, keeping me secure against him as we hurtled around hairpin turns, the jagged snowscape a blur.

"Having fun, my mate?" Tazhr called over the roar of the wind, eyes alight with exhilaration and his typical hint of wicked mischief.

"Yes!" I cried breathlessly, tightening my grip as we plunged into a steep straightaway, acceleration pressing me back against his solid frame. I turned my face into his neck, savoring his sandalwood scent mixed with crisp ozone.

After yet another sumptuous breakfast in bed, we decided to take advantage of Suntala II's arctic regions, eager to experience more of the planet's diversity. Now we raced along sheer cliffs, ice-fields, and plunging ravines, the sled's runners perfectly tuned to the slick crystalline snow. By unspoken agreement, Tazhr handled the breakneck steering while I simply enjoyed the ride.

With a final stomach-dropping descent, the tracks leveled out and our speed gradually eased. I sat back, panting and exhilarated. "That was incredible! I've never gone so fast!"

Tazhr chuckled. "I enjoy showing you new thrills, my treasure." The heat in his gaze as he pulled me closer

suggested he considered other energetic activities to pursue next.

I leaned into him eagerly, but a muttered curse made me pull back. “Tazhr, your hands!” I cried in alarm. During the wild ride, his grip on the icy sled runners abraded his palms nearly raw. Violet blood welled in the worst cuts. “Why didn’t you say something?”

He shrugged off my concern. “It’s nothing. I was too distracted watching your delight.” But he indulged my fussing as I examined his battered hands with gentle fingers.

“Wait here,” I insisted, hurrying off to speak with the Suntalan attendant who rented us the sleds. Moments later, I returned triumphantly bearing a medkit.

Tazhr obediently held still as I cleaned and bandaged his torn palms. His eyes smoldered, watching my ministrations. “Normally these would heal in hours,” he mused. “But the cold slows my regeneration. It seems you’ll need to care for your poor invalid husband awhile.” His exaggerated pout made me laugh.

“What a shame. However will we pass the time?” I teased, tracing a fingertip lightly along his wrist. Tazhr’s breath hitched, proving cold was no match for our passions.

Securing the last bandage, I lifted his wrapped hands and tenderly kissed each palm. “All better,” I pronounced. “Now take me somewhere warm, my love.”

Tazhr’s low growl sent delicious anticipation skittering through me. In one smooth motion, he swept me up onto his lap, the sled shooting forward once more. I nestled happily against his chest, content to go anywhere as long as we were together.

---

I TRACED lazy patterns on Tazhr’s bare chest as we reclined together on a secluded rocky outcropping overlooking the Serene Sea. The sun sank low over the calm azure waters,



limning everything in molten gold. These quiet twilight moments alone together became precious rituals during our honeymoon.

“Can we just stay here?” I murmured, nuzzling closer. The thought of departing Suntala II and returning to the chaos of Thodos III depressed me, just a bit. I wanted to cling to this blissful simplicity a little longer.

Tazhr’s arms tightened around me. “I wish we could.” His claws combed gently through my windswept hair. “But we’ve tarried long enough in paradise. Reality is calling us back.”

Though he kept his tone light, I heard the undercurrent of resolve. Tazhr was not one to shirk his duties, even in the name of love. The syndicate he pledged himself to still required his particular skills and strengths. And the allies who stood steadfast at our side deserved our loyalty in return.

Sighing, I nodded reluctantly. “You’re right. It’s time.” I lifted my head to smile at him with determined cheer. “As long as we’re together, anywhere can feel like paradise.”

Tazhr’s eyes softened, his knuckles skimming my cheek. “With you at my side, I’m prepared to face anything.” He drew me up to meet his kiss, full of promise.

We clung together as Suntala II’s small golden sun dipped below the horizon. I engraved every sensation on my heart—the lap of waves on rock, Tazhr’s skin against mine, the clean salt-air scent of his hair.

And we had one more night here. One I knew we’d never forget.

---

MY DELIGHTED LAUGHTER rang out clear as a bell as Tazhr spun me across the polished dance floor. I thought waltzing would be beyond his capabilities, but he was a quick study. Now, he effortlessly led me through the graceful steps and turns I taught him.

“You dance divinely, Mr. Rochester,” I teased, echoing the formal manners of the period costumes we wore. We attended Suntala II’s annual Crystal Ball, and the opulent hall was decorated to evoke the elegance of old Earth.

“Only because I have the perfect partner, Mrs. Rochester,” Tazhr returned smoothly, golden eyes warm with humor. It still amazed me that he wanted to take my name. My perfect, patient mate.

I gazed adoringly up at Tazhr’s chiseled profile as the orchestra swelled into a romantic melody. In his tailored black tailcoat, golden sigils and horns, my husband was the most dashing gentleman in the room. Though we swayed in time to the lilting violins, the rest of the colorful whirling throng seemed to melt away until only the two of us existed.

When the final notes faded, Tazhr bowed gracefully over my hand. “Might I steal my beautiful bride away for some air?” Laughing, I let him lead me out to the candlelit terraced gardens. Other couples strolled nearby, but we soon found a secluded alcove framed by swaying lavender fronds.

Tazhr gathered me close, one hand pressed to the small of my back, the other tenderly cradling my jaw. “Have I told you yet how incredibly radiant you look tonight?” His molten gaze took in my pearl-studded ivory gown, painstakingly styled curls, and the ethereal veil crowning my elaborate coiffure.

I smiled up at him coyly through my lashes. “Why, Mr. Rochester, are you attempting to seduce me out here in the shadows?” My fingers drifted teasingly along his lapel.

Tazhr’s golden eyes flashed. “Perhaps I am, Mrs. Rochester. We are wed now. No one could fault me for stealing a kiss from my lovely wife.” He drew me tighter against him in emphasis.

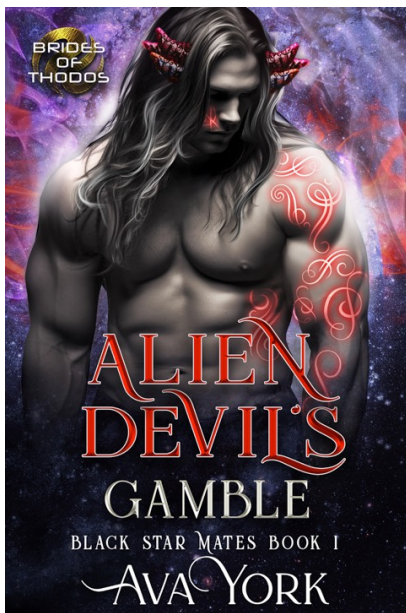
“Well, when you put it that way...” I leaned up on tiptoe, eyelids fluttering closed in anticipation of his kiss.

Later, in our opulent honeymoon suite, we would finish what was already set ablaze out under the stars. But for now,

we were content to bask in the joy of the dance, in one another, and in the love that made us whole.

---

NOT READY TO LEAVE THE dark and delicious world of the Vinduthi? Don't miss the Black Star Mates!



I STRODE through the bustling casino floor, keeping a watchful eye on the operations. The slot machines flashed and rang out as patrons shouted and laughed. It was a successful night, as usual at the Black Star Casino.

Laux approached me briskly. “Good evening, sir. We’re at ninety-three percent capacity and all games are running smoothly.”

I nodded. “Excellent. And the restaurant?”

“Completely booked for the next two turns. Chef may need to bring in extra help.”

“See that he does,” I replied. I trusted Laux as the pit boss to handle the details.

As I continued surveying the casino, a flash of vibrant red caught my eye. I turned to see a woman with long, flowing auburn hair leaning casually against the bar. Something about her pulled me in. I felt an irresistible urge to go to her.

Changing course, I walked directly to the bar, cutting through the crowds. I couldn't take my eyes off the woman. Her fair skin appeared silky smooth, her profile delicate yet striking. She turned then, and her eyes, as blue and clear as Earth's lost oceans, met mine. My breath caught in my throat. She was exquisite.

I moved closer, compelled by her beauty. Just as I opened my mouth to speak, a gruff voice shouted, "Draven! We've got a situation in the back room."

I turned to see Sakkar, the head of security, scowling at me impatiently. With great reluctance, I tore my gaze from the mystery woman.

"Excuse me a moment," I said to her. She gave me a small, understanding smile that made my heart race.

I followed Sakkar to deal with the latest crisis, but my thoughts kept drifting back to the breathtaking redhead at the bar. A powerful urge to return to her side gripped me.

Who was she? I needed to find out. The night was still young. Perhaps she would still be there when I finished. I quickened my pace, suddenly desperate to resolve this disruption and return to the bar.

But when I returned, she was gone, and no one had any idea who she was.

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